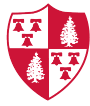

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Religious practice and the phenomenology of everyday violence in contemporary India

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Article

Ethnography

Religious practice and the phenomenology of everyday violence in contemporary India

Ethnography
2014, Vol. 15(4) 469–492
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1466138113490606
eth.sagepub.com

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Abstract

This article focuses on 'dread' in religious practice in contemporary India. It argues that the dread of everyday existence, which is as salient in a biographical temporality as it pervades the phenomenal environment, connects and transfers between religious practices and everyday life in India for the marginalized masses. For such dread, dominant liberal discourses, such as those of the nation, economy, or ego-centric performance, have neither the patience nor the forms to represent, perform, and abreact. Formulated in dialogue with critical theory, phenomenology, and psychoanalytic theory, this article conceives of religious practices in continuum with the economic, social, ethical, and political realms, and the repressions thereof. Focused on a rapidly expanding religious movement in India, it challenges normative discourses of religious practitioners as fundamentalists or reactionaries, and strives to extend the imperatives of recent critical urban ethnography into the domain of religious practice.

Keywords

religious practice, everyday violence, dread, ethnography, psychoanalysis, Siva, Hinduism, death drive, phenomenology, pilgrimage

It was a small brick house with a courtyard in the front, which also housed a tiny kitchen; inside, there were two rooms, one after the other. The *devatas* (divinities) were lined against the kitchen wall, six little concrete, house-like structures with tapering roofs set on walls about a foot high. Devatas are usually made in the fields, so we were surprised to see them inside the house. 'We have our devatas here, by us. Our village is far from here', the woman explained. 'They chose the place,

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wanted to be here.' 'That's fine', I said. 'You should be happy.... They would appear in my dreams.' The devatas were her children who had died either in infancy (two boys and a girl) or did not see light. They were good spirits, dear to the family, the mother, who remained with them in their afterlife.

Usually the devatas are *pitrs*, ancestral spirits. During hard times, when things are frequently going wrong – the crops have been failing, marriages cancelled at the last minute, someone had an accident, too many people are falling sick – the affiliated Brahman family would be consulted to organize a *havana*, a ritual offering of purified butter and other ingredients at a fire altar. The officiating *pandita* (priest) may divine that a particular ancestor is unappeased, and recommend that the spirit be set up as a devata. The devata would then be made and ceremonially installed at an auspicious time, attended by another *havana*, which would include, after food offerings to the devata, a religious feast for Brahmans, and the distribution of small gifts.

Here, it did not need a Brahman to divine. The mother herself dreamed frequently of her little loved ones whom she had failed to protect, and direly missed. The love and responsibility, the memory, the company could be sustained by having them beside her as part of her daily life. As devatas, they continued to live and participate in the family's life not only by their regular presence before the eyes – they stayed close – but also through venerations on festive occasions. At such times, a *diva* (a wicker in clarified butter) would be lighted to them, and they would be the first to be served food. At other times, special occasions and feasts would be arranged for their worship. And after the nominal serving, the food would be served to Brahmans. Intermediary to the spiritual world, the Brahman is held in high esteem; this regard, however, is no less based on their own supreme giving status – as receivers of the gift, of consecrated left-overs.

The love of course is not without dread of these spirits, who untimely deprived of life were entitled to, and likely harbored, their grudges. It was important to appease and be kind to them, as much in love as out of fear. Keeping them alive in one's memories, and life, was important to have them benevolently disposed. Such benevolence of the spirits would be propitious. In addition to appeasing the spirits, the bereaved mother when pregnant again also secretly asked for the blessings of Siva, the generous Lord of the world of spirits: 'Bhole Nath, I will bring your Kanwar... May my child be born healthy and survive!' Her husband, who had been bringing kanwars for some years, did not know that when she announced she would be accompanying him this year. She had had two children since, the elder now about 12 years old. 'But you never told me', he had said. 'What is the point of telling till things have actually turned right?', she responded. The traumatized mother was wary of revealing her secret – lest she jinx its fortuitous effect – till she was certain that things had *actually*, and rather unbelievably, turned out right. The possibility of something going awfully wrong, of tragic accidents, she dreaded and had known far too well, was never remote.

Discourse, dread, and repression

This article speaks of the phenomenal dread of everyday life in religious practice in contemporary India. In recent years, because of the ethnographic work of scholars such as Scheper-Hughes (1993), Cohen (2000), Auyero (2000), and Wacquant (1999, 2009), there is a growing sociological discourse on the phenomenal excess of violence in the everyday life of marginalized subjects. These ethnographies show subjects trapped in the double bind of neo-liberal structures that simultaneously overwhelm the collective with their undisputed, final, *winning* ideological representations, and exclude a growing proportion of people as economically and culturally incompetent and dangerous outcastes. 'Even the dead', Benjamin (1968: 255) would say, 'will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.'

Economic marginalization goes hand-in-hand with discursive or symbolic domination, not only expressly by a statist order, or a global network of neoliberal structures, but also through the normative insinuations of academic representations exhibiting the certitude of objective knowledge, and often functioning in the guise of apparently 'progressive' and 'universal' standards and historical goals (see, e.g., Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999; Singh, 2011, 2013).The complex, historicized reading of macro-economic structures and policies in the everyday labors, traumas, and performances of the marginalized masses, in the phenomenology of confined life courses and dead-end futures, is a novel and crucial sociological contribution of contemporary urban ethnography (see also Gaines, 1998). However, given the rather hermetic character of academic fields and sub-fields, few of these critical scholarly discourses and empirical choices of urban ethnography have been able to percolate into literature in the sociology of religion. In this article I hope to demonstrate the importance of a sociological approach alert to the continuities of religious, moral, and economic practices, and an embedded analytical orientation that wards off reified subject and object divides.

The narrative focuses in particular on the reflection of the dread of everyday existence, and the precarious performances of social roles and obligations in religious practice. Religious practice here, I show, expresses, performs, represents concerns, anxieties, fears, and images that are repressed in the dominant consciousness occupied by, say, discourses of the nation, economy, work, daily bread, or the media. For some of the most overwhelming experiences, fears, and desires of social and psychic life in dystopian conditions, the mainstream world seems to have no time, no means of accommodation, no sites for registration, no performances. In this article, I hope to show that these realities are often deferred and displaced to, and play out in religious practice.

As these motifs of 'repression', 'displacement', and 'return' would indicate, the following narrative is significantly informed by psychoanalytic theory. Parallels with dream work, the simple economy of the pleasure principle, and repetition compulsion, I found to be powerful themes with a gestalt-like effect that makes coherent and legible the otherwise complexly coded and dissimulated effects and

compositions of social and religious practices. Such salience of psychoanalytic idioms in the following narrative is, I believe, a direct consequence of the focus here on personal historicity, the profound lived time of the subject, as opposed to historical time with its focus on collectivities – both as events and factors – which is usually privileged in the social sciences (see Heidegger, 1962).[1]

Furthermore, the empirical human of my research was always already a subject embedded in social relations and obligations. The subject, I found, was a phenomenological entity as situated in a personal historicity with its memories, anticipations, and significant others, as it was a relatively open site perceiving, registering, and responding to a charged sensory environment. Cartesian individuality then would be but one manner of marking boundary in a phenomenological and temporal continuum. It is particularly important to note this since we exist in a time dominated by teletechnology, relentless bombardment by imageries, discourses, and forces, at once remote and instant, expertly coded to capture and manipulate attention, bodies, and affects (Clough, 2008; Singh, 2012). One may think of such subjectivity as suspended between the subject of contemporary affect theory with its conceptual antecedents in the monism of Spinoza and Deleuze on one end (see Clough, 2008), and the temporality of Being-in-the-world in Heidegger's (1962) existential phenomenology on the other (Singh, 2011).

