



## The Dance of the Deity: Performativity and Healing Affects in *Jagar* traditions

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**ABSTRACT:** In the northern Indian state of Uttarakhand, *Jagar* is a widely practiced ritual involving the summoning of and possession by the 'sacred'. It is perceived as one of the many traditions of spiritual healing and is contrasted with the scientific categories of Psychoanalysis. However, the attitude of both dominant knowledge traditions of Psychotherapy and of dominant Hindu mainstream traditions of spiritual healing, towards this folk tradition, has largely been characterized by ignorance and hostility wherein the healing potential of *Jagar* has been dismissed as baseless superstition. A closer look at the sensual experiences constitutive of the performance of the *Jagar* ritual reveals its innate and infinite performative and transformative potential with important takeaways for the larger socio-economic and political context in which we reside. Through a focus on sensual experiences, I focus on the creative potential of *Jagar* ritual which could set in motion new models and trajectories for traditional psycho-therapeutic practices as well as serve as a criticism for the conceptualization of spiritual healing. This article offers an alternative understanding of the *Jagar* knowledge tradition in the form of a material and bodily experience replete with endless transformative and de-signifying capacities for those participating as well as the large social milieu.

**KEYWORDS:** *Jagar*, Psychoanalysis, Healing, Knowledge Traditions, Sacred, Possession, Affectual Politics.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

A few months ago, during a conversation with a close friend, I was fortunate enough to hear the tale of a *Jagar* which occurred during a marriage ceremony. A vibrant imagery of a body possessed by the Divine in action, swaying jubilantly to the tunes of the *manjira*, while uttering prophecies and consolations intrigued my urban-educated self. Narrated in vivid detail in a breathless voice, the scene came alive before my eyes, almost tangibly. The *dangariya* (the ritual medium or the one who is possessed) addressed the present family members as well as the new bride and purportedly "healed" her. After being tapped on the head by the *dangariya*, the young woman who had been tormented by piercing headaches claimed that she "felt light in the head". The deity explained that the woman had been possessed by a *neeche saya* but had now been cleansed of it and would be completely "healed" by the next morning. After about three hours of ecstatic frenzy, the Divinity introduced himself as Golu or Goil Devta (a folk deity of Kumaon) and left after a final warning to the host household to conduct its annual *Jagar* ritual.

This particular incident of *Jagar* was a peculiar one, even to the narrator. He claimed earnestly that this was the first instance when the *devta* possessed someone unexpectedly and without being called (*bulana*). The divine was brought forth (*jagrit*) by the sounds of the traditional musical instruments which are played during almost all festive occasions in Pahadi families.

The entire incident was marked by strong interplay of sensory experiences. It involved sounds, touching, movement and specifically a lot of dancing. Outwardly, the healing process was a short instance of one body touching another. However, the performative roles of the bodies lent them power, magic and medicine to extents which can't be cursorily glanced over as symbolic or dismissed as fictive or as by-products of blind belief. Rather, these capacities are very much constitutive of the relationship between the cosmos, the divine and the person. These are all embodied interlinkages which are rendered tangible, audible and visible for all to see and all to experience.

Accordingly, the healing process of *Jagar* can't be reduced arbitrarily to Psychoanalytical categories of rational and irrational behaviour territorialized by the "mind" of an island-like individual which alienates it from its nature, or as Kakar likes to put it, akin to "a kingdom within a kingdom". Instead, the sensuous experiences

of the dancing deities could lead us into new directions of affectual politics aimed at singling out what Spinoza aptly refers to as “sadness”.

Further, the very image of the “awakened”, “dancing” deity within, without and around the ritual medium and their interactions with the bodies surrounding them cannot be reduced to an instance of spiritual healing facilitated by the absolute surrender of the practitioners and the patients, who, in turn, have transformed into what Kakar would describe as selfobjects.

The first section of this paper deals with the elements of Jagar and their ritual, practical, symbolic and embodied significances. There is a brief discussion on seven to eight important elements and an attempt at tracing their almost untraceable lineages. In the second section, the performance of Jagar as a ritual and its performative and transformative potential has been tapped with reference to the theory of Performativity by Judith Butler. The third section deals with affectual politics of Jagar and its interactions with the theory of the selfobject by Heinz Kohut has been looked at with specific reference to the arguments of Spinoza and Sudhir Kakar respectively. The final section is an attempt to seek possibilities of clinical, scientific as well as political significance in the Divine dancing deities of Jagar.