Practices and discourses – novel and ritual

The empirical focus of the article is an exponentially growing religious movement in north India, called the Kanwar, in which participants carry water from the river Ganga for libations on sivalingas, generally in their villages and towns.[2] In the process, Kanwarias, as the participants are called, often walk up to several hundred miles, ritually carrying the sacred water in the form of the kanwaṛ, a contraption from which the phenomenon derives its name. It normally includes a stick with water containers on both sides, carried on one shoulder. The water is usually collected in Hardwar, the renowned Hindu religious city at the banks of the Ganga, where it emerges out of the Himalayas into the plains. In a small proportion of cases, participants go so far as to collect the water in Gangotri or Gaumukh, the glacial origins of the river in the upper Himalayas. The libations are commonly performed on the day of the new moon in the month of Sravana, about July–August, in the Hindu lunar calendar; in some cases, however, the festival continues throughout Sravana. The festival is dedicated to Siva, also called 'Bhola' [Simple One], 'Bhole Nath' [The Simple Lord], or 'Bhole Baba' [Simple Father/Grandfather]; the participant in turn is hailed as a 'bhola' [simpleton], and in the plural and vocative, bhole! From an indistinct, scattered event till the early 1980s, the Kanwar has grown into India's largest annual religious event, involving more than 12 million participants in 2011 (see Singh, 2011, 2013; Lochtefeld, 2010).

Most participants cover the journey either in flip-flops or barefoot; and many aggravate their travail by pledging, for instance, to a variation called the Khari [Standing] Kanwar, which warrants that the apparatus will not be dismounted off

human shoulders through the length of the journey, or, in another called the Dandavata [Prostrate] Kanwar, by covering a portion of the journey measuring the length of their bodies on the ground. While liquor consumption is taboo, a good number of participants are under the effect of cannabis products, called bhang or sulfa, which are regarded as items Siva himself relishes.

In South Asian studies, the growing pull of religion, as reflected in the Kanwar, for example, is usually conceptualized in the idiom of 'religious nationalism'. This is a revised version of the religious fundamentalism thesis, and incorporates a historical 'postcolonial' dimension, along with Anderson's (2006) structuralist proposition of the nation as an arbitrary and imagined historical community (see Hansen, 1999). This is an important thesis, which corresponds with political reality in India. Hindu religious nationalism with its powerful cathexis around colonial and historical injuries, real or imaginary, has indeed attempted to assert itself through an exclusionary, retrogressive, and often violent figure of cultural essence with obvious affinities with European fascism (see Ghassem-Fachandi, 2012; Jaffrelot, 2010). However, to reduce Kanwar participants – millions of mostly young adults or adolescents from poor or lower middle-class backgrounds, taking to the road for hundreds of miles with evident pain, suffering, and anxiety, often bound by vows and commitments to their loved ones – into fanatic 'nationalists' or 'fundamentalists' would be an inconsiderate epistemological gambit.

I have shown elsewhere that in conditions where more than 90 percent of workers are informally employed, with few employment, social, and health safeguards, the Kanwar practices provide participants with another, voluntary, and accessible field to demonstrate and practice their talents, moral sincerity, and determination (Singh, 2011, 2013). Religious practice here is simultaneously a way of performing to, and performing against, a totalizing neo-liberal social ethic and structure.

This article takes a different turn. Here I wish to demonstrate an existentiality suspended between desire, on one hand, and dread, on the other, which transfers between, and relates these religious practices to the participants' everyday phenomenal conditions. Such suspension between desire and dread is as active and evident in a biographical temporality as in the seamless phenomenal exposures through which the majority of people navigate everyday life in contemporary India. This proximity of desire and dread is expressed in the many repetitions of the Kanwar, and in an almost obsessive compulsiveness that characterizes the performative constitution of the phenomenon (see Freud, 1958, 1959). The obsessiveness demonstrates a fear of Siva or Bhole Baba, the Supreme Master; it simultaneously betrays a compulsion to please (though also to renounce) worldly forces, masters that seem to arbitrarily decide fates in the world (see Lacan, 2007). This complex phenomenality, I argue, finds a perfect adumbration in the figure of Siva, the dreadful God who exemplifies the destructive principle, but who is also the most generous. In modern theory, this is best seen in Freud's (1959) exquisite articulation of repetition compulsion and the death drive. I will thus argue that the pilgrimage in its departures and returns, in its mortifying practices, is as much a renunciation of the world as a return to it.[3] It assists in performatively mastering

the otherwise repressed dreadfulness of everyday life – in an absolute, chosen, yet bounded field.

Such evidence of religious practice as simultaneously participating in, and negating, worldly obligations complicates both the common conception of religion as a form of flight from the world (specifically in the case of 'Eastern' religions), and the common divide between the renouncer and the householder, which has been a persistent motif in the sociology of Indian society (Weber, 1946; Dumont, 1970). My relational findings also preclude ethnological essentialism, which would invent an 'ethno-sociology' to characterize Indians as 'dividuals' related through transactions of 'substance-codes', as opposed to Western 'individuals' (cf. Cohen, 2000).

My findings are based on a year of fieldwork spread over three pilgrimages, and multiple visits in between. The fieldwork included 60 in-depth interviews, extensive interactions with participants in pockets of a town, and an adjacent village, both about a hundred miles away from Hardwar, and ethnographic observations in Hardwar, while visiting shrines in the vicinity, and at transit camps. In 2011, I participated in the journey, walking a distance of about a hundred miles between Hardwar and Pura Mahadeva, an important Siva temple in the state of Uttar Pradesh. I covered the journey along with a companion and, in stretches, as part of larger groups. I also did content analysis of religious hymns, popular religious stories, devotional songs, news reports, pamphlets, and commercial videos. The following narrative veers between interview accounts and participant observation during the pilgrimage as well as everyday interactions.

Dread and mortification

'"I will have to do it, mother . . . if I don't who else will . . . otherwise, He [Siva] will keep on breaking (*khandita*) our lives" said my younger son', the old woman recollected. It had been more than a decade since his elder brother, sitting beside his four-year-old almost fully paralyzed child in the hospital, had pleaded for the recovery of his child.

> He could not speak; could not lift his hands, nor legs, nothing was left, had even gone blind . . . 'Hey Sivaji [said the father] I will bring your kanwar on my shoulders and offer you jal [holy water] not from Hardwar but from Gaumukh itself . . . but at least improve him such that he can talk to us, that he can drink and eat on his own.

Her grandchild was now 18; 'so clever', continued the woman, now full of pride. 'One of his legs is sure affected, but he runs a shop and is very smart in his studies.' A Kanwar from Hardwar, however, was one thing; from Gaumukh, another 170 miles, at the roof of the Himalayas, quite another. Before he could find a companion to pull off the journey with him, the father himself died, from 'paralysis and heart attack'. The onus shifted to the younger brother who also, despite some pilgrimages from Hardwar, found it hard to gather the courage and find a companion for the trip from Gaumukh. 'Some time ago', she continued,

> three of my buffaloes, all of them very vigorous and healthy, died within a year.... We could not believe it... I had not been for the pilgrimage for some years. 'Bhole Nath', I pleaded [in grief] 'don't test me so much! I have not forgotten you.'

They stopped rearing cattle after that, and over the next two years the younger brother – the boy's uncle – brought the Kanwar from Gaumukh twice to fulfill his expired elder brother's promise. The possibility of God's displeasure was too much to take for a family that counted on His beneficent disposition. 'We cannot even live without Him', she said, her voice turning soft and heavy. Most of the other years she had gone for the Kanwar as well as to other religious centers with only the wish of the well-being of her loved ones, and seeking peace and welfare in general.

If it is out of dread that the actor seems to frequently seek the assistance of Bhole Baba, the demands of the Baba are to be feared no less. As we sat on a parapet by the canal we decided to suspend the kanwars by the parapet itself, seeing no other place. In the process, several caveats were exchanged. 'The two sides of the kanwar are not balanced', one observed. Another said: 'Make sure that the kanwar [any part of it] does not pass over someone else's... that they are all evenly set.' Yet another advised, with fear of a part of the kanwar touching the ground: 'Your kanwar hangs low. Why not try the tree there?' At every step, there was an obsessive anxiety to abide by every scruple, to repetitively ensure the ritual appropriateness of every action, the symmetry of every alignment. The violation or failure of every stricture carried the final threat of the fragmentation, the failure (*khandita*) of the pilgrimage, the offering itself. When lifting the kanwar, it had to be borne on the right shoulder, and could be moved to the other shoulder only around the back, never in front or above the head; and, as far as possible, with the containers evenly balanced. No animal or person could be allowed to pass under it. The ritual cleanliness of the bearer was equally significant. The pilgrim had to wash herself, including the clothes she had worn, not only in the morning and after defecation, but after every meal in which solid food had been consumed. A compulsive quality may also be seen in the necessity of immersing the whole kanwar in the river, after the vessels are filled; or in the pilgrims who traverse the distance to the shrines, repetitively measuring their bodies' length on the ground. Likewise, it is critical that the pilgrimage is repeated; the pilgrimage is made in pairs, or you can make sets of five or seven if avowed in such a form. And although not all stick to this imperative, all Kanwars in one set should be repeated using the same beam. The series of abstinences, behavioral and dietary, to be repeated by the family, at home, further emphasize the compulsive quality of the ritual.

The word '*khandita*' – breaking down, fragmentation, disintegration – invoked in reference to existence earlier is also precisely the word that is used for the Kanwar if it can't be completed, if it is breached. It disintegrates. The precarious carrying of the water is the precarious carrying on of life itself... its breaking down, a sign of impending disaster. The obsessional character is toned by one's abject conditions. The desperate expectations from the symbolic order are correlatives of precarious social conditions. The expectation of demand from the symbolic order – in

conditions of mass unemployment or underemployment, one must keep in mind – the anxiety that attends, anticipates every demand which the subject promises to unconditionally meet, as it were – for the most trivial looking of them may potentially, like a hidden trick, like an omen, make or ruin everything – constitutes itself in reference to the precariousness of circumstances. That is, in reference to a phenomenology saturated with daily, foreboding exposure to disease, poverty, misfortune, death, humiliation: a neighbor consumed by tuberculosis; a gruesome accident on the road yesterday; a child who barely escaped being run over by a speeding motorcycle; the friend complaining her kidney was removed by the doctor, a crook, on the basis of a false diagnosis; the crowded clinics filled with rude staff and authoritarian physicians; word of a young relative who burnt himself to death; the anxiety over a child who is frequently sick and doesn't seem to be growing; a drunken man drowned in the open sewage line in the neighborhood this evening; the agonizing humiliation of someone (or oneself) pulling a rickshaw being slapped by a policeman. 'If the obsessional mortifies himself', says Lacan with characteristic insightfulness, 'it is because . . . he binds himself to his ego, which bears within itself dispossession and imaginary death' (1988: 268). Butler in her paraphrasis of Hegel is equally to the point, 'Although devotion appears to be a form of self-immersion, it is also a continuation of self-beratement as self-mortification . . . . The sanctification of abjection takes place through rituals of fasting and mortification' (1997: 47).

The anxiety of following every diktat, almost to the extent of inventing new scruples – since there are scarcely any canonical texts – is part of the performative construction of the pilgrimage. And insofar as the performances, the desires here, are tied to one's performances in the world, it reflects the compulsive anxiety to ward off every possibility of infringement, every untoward event, every threat to fortuitous possibilities, to the desired object – which is often just for life to keep to its ordinary course.

Bimala, another of my respondents, likewise tied recent misfortunes with the consequences of not meeting a promise, when a deity warned her in her dream, days before people were leaving for the pilgrimage:

> It is a man, he comes from the direction of the pond to stop at the doorway, next to my cot. 'People make pronouncements, and then don't fulfill them', he says. 'What did we commit?', I ask him. 'Didn't he vow a Kanwar?' he answers back, referring to my husband. 'Did you bring it? Did you have it brought? Isn't that why your home is in ruins?' 'I will have it brought', I say, 'this time . . . will that be okay?' 'It is up to you', he replies, 'bring it if you wish, forget it if you don't want to'. I do not know who he was . . . must have been one of our devatas warning us.

Others sitting with us concurred: 'It is a devata's call; some devata warned you.' The family had been forced to move from Delhi to this small town in Uttar Pradesh after her husband died a year ago. He died from a wound on a foot struck by a brick during construction work. The wound had festered when he kept working in

a paddy field despite the injury and, 'according to the doctor', because of his heavy drinking which undercut the effect of the medicines. 'I am willing to die', he is said to have insisted, 'but I won't abstain from liquor'. Earlier, the elder son had absconded after a tiff in the family (probably over the father's drinking), following which the father had vowed he would have him bring a Khari Kanwar after his return. The young man did return for a while but left again; and when his wife asked him to bring the Kanwar in lieu of the son, the man was evasive.

The rebuke in the dream alarmed Bimala, who immediately began consultations next morning. 'You will have to bring the Kanwar in his place', people said. 'Take the younger son with you, and have him lift the kanwar on his brother's name.' Without a penny at home, she nevertheless quickly arranged a loan and made the necessary arrangements. And, although she faced a lot of problems in the journey because of intense chafing between the thighs, as we will see, together the two successfully brought the Khaṛi Kanwar in the others' names. The pair would be completed next year. 'But whenever the elder one returns', Bimala insists, 'I will have him do a pair too . . . even if I have to pay the expenses myself.'