## II. THE ELEMENTS OF JAGAR

### 2.1 The ritual

A typical performance of a Jagar ritual involves a *jagari* who is the priest, a ritual medium who is referred variously as the *pasvas* (vehicle), *ghoras* (horses) or *dangariyas* (small horses), specific musical instruments like the *hudak* and the *manjira*, narration of legends and folktales associated with the Divinity in the form of *gathas*, mantras referred to as *shabar mantras* and the conducting household. Apart from this, a Divine entity and a Guru are also involved.

The *jagari* narrates popular *gathas* associated with the deity which are generally sourced from popular folktales while making necessary additions and omissions. The *gathas* also include allusions to more well-known deities of the Hindu mainstream as well as references to scriptural narratives. This narration is accompanied by music and it is an act of calling upon the God (*bulana*). The God then possesses the ritual medium although, they could also incarnate (*avatarit hona*) into others who are present at the scene or could alternatively switch bodies. While the ecstatic dancing is the most prominent image of the deity’s awakening, the possessed body also issues commandments, responds to questions and engages into spiritual healing. While many Garhwali households, particularly Rajput families conduct yearly Jagars as a regular family ritual, they are also patronized and conducted by those families who have members purportedly suffering from negative or dangerous possession by demons (*mashetani*), ghosts or evil spirits (*bhoot badha, preta*) or ghouls (*pishach, saya*).

There are mainly two kinds of Jagar- dev jagar and bhoot jagar which are distinguished along the lines of what kind of a spiritual entity is being summoned. In the former, it is generally the summoning of a Divine, Godly entity while the latter involves calling upon one’s ancestral spirits or even evil spirits for various purposes. However, the lines between the two forms are blurry because many ancestral spirits are revered and celebrated as Folk Gods. These Folk Gods are not pristine, idealistic images of transcendental perfection like the omnipotent divinities of the mainstream. Rather, these entities are closer to virtues and vices of humans and are often perceived as protecting members of social (*gram devta*), familial (*kula devta*) and even individual units (*isht devta*).

### 2.2 The sacred and the material

Sudhir Kakar perceives the “sacred” or the Divine as belonging to the sphere of the polis wherein the individual dwells as a social being with regard to Hindu tradition. He says,

“...for many Indians, the polis consists not only of living members of the family and the community, but also of ancestral spirits—the pitris—and other spirit beings who populate the Indian cosmos.” (Kakar, 1982, pg.11)

Kakar is of the opinion that with regard to the psychoanalytical perception of the disease, the mind is what gets afflicted by the impurities of the world which subsequently get manifested in the body in the form of a disease (Kakar, 2008, pg.107). This inference is a consequence of a divergence in the ways in which the image of the body is perceived within the Western and Indian discourses. In contrast to the Western image of the body which sharply differentiates the individual body from the rest of the Universe and its preoccupation with what is going on within the stronghold of the body (Kakar, 1982, pg.262), the Indian perception, Kakar believes, underlines a kind of unity between the soma (the individual being) and the psyche (the social being). The most evident dimension of this purported unity is the conceptualization of the “subtle body” within the Indian Yogic tradition which consists of five elements, namely, the *buddhi* (individual counterpart of a cosmic intelligence), *ahamkara* (I-ness), *manas* (mind which is conceptualized as residing in the heart), *indriyas* (five potential sensory organs and five potential motor organs) and the *tanmatras* (forms of subtle matter or potential energies).

(Kakar, 1982, pg.267) After death, the *tanmatras* function as the vehicle (*vahak, vahan*) of the *atma* (the soul or a manifested counterpart of the cosmos and/or the Divine) which then escapes the body while riding on them into the newly constructed subtle body (*sookshma sharer*) which then traverses onto the transcendental plane of higher existence before getting rebirthed into a new body.

Kakar points out that with respect to the Hindu image of the body, the *manas* serves as “Psychologically, a mediator between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’, metaphysically, *manas* is also the barrier between the two, the sheet covering the ‘true’ nature of reality.”