We can see here that the pilgrimage has to be completed, whether the wish is fulfilled or not – say, fulfilled only partially, nominally. And, whether it is completed by the vower or a subject assigned through a series of substitutions – the parent calling in the child's name, the wife replacing the husband, one sibling filling in for another. It was the compulsion to keep the faintest word to the deity, the smallest hint of a pact. Although some may categorically say, 'I will make the pilgrimage when X happens', in most cases, the anxiety is such that the pilgrimage needs to be completed in any case. The smallest trace of fulfillment has to be seen as a sign of His beneficence; beneficence one feels compelled to construct, read, instead of denying. But coupled here, one must also see the play of desire. There is an attractive force to the pilgrimage, as the occasion, the season descends. As one of my respondents put it: 'There is a joy that takes over my heart at the time, making my hair stand on end and tears well up in the eyes.' The dream here thus also manifests a desire to go on the pilgrimage, merged with the desire for the vow to actually come true, for felicitous conditions at home.[4] As the head of the family, Bimala was now making her own decisions, and also assuming expanded responsibilities for mentoring her wards.

Desire and the dreadful God

The desires, whether for the many joys and pains of the pilgrimage, or domestic felicity, or the company of an absconding child, or general peace and well-being ('Baba, grace everyone with your benevolence') are merged with dread, the fear of an *otherwise*. Such collapse of desire and dread into a singularity, two sides of the same phenomenon, finds a perfect adumbration in Siva, his complex character, and the bountiful, timeless mythology surrounding Siva, Sati/Parvati, and the Ganga (see also Obeyesekere, 1981). On one hand, of course, Siva is the destructive principle itself: garlanded with bones and skulls, smeared in ash from funeral pyres,

drinking *bhang* from skulls with rotting flesh, his dreadlocks filled with snakes, throat blue from deadly venom, and in the middle of his forehead, the all-consuming, grotesque third eye, which once burned *Kama*, the god of desire, to ashes (see Coomaraswamy, 2011). Thus, for example, once 'Brahma said to Rudra, "Siva, lord of Sati, perform creation", but Rudra said, "I will not perform creation. Do it yourself, and let me destroy. I will become Sthanu [the pillar, an ascetic]"' (Skanda Purana, cited in O'Flaherty, 1981: 137–8). Surrounded by ghosts and goblins, this drunken, necrophiliac ascetic is, in his own words meant to dissuade Sati who desired him, an 'ugly naked beggar who makes his home in the burning ground, who smears his body with ashes taken from burned corpses' (Siva Purana and Matsya Purana cited in Handelman and Shulman, 1997: 160).

On the other hand, however, this Kapalika (skull-bearer), Bhasmabhuta (Made of Ashes), Vamadeva (the crooked God) is also Bhola, the Simple One or the Fool, and Asutosa, who is easily pleased; he is the most generous, and the greatest renouncer. Siva fulfills everyone's wishes. Such descriptions of Bhola – and, by extension, of the devotee, the bhola – are very frequently cited, for example in the following excerpts from popular material on the pilgrimage:

> Lord of the three realms . . .
> Yourself a seeker of alms . . .
> Settler of the universe . . .
> You live in the wilderness . . . (*Siva Upasana*, n.d.: 38–9)
>
> To Indra you gave all wealth . . .
> Nectar you gave to the gods, keeping the poison to yourself . . .
> To Bhagiratha you gave the Ganga, for everyone to bathe . . .
> Lanka you gave to Ravana . . .
> To Rama you gave the bow and arrows, to Hanumana, the Lord . . .
> Yourself you remain in drunken ecstasy, drinking bhang from a skull.

(*Bol Bhole* . . . n.d.: 3)

And, at the same time, Siva – the phallic god usually worshipped in his iconic form with the *lingam* placed in the *yoni* – is Desire, Kama itself; his dreadful countenance also makes him most desirable to Sati as well as to countless other women (see O'Flaherty, 1981). And, in later Tantric editions, Siva as Bhairava is but the lesser deity, the consort who resides by Sakti at every Pitha (Seat) (see also Sax, 2009). In a widespread practice, young unmarried women worship the siva-linga every Monday with offerings of milk and often requesting desired characteristics in their future husbands. Generous as he is, Siva – who is also Ardhanarisvara, the god who is half woman – understands and disposes desire. He is, at the same time, the supreme ascetic, and a householder; the power of his tapas (meditative energy) such that even marriage and cohabitation cannot affect his ascetic potent, and Siva remains a brahmacarin (celibate) despite marriage. Siva is the greatest of yogis (ascetics) and an equally great bhogin (hedonist) and the two

affects are often merged in the existential aesthetic, the ethic he epitomizes.[5] The dread that binds the subject to the security promised by the deity also repeats itself in the religious performance.

The sudden invitation: The case for visiting the God

'You cannot go on the pilgrimage unless He calls you.' This refrain echoed by almost every participant, and even by those who have never been able to make the journey, succinctly expresses the peculiar dialogical character of the performance. The expression is common to most north Indian pilgrimages, although particularly salient in the context of the Himalayan goddess, Vaisno Devi. In one popular, and widely filmed, rendition: 'Chalo Bulavaaya hai; Mata ne Bulaya hai' [Let us go, an invitation has arrived; the Mother has called]. The expression reckons a return to the mother – now the divine Mother – the time of her authority, and the care, protection, and endearment her presence promises (see Erndl, 1993). She would both give ear to one's agony and grant wishes. The figure of 'invitation' is often characterized by specific existential references, shared by both the goddess pilgrimages and the Kanwar. The invitation is the paramount condition for the pilgrimage – *unless* He invites, the journey cannot materialize, by any means; but *if* He calls, it will take place despite any number of obstacles. 'No one can go just like that, whatever offering you may announce, but when He *calls*', said Amma, another of my respondents, forcefully emphasizing, 'you go automatically... Only then can you raise a step.' And it was in reference to the same force of the call that Bimala had recounted the dream which had sent her on the pilgrimage. 'We simply did not have the wherewithal for the journey till the last minute, it was totally out of question; and then I had this dream ....'.

Things happen at the last minute. It is a last moment swell that sends one on the journey, an impulse that breaks out of normative concerns – financial restraints, calm reasoning, the many expenditures of the adventure. Suddenly, in the manner of the immediacy of a call, desire holds sway; although of course in correspondence with the desires of so many others. Yet the 'invitation' also has the added resonance of its specificity, of being God's elect, the recipient of divine grace and therefore felicitous, blessed – 'Everything is fine, God has been generous.'[6] The call has to be followed, literally, by a visit. And, almost every visit, whether to the goddess or in the Kanwar, expresses the desire to come yet again – if the deity wishes, and times are propitious! In addition to the absolute agency of the deity of course, since the pilgrimage depends on circumstances being propitious, on events being favorable, or perhaps a wish being fulfilled – since it depends on desire – it invites the assurance that everything will be fine and no untoward incident meanwhile would preclude the anticipated journey (see also Singh, 2011). It seeks the assurance of security amidst the dread, the ravages of Time, of Kala, which is as much Death as Duration.

But, of course, circumstances are not always felicitous. Despite the desire to acknowledge the blessings of Bhole Baba, to not appear ungrateful – for things could always be far worse; for life itself is a gift – there may be instances where His

injustices may be hard to condone. Thus, Kshetrapal, who has made more than a dozen pilgrimages, several of them Khari (Standing), is undeterred when questioning the Lord's justice:

> Bhole Baba does not fulfill anyone's wishes. . . . He doesn't do anything. It is just that we bring the kanwar out of our own desire. . . . My wife's pair of Khari Kanwars remained incomplete. She did the libations in this very temple. . . . Where was Bhole Baba? ... She died [the same year] before she could complete the pair . . . leaving three children behind her.

' . . . leaving me alone to look after them', he continued poignantly. Kshetrapal nevertheless continues to go on the journey, every year. 'I will keep going as long as I can still walk, as long as there is some desire left.' The journey continues despite His injustices – 'what suffering He inflicts, one will have to endure'. And the wife's pilgrimage itself would be completed at some point, 'by her child', says Kshetrapal. In the completion of that particular journey, the Khari Kanwar, by the child who would have come of age, Kshetrapal would also have completed a critical component of his own journey or performance in the world – fulfilling a primary responsibility to the companion no longer there. But if fate continued to be defiant, the vow would still be completed. 'Why not you?' asked someone in the background yet again. 'It is better the child does it', he replied, after having avoided the question, the unfortunate contingency, for a while, 'but if it falls on me, I will have to endure that as well.'

Bhavan, who comes from a family with several members invested in religious activities, and who had himself made six pilgrimages, likewise acknowledged the difficulty of times, expressing doubts about divine help. Two years ago, a taxi he used to drive was stolen from the street in broad daylight, 'at 2 pm, within a span of 15 minutes .. . . The owner filed a police report against me, I had to recompense the cost of the car . . . what other option does a worker have?' This development disillusioned him with the job of a taxi-driver, although he continues to drive rental cars which can be returned to the owner every evening. 'I have not progressed since finishing studies. . . on top of that, this loss.' If there is little that is certain here, he nevertheless keeps feeling for certainty in Baba.[7]

> When here, I am more *disturbed*[8] . . . but in Hardwar, my mind is set on him. I don't go after sight-seeing et cetera . . . I just look for where He might be, where I might have his darsana [sight/encounter] . . . I will climb a hill, a rock, and look around.

In some of his expressions, the pilgrimage was truly complete only if one was able to touch, embrace the *lingam*, or at least have a clear, satisfying *darsana*. Here, the sensuous perception of the *lingam* – in those marked days of the pilgrimage – seems to carry the effect of the actual manifestation, *darsana* of the deity, an exalted motif of Hindu religious belief or tradition (see Eck, 1981). Bhavan's desires correspond with the experiences of his father, an ardent devotee of Hanumana. 'Although he

will rarely talk about it, on days when he is very tense... Hanumana manifests himself to him... and then he is at peace.' And if it is in the power and composure of the mighty Hanumana, who conquers all fear, that his father finds solace, for Bhavan, Siva is the great source of energy and inspiration – 'The slogans hailing Him give me so much peace. My body feels suddenly animated, energized... even if you don't say them yourself, just hearing them inspires you.'

Nevertheless, Bhavan continues to wait for some wish to be fulfilled, for a whiff of divine assistance. The obsessive abidance by the protocols of this Master, Siva, continues the anxiety in relation to the arbitrary whims, demands of that other master, the diviners of the symbolic order.[9] It weaves in the anxiety attending, anticipating every demand – demands one hopes for, awaits – from the equally elusive worldly masters, chances which one is well aware make or break lives. There is a transfer, a communion of affects between the different orders. The pilgrimage is often a merry, carnivalesque occasion (Lochtefeld, 2010; Singh, 2013); yet, on the other side of its spirited merriment, one may also see the compulsions of a desire to follow, to serve much anticipated commands of the symbolic order which, however, never seem to come. In other cases, even when the wish fulfilled may be so grave, the gratitude so binding that the subjects feel compelled to perform the journey year after year, the dread may nevertheless continue to haunt.

The greater suffering and the case for renunciation

Unlike the commotion of the many temples and ghats of Hardwar, the temple of Bilvakesvara, located under a hill about a mile south-west of Har-ki-Pairi (God's steps; the primary ghat of the town), has a rare, quiet, verdant ambience. Here, Parvati, in one of her avatars, is said to have meditated on Siva, following which the Lord appeared to grant her a boon. The place where Siva manifested himself hosts the central temple complex, while the site of Parvati's meditation, deeper in a hill recess beside a stream, has another temple with a small well, the Gauri-Kunda. By the kunda [a natural pool] on that day sat a man dressed impeccably in trousers and shirt, perhaps a local, chanting hymns. Outside, two middle-aged couples who had just finished bathing in the celebrated waters of the stream packed their bags. The Kanwar couples had been in Hardwar for a few days, and there was some confusion over whether they would begin the journey that day or the next. 'We come for the pilgrimage every year', said one of the women. On further discussion:

> My only child was brought *dead* from the hospital... the doctors had resigned, and had let him go. There was no hope. 'Sivaji', I had then cried in front of Bhole Baba, 'I will not ask you for anything else ever again in my life, grant me the life of my child!'

Her husband stood by, nodding somberly. The child was said to have revived miraculously. 'His debt on us is infinite. We will keep coming as long as we are alive, as long as these limbs will still carry us.'

We lingered around the setting for a while and, on the way back, again came across the two couples. The women had sought shade under a tree, while a heated argument was going on between the two men sitting by the curb of the narrow paved pathway. The man we had conversed with was frantically challenging the claims of the other, who spoke in a more subdued manner. The other person had apparently suggested self-reflectively that the fact he looked old beyond his age was the result of a life-time of hardships. ‘I am scarcely 40’, he repeated for us, ‘but already look older than a 50-year-old. This is because of a life of endless hardships... I began working when I was not yet 12.’ Our previous interlocutor, a few years older than him, seemed to see here a negation, an underestimation of his own suffering. ‘I began to work at 20, but I have been through so much pain... through one ordeal after another.’ If the latter was provoked by an apparent discounting of his suffering and ordeals, the former recognized in these signs of early aging the ravages of Time – life’s tribulations, as if one could not but lose against them; even when one had come past, conquered them, one after another, with the greatest heroism and courage, they would have the last laugh, in the ruins they left behind. For the man who indeed looked much older than his age, a weary countenance seemed to be as much the repetition of a lifetime of suffering as its confirmation – if not for recognition by likewise competing others, perhaps in the face of the absolute Other.

The endless tribulations of life in one place seem to correspond with the endless iterations and excesses of the journey in another. In phenomenological terms, the individual is but one boundary for such experiences, their affects and resonances, which determine the social field for a vast majority. ‘I just keep repeating Bhole Baba’s name as I walk, and as long as you are doing so, everything remains fine’, said Basant, a man in his mid-50s who has been on the pilgrimage almost every year since the late 1970s. ‘Earlier, I used to take the Kanwar to my native village in Haryana’, continued Basant, recounting a time when the rivers were crossed by ferries, the roads were infested with robbers, and the pilgrimage was rather obscure with many fewer participants. ‘People would occasionally mistake us for snake charmers.’ It has been a long time since. Following the many pilgrimages from Hardwar, several of them Khari, for the last two decades he has been bringing kanwar*s* from Gaumukh; in addition, Basant has also made pilgrimages within the Himalayas, taking the sacred water from Gaumukh to the upper Himalayan shrine of Kedarnath. A widely travelled person, he has many tales to tell – of deep valleys and gorges, perilous tracks to Kedarnath, where one would not come across a human being for hours on end; of a boulder hurtling down a mountain he barely escaped; of exhaustion and indefinite periods of hunger, thirst; of walking in the night under fear of robbers and wild animals; of villages that live off water from the streams; of landslides and a cloud burst when the paths were flooded with four feet of water; of dangerous mountain roads. Once, as he was coming down from Gaumukh with the water, he ran across fellow villagers who had travelled uphill by a shared car. Visibly shocked, they said to him, ‘Basant, disaster struck!’ ‘I had my heart in my mouth’, said Basant, ‘I feared the worst. I thought the vehicle

had fallen into the valley.' However, they had been saved; their car sliding backward toward the deep river valley, ready to topple in, had been saved at the bare edge by a god-sent rock that stuck into the base.