### 2.3 ‘Locating’ the body

Kakar’s description of the images of the body is an explanation of the positioning of the body chiefly with regard to its own nature and the natural environment which surrounds it. While in the Western notion, the body is isolated from its polis and is defined as a hierarchical relationship between the rational mind and the physical body, the Indian conceptualization is of a oneness of the individual and the cosmos with the *manas* acting as an obstruction which can subsequently be conquered through regulation of sensory experiences (*indriya nigraha*), practice (*abhyas*) and penance (*tapasya*). Within both the notions, rather than the image of the body in itself as a material, moving entity, the position and instrumentality of the body necessary for the achievement of a few predetermined or predestined purposes is more important. The body is perceived as a static, controlled unit lying at some fixed chronotope of the material, spiritual and metaphysical, which is to be pushed along a striated trajectory which alternatively leads towards the attainment of absolute rational individuality or *moksha*. The healing practices based on these knowledge traditions, therefore, are assumed to be strictly adhering to dealing with symbolic, representative and to a degree, fictive imbalances “within” the body which may be caused by the mischief of the *manas* or the unpredictability and incognizance of the natural environment. Accordingly, the clinical and the spiritual healers are perceived as performing their respective roles as the superimposing and superimposed mediators between the cosmos and the individual, the *atma* and the *paramatma*. The role of the Healer, or the Guru in this context will be discussed in more detail in the later section.

### 2.4 The ‘awakening’

Beyond the spectrums of the dual chronotopes of the body, the performative role of the Jagar cuts across the boundary of the physical body and the superimposed mind which stands between the individual and the cosmos. The speech-acts of the event of *bulana* are undoubtedly composed of verbal utterances such as *gathas* and the mantras. However, in line with Judith Butler’s arguments, these utterances are not merely performed as a practice within the Jagar ritual, they are also performative of bodily acts which lead us through an opening into a more legitimate but lawless cosmos constitutive of and constituted by flows of individual potential energies and moving bodies.

The very act of ‘awakening’ or *jagrit karna* is not merely symbolic of an act of possession of the mind. Instead, it is a whole embodiment of an entity which was otherwise deemed intangible by the material and could be remotely “experienced” by what is spiritual. The act of dancing and the healing touch are the most vivid sensory experiences of this embodiment.

Clinical psychotherapy is characterized by what Kakar calls “an implicit paradigm of human nature, a model of man with an unspoken consensus on the boundaries of acceptable inquiry.” (Kakar, 1982, pg.133) There is intensive focus on specific kinds of sensory experiences both in theory and therapy which are acted out by distancing one’s own body from that of the patient. This becomes crucial to the performative formation of the social agency of the therapist which is held in esteemed reverence as the quintessential basis for the execution of rationally categorized and clinically administered diagnosis. Touch is the least visible sensory experience in the clinical context. Even if it is present, it is mostly symbolic of sentimental consolation or representative of metaphysical, fictive metaphors of touching the heart or the spirit.

However, the healing touch of the Jagar is touch in its physical, sensory form. It is acted out and it transforms both the one touching and the one being touched. Beyond the decoding and recoding of the arbitrating mind and the superimposed cosmos, the moment of touch between the *dangariya* and the audience, while their bodies are still in motion, is an instance of change and of healing. However, this healing is decoded of the territories of subjectivity, objectivity and agency. It has been wiped clean of significations, mediation and superimposition to make it possible for what was coded as metaphysical to move on to breaking the boundaries of the physical and of itself. The hearing, touching body of the *dangariya* is a continuum of healing which doesn’t have to pass through categories of diagnosis, treatment and therapy.

The healing process of Jagar is an instance of repeated performativity. While there is a lot of recoding of the actors and performances involved and of the speeches uttered, the bodies in action also have a lot to say when it comes to the deconstruction and reconstruction and repetitive deconstruction of existing and fictive social agencies of the Divine Healer and those revering it. In this sense, Jagar is a site of possibilities. While it is

entirely plausible that the newly deconstructed agencies could become recoded as and by the dominant traditions, there is always a scope of further shattering of boundaries rendered possible by the healing touch of the Divine which travels through the dancing, singing bodies, penetrates their skins and transforms their experience of the spiritual to the feel of the sensuous.

This then leads us to the question: If the performance of Jagar is performative of a flow of healing in and around the moving body, then how do we move back and forth to and through the flow and its constant penetration of its own knowledge traditions and of those apparently contradictory to itself?

### III. THE HEALER

#### 3.1 Surrender of the Selfobject

Sudhir Kakar talks at length about the symbolic, spiritual and social significance of the figurehead of Guru in the Indian spiritual traditions with regard to the attainment of spiritual goals such as enlightenment or healing. To begin with, he observes that within both the Psychoanalytical traditions of the West and spiritual traditions of India, the primacy of human mind in the production of suffering has been acknowledged. It has also been emphasized by both the knowledge traditions that the mind has instrumental significance in containing and processing disturbed thoughts and feelings which can cause emotional distress. With this conceptualization of suffering and its linkage to the mind existing as the predominant paradigm of understanding the processes of healing, Kakar proceeds to look at the significance of the healer in the spiritual traditions of healing through the lens of the self-psychology theory of Heinz Kohut. Within this theory, his primary focus is on the conceptualization of the selfobject.