Basant's expression of his desire for the pilgrimage is evocative. 'As soon as the month of Savana [Sravana] sets in, I have the compulsive feeling to leave. Every morning, after prayers, I will reach for the calendar... check the various dates... I feel restless.' Some of Basant's enthusiasm for the journey has been perhaps inherited from a family with an extensive culture of Siva worship; especially on his mother's side, where his uncle and grandfather had both made several pilgrimages. 'My grandfather [and later, mother] would make little sivalingas, and statues of Siva, Parvati, or Ganesa from clay... say, 11 or 101, or 1001 [an auspicious number] of these.' The idols would be worshipped ritually, using milk, rice, Bael leaves, and bananas.[10] The sacred objects would be made in the morning and dispersed in the canal or the pond after prayers in the evening. At times, when the practice would become associated with a particularly strong wish or concern, it could include resignation the offering or promise of as many as 125,001 sivalingas. If the labor of the offering manifested the force of the desire, if it was meant to convince the deity of the artist's, the devotee's, compulsion and gratitude, the dispersal of the works in the waters every evening perhaps also had the effect of renunciation. And it is precisely the mood, the existential attitude of the renouncer that seems to appeal to Basant. 'Now, where I am concerned', he continued,

> I don't have any wish in mind.... Otherwise, there is no limit to human wishes.... About Sivaji, you see, what people aspire for, He rejects. The world likes dresses, ornaments ... Siva stays away from them. The world likes palaces, he looks for crematoriums ... it is the same for the Kanwar ... just need to have five to ten days' worth of bare necessities, like the ascetics, that's all.

In his highly controversial studies, the French sociologist Louis Dumont argued that in India, a society structured on the principle of hierarchy, the renouncer has been the only creative figure. In Dumont's proposition of the fundamental code of Indian society, the Indian was 'Homo Hierarchicus'; the renouncer alone broke off from the vise-grip of the caste society to be an individual-outside-the-world (see Dumont, 1970).[11] Setting aside Dumont's essentialist propositions, it is important to note that the oppressive concerns of regular social existence are clearly a key impetus to the renunciation of social roles. The desire to leave the householder's conundrum and turn a renouncer, thus, is expressed quite commonly in Indian homes, usually as a threat, a last resort in times of conflict or excessive anxiety. By its definitiveness, other-worldly character, resignation and the loss and difficulties it represents both for the subject and the addressees, the threat verges on that of suicide.

In the pilgrimage as well as the other votive rites, the desires and agonies of everyday life are as much expressed as they are renounced or transcended; they represent as much involvement as detachment. The pilgrimage is itself as much a departure from the ordinary social world as a returning to it. The tension expressed

in the structure of the pilgrimage – the going and the returning – is close to that afforded by the phenomenological edge of the suicide threat – a will that verges on action, a departure that may or may not actualize.

The play of this duality perhaps finds its best analytical illustration in Freud's (1959) astute observations in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Particularly pertinent here are Freud's reflections on a peculiar game he saw his grandchild play, to master the mortifying experiences of the departure of the mother, to whom he was much attached. 'The only use he made of any of his toys', Freud says, 'was to play ''gone'' with them': a habit of throwing the toys in a corner under the bed, giving in the process 'vent to a loud, long drawn out ''o-o-o-o'' . . . [which] was not a mere interjection but represented the German word ''*fort*'' [gone]'; and in a more complete version, pulling the object back, hailing the reappearance with a joyful 'da' ['there']. Realizing that these observations were incompatible with the pleasure principle, which had been at the center of his theories to this point, Freud finds himself forced to recognize here a drive of which the pleasure principle would be but one component. Beyond the pleasure principle, he sees in this compulsion to repeat – which may often dawn on people as an obscure fear of 'some ''daemonic'' force at work' – an impulse more primitive: the death drive (1959: 65; also see pp. 42–7). Likewise, in the case of a person in analysis, Freud says, the compulsion to repeat childhood events in transference 'disregards the pleasure principle in every way' (p. 67). The child's game here demonstrates a rejection, renunciation of the object of one's interest, the mother, in view of her inevitable departures, the phenomenological complications of being with her. This was followed by an expression of the pleasure in her consequent return. The compulsion to repeat the dreaded moment, and the pleasurable feeling of the mother's return, 'converge here into an intimate partnership' (p. 46).

In both its joy and self-inflicted violence, this 'peculiar tension' closely represents the performative intensity of the pilgrimage. On one hand is the worldly experience of dread – a relentless exposure to pain, suffering, and social demands, as biographical as it is phenomenologically pervasive – which forces the subject to repeatedly depart from the world, to renounce it again and again. This is followed by a return, in peace, carrying the sacred water, yet also, as noted earlier, in a painful, mortifying manner, and often with an element of fractiousness. At the same time, in this repeated practice, now in control and in a field of one's choice, an absolute field, one also sees an element of mastering over otherwise repressed affects (see also Singh, 2013). The pilgrimage thus becomes an alternative field of performance, simultaneously repeating the traumas of daily life, and transferring, transforming, binding them to a sacred occasion and performance. For the subject, here an adult, it will also be a site to practice her resolve.

Agency, between pain and dread

'Once it so happened', said Basant, 'my brother while bringing the Kanwar from Hardwar tipped on a speed-breaker – the kind they make in the villages, with wood

stumps covered by soil – and badly sprained his ankle.' Among his siblings, Basant's expired brother was the only other person who used to bring kanwars. However, since he had lived an urban life, suggested Basant, he was not as versed in walking in this manner. The injury delayed him and he sent word home that he would be late. When Basant, who had brought the Kanwar from Gaumukh, reached home, the sister-in-law reprimanded him for not getting his brother along. 'But I never met him', he had to reply. The next day, he went back to his brother in a neighboring village en route. Seeing him barely able to stand, Basant offered to carry the kanwar for him. The brother, however, was firm: 'The kanwar I will carry myself, even if the legs are to be amputated.' 'Slowly, we made it to the temple; he carried the kanwar himself although I walked with him', continued Basant. 'He fell very ill at home thereafter and was on intravenous fluids for several days.'

Although people frequently carry each other's kanwar*s*, bring joint kanwar*s*, and helping one another is considered meritorious, here the suggestion, the context of failure, the hint of an inability to complete the sacred, all-important journey made the subject refuse the assistance; perhaps especially when he was so close. Evidence of a lack on this chosen ground would imply a deep, essential lack that threatens to repeat in every other sphere, in every other responsibility, and most immediately in the object of one's wish or vow. This is a widely shared orientation, perhaps the defining feature of the event: the compulsion to complete the journey despite all obstacles and physical excesses. Failure in this religious, chosen task – although surely not unknown, as we will see – will be regarded as disastrous, a fundamental failure by most. It would be inauspicious. Thus, while many may seemingly pull off the journey without grave difficulties, a good number labor to the end with evident pain and suffering. The tracks are often blue from feet wetted in potassium permanganate solution to suppress blisters; although regarded as ineffective by many, trays filled with the solution are ubiquitous. Numerous participants toil in heavily bandaged, bleeding feet, after the skin from the blistered soles of the feet is removed by medical personnel. And the frequent medical stalls on the way, either selling or freely distributing antibiotics and basic medicines for pain relief, fever, muscle strain, diarrhea, and other common problems, are crowded with clients. In some cases, people assist others, especially children, by pulling them with ropes tied to their backs.

'I was vomiting on the way back from Gangotri this year. The air pressure on the mountains creates a problem. My body has started developing fever from cold these days... bathing in the freezing water gives shivers.' Basant kept speaking of his own problems in bringing the water from Gaumukh after describing his brother's ordeal. Despite precautions and extensive guidance, pain and suffering in the pilgrimage is as common as the resolve it provokes. These features are evident in the experiences and narratives of many of my respondents. 'I had a high fever on the way', one said, describing the experience of his first pilgrimage, 'but I was determined to complete the journey even if I were to die'. In other cases, where participants may not be as vocal about their resolve, their ritual completion of the

journey through intense pain and struggle speaks for itself. In a previous discussion, Amma, one of my elderly respondents, had been critical of a woman in her group for dithering while taking the frequent showers:

> 'My thighs will chafe', she said, and did not bathe properly. On the other hand, I immerse myself in the shower without hesitation and nothing happens to me.... In Baba's journey you have to do everything with a pure heart. Her thighs got stuck into one another from chafing, giving her a very hard time.

In view of the frequent ritual baths in the open and in clothes, and because of the inconvenience of drying clothes as well as their minimal baggage, participants would often continue to walk in the clothes they bathe in. The dilemma is worse for women; younger women in particular rarely change clothes after baths because of privacy considerations. The wet clothes rubbing between the thighs on skin tender from the bath can cause intense chafing and bleeding, making literally every step of the journey painful. When later Amma introduced Bimala as the person who had the difficulty, the latter acknowledged that it had been a painful trip. Bimala's ordeal as she pulled off a Khari Kanwar (covering the distance with very little rest or sleep), under the pain and anxiety caused by this problem – and in a time of grave difficulties in her family – in apparently not very sympathetic company, can only be imagined. About another woman who went with her last year, Amma would say, spreading her hands indicating a tree trunk, as it were, 'her legs were this swollen'. A man speaking of his own first journey, likewise pointing to his knees: 'my legs were draped this high in bandages... the toes were completely ulcerated, I walked on my heels.' Amma herself was a goiter patient, and had gone on the pilgrimage without a break for many years – although often deciding at the last moment – even when battling fever and injuries.

Yet, in certain instances, it becomes just too difficult, or the circumstances stack up, leading to the relinquishment of the project – almost arbitrarily, as it were. In the middle of the journey where every step may be painful and the destination inconceivably distant, or a possibly feverish, enfeebled body no longer able to orient itself to the project, or perhaps just the circumstances, the company unsupportive, the journey may have to be aborted. The woman showing us Rati's place was perplexed, and somewhat dismissive: 'What could you want to know from her? Her pilgrimage remained incomplete.' Rati's house was next to a small temple where a soothsayer, a devotee of Sai Baba (a renowned fakir with his shrine in Shirdi, Maharashtra), sat for a few hours every evening attending on people's everyday anxieties and their concerns about the future. A composed, middle-aged woman in a sari, dressed and looking like any regular, married Hindu woman, she would listen to people, answering their questions and offering advice and comfort, while meditating on a picture of Sai Baba. As I sat in the temple later that day after my conversation with Rati, a woman asked her: 'My parents are both old, and my brother's family does not care for them. Can you tell me, which of them would be the first to die?' 'You are a daughter, why would you ask such a

question?' she asked in turn. 'They are concerned, and wanted me to enquire', she said. Nodding understandingly, the seer closed her eyes while gazing at Sai Baba's picture and made a few observations on the poor treatment meted to the parents, and the current goings-on, and continued: 'I see both your parents, your mother will still be healthy... your father I see in a wheel-chair. I see him leaving earlier.' When the petitioner repeated to confirm, the seer only nodded subtly, as though hesitant in intruding over fate and such final matters. About then, a man circumambulating the sivalinga at the center remarked: 'There is relief in my stomach pain since yesterday, after several months.' 'Keep to the regimen I gave you, it will go away completely', she responded.

Rati, a young woman, married for several years, had not gone for the Kanwar with any new wish; rather, the pilgrimage, her first, was in thanksgiving for the child who had survived after several of her children died in infancy or sooner. 'My pilgrimage would have been completed, if only our companions had been supportive... they would not stop, and kept pushing. I came crying till Roorkee', she observed, regretfully. Rati's feet developed giant blisters, which made it difficult for her to walk. And half way through the journey her companions saw her off by train, along with a young nephew accompanying her, and an older woman in similar agony. The other woman had a previous injury, which was aggravated during the journey, and a hair-line fracture was diagnosed later. 'But I only had blisters, and could have completed the journey. They could have sent the other woman on her own... at least my pilgrimage would not have been breached', Rati had continued pensively.

The missing dread

In one of the essays on his hashish experiences, Walter Benjamin (1999) notes the continuity between the mind's normal trails and the spectacle it generates under the influence of the drug. Whereas in the normal state, he notes, free-floating images heedlessly fly by the mind, under the influence of hashish these images – now in extraordinary shapes – present themselves to us without requiring any attention (1999: 329). Thus, fleeting images which otherwise 'simply remain in the unconscious' in this case present themselves vividly without any effort (p. 329). Now, since images here are of course not mechanically optical, one may add that such experiences also rejuvenate affects, memories, desires, which otherwise find no room or expression in conscious life. Without over-determining the drug high, let us note that this has Freudian parallels in the return of repressed associations and affects. Furtive emotions, fears, desires that go almost unknown, unrecognized return in the form of a slip of the tongue, a symptom, a dream image, a pattern of forgetting – a whole different realm of being whose patterns Freud will delineate, interpret, illustrate through a lifetime of work as the 'unconscious'. An observation that will echo in Nietzsche's observation that 'the great principal activity of the organism is unconscious' (cited in Assoun, 2000: 112).