He observes that in accordance with this theory, analysis cures by restoring to the self the empathetic responsiveness of the selfobject. In Kohut's vocabulary, selfobjects are external objects that function as part of the "self-machinery". These are objects which are not experienced as separate or independent from the self. With regard to the Guru or the spiritual healer, the form of this inseparability from the selfobject is one of absolute surrender.

After conducting close examination of the disciples' accounts of healing interactions with their respective spiritual guide, Kakar infers that these interactions have the aim of establishing the Guide as a "highly reliable, always available selfobject for merging experiences." (Kakar, 2018, pg.110) The Guru is seen as an extraordinary figure of divine mystery and power who is greater than the scriptures and the Gods. (Kakar, 2016, pg.52)

In accordance with the characterization of the Guru, there exists an appropriate imagination of the ideal disciple or *shishya*. The ideal disciple is pure of heart, of a malleable character and naturally renounces all adult categories notably rational enquiry and sexual gifts. The idea of surrender implies that the responsibility of the disciple's inner transformation doesn't remain that of the disciple but shifts onto the Guru. Thus, Kakar concludes that the role of a guru is that of a healer of emotional suffering as well as of its somatic manifestations. (Kakar, 2016, pg.53-54)

#### 3.2 Possession and Affects

Kakar's understanding of the spiritual healer as selfobject, as we have seen, is grounded in a dualism of the body and mind with regard to emotional distress. Spinoza's theory of affects has a different view with regard to this duality. Spinoza asserts that the mind and the body are essentially "one and the same thing". Accordingly, it hasn't been possible to lay down the limits of the powers of the body- what all the body is capable of feeling and doing. The mind "endeavors to persist in its own being" (Spinoza, 2000, pg.12) which is why Spinoza asserts that the body, alternatively the mind, can only be destroyed by causes which are external to itself.

This understanding of the body-mind, desire-appetite monism and external causes is crucial while we are attempting to analyse the diagnostic practices of Jagar and the aspect of blessing. The chief pathological category which necessitates the conduction of the Jagar is "possession".

Interestingly, possession is both pathological and also equipped with healing effects. These effects are neither necessarily mutually contradictory nor operationalized in divergent ways. Their adequacy and appropriateness are context-specific, to say the least. Jagar in itself is an act of possession. It is a kind of possession which is based on a conceptualization of the body as a space which can be territorialized by what is otherwise kept external to it. This territorialisation is not merely in the form of an establishment and/or deconstruction of the rational codes of the mind. Rather, it is an act of creatively visualizing the bodily space as a dwelling for the "other" and the organs of the body as technologies which can be as easily used by the "other" as by what has traditionally been perceived as the "self".

Possession is not an act of surrender or merger because it does not imply duality- once the deity is awakened, the body is the deity. The act of possession by the deity is absolute. It cannot be restrictive in the sense of a dualism of entities as is evident in Kohut's selfobject. Empathy, control, subordination, discipline,

responsibility are shared tasks of the *dangariya* and the sacred who cease to exist as separate or separable agencies.

The deity's healing touch is perceived as "cleansing" in the sense that it rids the receiving bodies of possession by disease, grief or other forms of sacred which aren't conducive to the functioning of the body and the mind as one.

Possession doesn't distinguish between morally "good" or "bad" sacred or even between "desirable" or "undesirable" possession. It occurs to reproduce itself and it recreates to abandon the territory it created. It is not logically coherent or linguistically cognizable. An important example of this fact is the existence of *shabar mantras* which are often recited during Jagars as well as otherwise within communities. While the practitioners claim that these mantras are older than the scriptural traditions of the Puranas, they are generally in the form of a bunch of words bound together holding no actual or coherent meaning. They can be mastered (*siddh karna*) without the aid of a Guru and can be used to bring forth both positive and negative consequences on others and specifically on other bodies.

Therefore, the "healing touch" is the vehicle and the technology of the sacred. It dispossesses to repossess and vice versa. It fosters the creation of a creative bodily space within and without the body which provides an opening for newer forms of self-expression, realization and acknowledgement.

Consequently, the "healer" is not a singular, omnipotent entity. As we have seen earlier that there are two broad and hazy forms of Jagar with respect to the kind of "sacred" being summoned which could be a God or an ancestral spirit. With regard to jagaris, most of them belong to a long lineage of Jagar priests with the knowledge hereditarily passed, mostly through oral renditions and practice implied in participation. Some even claim to be self-taught. While the *shabar mantras* often chanted during jagars and the wordings of the *gathas* make allusions to Guru and Sharda (the Goddess of Knowledge), the act of blessing translates into an act of possession and is felt as a sensual experience. It is transformed into a collective act of creative expression and participation- everyone needs healing and everyone and everything has the potential to be therapeutic. Healing is a continuum and not the goal to a predetermined trajectory of application of clinical pathologies.

### **3.3 Possibilities and Potential**

Clinical psychotherapy considers a kind of emotional state as a disorder once it starts to "disrupt" the daily life of the patient. The somatic manifestation of the psychic disturbance is inseparable to the disturbance being seen as a social pathology. The patient is not an individual agency. Instead, the doctor and the therapist particularly perform speech acts which are performative of the individual being transformed into a potentially dangerous social agency. Accordingly, the psychoanalytical categories are deployed to administer what Spinoza calls "sadness" or "sad affects" upon the individual.

Affects, in psychology, refer to underlying experiences of feelings, emotions or moods. Affect theory seeks to organize affects/emotions/feelings into categories. This is done in order to understand the appearances/instances of the manifestations of these emotions in physiology, society, interpersonal relations, at the internal level and in politics. Affect Theory is originally attributed to the psychologist Silver Tomkins.

In his theory of sadness, however, Spinoza clearly states that one cannot affect without being affected. He asserts that the mind endeavours to the greatest possible extent to conceive those things, which increase or help the power of activity in the body because as we have seen earlier, the mind attempts to always persist in its own being. Further, the mind shrinks from conceiving those things, which diminish or constrain the power of itself and of the body. In Spinoza's (2000) own words,

*"The human body is composed of a variety of individual parts of different nature, and may therefore be affected in a variety of different ways by one and the same body; and contrariwise, as one and the same thing can be affected in many ways, it can also in many different affect one and same part of the body."*

The affects which diminish the capacity of the individual to affect and to be affected are called sad affects. On the other hand, those affects which increase the power of our bodies to affect and be affected are called joyful affects.

Clinical psychoanalysis, operating, existing and coding itself within a framework of industrial capitalism, serves to categorize, regulate and control. It is designed to "study" a static body with a fixedly rational mind which can be conceptualized as an "object" of research and study by a distant subject of the researcher with agency. It encourages the production of mess and jumbles for its own sustenance but channelizes them towards sadness for its profit. For psychotherapists, the idea of the possession by the Divine, the conceptualization of multiple agencies and of "healing touches" are fictive images produced irrationally by an ill-functioning mind. The moving bodies of the Jagar and the dancing deities are at best an evidence of Schizophrenia or a display of baseless, scientifically illogical superstition of traditions which do not even deserve to be deemed knowledge in the conflicts of knowledge hierarchies.

On the other hand, Jagar performances of possession explore and incite the powers and potentials of the body. Instead of categorizing, they seek to shift and transform. Moving bodies escape regulation, perforate and penetrate the boundaries of spiritual and material, thereby initiating an eternal decoding of rationality. Jagar is not about research, instead, it is an act of seeking- an eternity of seeking space, touch and healing- because healing isn't a purpose, it is an activity and a process of capacitating bodies, of dwelling in Joy. The Joyful affects of Jagar are healing not only for the individual but also for the larger context which is characterized by dominant traditions, casteism, violence and capitalism.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Deleuze and Guattari tell us about the significance of Schizophrenia and schizzo experiences in dealing with the engulfment of the capitalist immanence. Jagar takes a step forward by emphasizing on its desirability. The experience of Jagar instantly reminds one of the Divine we lost to the consecrated stone idols sealed within the innermost sanctum sanctorum of grandiose temples, bound and regulated by the mundaneness and morality of ritualistic traditions. We, who have lost our eyes to the consecrated stone idols, who have lost our ears and tongues to the Sanskrit scriptural traditions of the Shastras, our tongues and skins to the bestowals of the Brahmin priests and our hands and feet to caste and class moralities rediscover our bodies in Jagar possessions. The Jagar schizzo dances, spews nonsense in the name of mantras and while sensually experiencing the sacred and the divine enters into the becoming of the sacred and the divine, accompanied by the sacred and the Divine. Thus put, the knowledge traditions of Jagar are replete with infinite transformative capacities which are constitutive of newer forms of knowledge, its traditions and experiences and more creative forms of politics.

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