The performances in the pilgrimage indicate a parallel phenomenon. They demonstrate the powerful presence of a nether zone left unrecognized, or repressed in normal public practices or the dominant modes of the consciousness. A nether zone which yet unfolds explosively in these religious practices, and in a mythical vocabulary, a world of gods, devatas, rituals, repetitions, phrases, exhortations, fears, vows, resolutions, desires, desires of the other – a world of apparently timeless, collective performances congealing at a large scale in the form of an alternative text, a text of unbelievable appeal that sends millions marching, as it were. Yet one cannot think of this 'zone' as an island, an identifiable thing *present* elsewhere; it is the effect of continuities, of differences. It is a sequential efflorescence in touch with exclusions, refusals, a shortage of signifying and thereby practical possibilities. It shows the limits, the shortages of the consciousness – or what we may have to here qualify as a certain 'dominant consciousness' – the limitations of ideological force, of networks, cartels of signs that exclude in power-oriented processes, historical as well as geo-political, and as active in a certain sphere marked as 'religion' as anywhere else (see also Lacan, 2006).

In its treatment of this 'other' realm, where psychoanalysis seemingly retreats into the individual, a kind of personal historicity – which, as the above narrative should show, is no less important here – the performances in the pilgrimage also show an agglomeration of affects in which the individual is but one border. These affects are as embedded in personal histories as they are relational or free-flowing – friends, relatives, self, deities, cows, streets, all feature in a phenomenological continuum. Thus, Benjamin's emphasis on the sensory is important; it underscores the phenomenological aspect of these affects or impressions that seem to pass by the consciousness without being acknowledged or recognized – or indeed are denied, and yet may register deep, precisely by virtue of this negation, as 'repressed' (see Singh, 2011).

I have suggested earlier that in a context marked by continuous and foreboding exposure to poverty, disease, death, to the violence and humiliations of everyday life, its excesses that may feature as much in personal history as in the encounter with the other's suffering – where all one finds oneself seeking is peace and well-being as much in reference to the self or immediate relations with their longer temporal involvements as, say, on the street or in the past, which nevertheless keep repeating in dreams – the experience of dread is part of the tonality of everyday life (see Freud, 1913). 'Hey Baba, do good to everybody... let your grace be on everyone', Amma would say multiple times in our discussions, almost out of context. This experience of dread also drives desire – the desire to escape it, conquer it, forget it, or as much the desire to suffer, repeat it, to practice, master the falling (see Freud, 1958, 1959). Thereby, also the resolve to persist.

In one respect, then, we find in these religious practices, dread, anxieties, desires, concerns, and images that go unrecognized, unaddressed – mockingly, cynically suppressed even – in the dominant collective consciousness, which is usually the discourse of the nation, the economy, work, daily bread, ego-centric achievement, or of mediated spectacles. For such desires, fears, and their psychic life, the world

otherwise has little patience, or means for registering or performing – except perhaps for drinking, squabbling in personal relations, or a general brusqueness in social conduct (see also Lacan, 2006: 215). One hears a new intimate, heart-rending account of death, suicide every day – of a relative, an acquaintance, a family member. Last year in one of the fieldwork locations, two weeks after the festivities, a child going to school crushed by a bus – mob violence, cars and buses burnt, shops gutted, curfew, flag march by special police forces. In distant parts of the country as much as in nearby villages, women and men committing suicide using pesticides; a violence that threatens to get personal any time.

This article has then argued that it is such dread and the desires that are its corollaries for which there is no time, place in everyday reality that are deferred to these religious practices. In terms of ethnographic practice, I believe the above narrative surely does not compromise theoretical consciousness. In fact, it is theory that constitutes my observations here, which would otherwise collapse into a confusing and often repulsive mass of sensations and perceptions conforming to dominant ideologies. In contradistinction to the opposition of the 'theoretical' and the 'poetic', in recent debates on ethnographic method, I believe that given the vast and diverse, theoretical resources available to us today, a theoretically informed ethnography can, and should, verge on the literary – that is, representations of the real, which appear the more immediate and captivating the more they are mediated and coded (see Wacquant, 2004; Behar, 2003).The history of modern poetry, we know, is perhaps but an itinerary of endless reflexive registration of failed adventures of 'the desire to draw closer and closer to the ontological status of the object' (De Man, 1984: 7). Such desire and reflexivity would be both worthy standards for ethnography to strive for. And yet the reference of such reflexivity does not have to be the Cartesian individuality of the author, which would only throw us back into the ruses of dominant ideology, let alone promise responsible accounts of social reality. The judgment may very well, as in the case of poetry, but reflect the reader's tastes and sensibilities, which are as political as they are aesthetic.

Acknowledgements

This article would be inconceivable without the tremendous faith demonstrated by my advisor, Arlene Stein. I am also deeply grateful for the invaluable feedback and encouragement I have received from members of the New York Psycho-social Group, especially John Andrews, Lynn Chancer, Patricia Clough, Joshua Klein, Christina Nadler, Catherine Silver, and Ilgin Yorukoglu. The article also benefited immensely from the excellent feedback from three anonymous reviewers, and the editors' comments. Furthermore, some of the insights generously shared by reviewers of my previous manuscripts and articles have provided the building blocks of this essay. I am no less obliged to the many people who freely, and in good faith, shared their experience and views with me during my fieldwork. And finally, I cannot even begin to express my gratitude to Bhupendra Singh, Deependra Baghel, family members, and a generous friend, 'K', who have made my research possible. In brief, anything of merit in this article is a communal achievement; the limitations are mine alone.

Financially, the research has been made possible by grants from the Rutgers Sociology Department, Rutgers Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis, and the South Asian Studies Program at Rutgers.

Notes

1. I could not agree more with Lacan when he says, 'in order to have perhaps a slight chance of conducting a correct ethnographic inquiry, one must, I repeat, not proceed by way of psychoanalysis, but perhaps, if there is such a thing, be a psychoanalyst' (2007: 92).
2. The *sivalinga* is a characteristic representation of Siva, in the phallic form.
3. While, for epistemological considerations, I found it important not to confine this article to the field of pilgrimage studies, I have drawn inspiration from the many subtle ethnographic studies discussing continuities between pilgrimages and everyday life (see Sinclair, 1992; King, 2005; Gold, 1988; Morinis, 1992; Haberman, 1994; Lochtefeld, 2010; Eck, 1981; Turner and Turner, 1978).
4. I would direct the reader to the wonderful ambiguity of dream work demonstrated in Freud's (1913) analysis of the Irma dream, which sets the stage for his classic *Interpretation of Dreams*. The text is best read in juxtaposition with Lacan's (1988) excellent exegesis of its complex significations. For this lead, and so many others, I would like to thank Professor Vincent Crapanzano.
5. In one respect, of course, however, phenomenal representation is not tied to affect; a level of arbitrariness or play is involved. If Siva's frightful and disgusting aspect arouses dread, in other cases the purity attributed to the deities may be even more terrifying. Instead, Siva's aspect with its manifest forms, in its appropriation of the phenomenal forms of death and destruction, seems to be more 'liberating'. It perhaps provides greater abreacting efficacy; thereby, the abandon of Saivite religion, the merger of opposites.
6. On this point, see also Weber's (1946) illustration of the significance of the 'calling' in Protestantism.
7. On the importance of 'certainty' to the psyche, as well as in Freudian analysis, see Lacan (1978).
8. Bhavan used the English, 'disturbed'.
9. On the figure of the master in the dominant discourse see Lacan (2007).
10. Bael is the common name for the wood apple tree, Aegle Marmelos.
11. This hierarchical disposition he located in the traditional superiority of the Brahman – and thereby the purity he represented – over the worldly power of the king.

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