

Arrival of the Devis' Spirit

Filming Voice and Agentive Entanglement

Rajat Nayyar



Voice and Agentive Entanglements

Listening to the unique vocal timbre of my long-time collaborator Aaji in Badhuli village,¹ Bihar, India, I realize the significant role played by voice in navigating personal, social, spiritual, and more-than-human relationships in everyday life. As Virginie Magnat notes, the marginalization of embodied knowledge and vocal traditions not only undermines our ability to recognize the agency of stories and songs as “they animate and activate the world,” but also restricts us from “establishing relations of ethical reciprocity” with other human and more-than-human agents including our natural environment (2022:30).

Although I refer to different scholars' writings on “spirit possession,” I avoid this terminology in theorizing Aaji's rituals because it may point to unequal power dynamics between human and spirit and a conceptualization of the spirit medium as passive. In fact, Aaji never uses this term. In describing her rituals, she always refers to the “arrival” of the seven Devis (goddesses) in her body as the moment when she enters into a deep state of dialogue with them. Aaji knows her own relationship with the spirit, as well as her voice, vocal traditions, and the embodied memories she uses to navigate relations with other human, animal, and more-than-human agents. I focus on Aaji's

1. I am using a fictitious name for the village to protect the privacy of my interlocutors.

conceptualization of the interconnectedness of her own agency with that of the spirit of the Devis. Through her songs and stories, she conceives of other humans, animals, spirits, gods/goddesses, ancestors, and the natural environment as powerful agents who, as Dolleen Tisawii'ashii Manning puts it, are “alive, interconnected, and mattering” (Manning 2017; see De Line and Manning 2020). I bring my research with Aaji into conversation with indigenous relational ontologies that take as their “starting point the presumption of a life-world populated by human and other-than-human persons, ‘entities/bodies,’ or, rather, ‘potencies’” (Manning 2017:158). I follow Aaji’s move beyond anthropocentric individualism and towards what Manning refers to as an “entangled interrelationality” (11), a relationship in which agency is not tied to the “Western individual ego” but emerges through the exchange between materiality and immateriality, finitude and infinitude, and the animate and inanimate (32). Drawing on Manning, I propose the term “agentive entanglements” to describe Aaji’s performative relationship with the spirit of the Devis and her use of voice and vocal traditions in her rituals.

My inquiry into Aaji’s voice also led me to reflect upon my own training in anthropology and ethnographic film, where “voice” itself is rarely studied, and instead has often been equated with the metaphorical notion of “having voice.” Moreover, the positionality and intentionality behind the collaborations and coauthorship of many ethnographic and ethno-fiction films gives equal (or more than equal) “voice” to our interlocutors sharing their stories with wider audiences. However, as Nina Sun Eidsheim notes, these trends “have to some degree obscured the material and multi-sensory aspects of voice” (2012:9). Although the recent sensory and new materialist turn in anthropology and advancements in sound technology have immensely contributed to the field of sound studies, we have not yet been able to detach voice from its metaphoric equation with subjectivity (Schlichter and Eidsheim 2014) and consider the potentiality of voice on its own.

Filming Voice and Spirits

I first met Aaji in 2015 while conducting a month-long folklore documentation that I organized for an NGO called Leadership Projects for Bihar in collaboration with the government of Bihar. In this documentation drive, my team and I visited 50 villages including Badhuli where Aaji lives. In each of these villages, we invited community members to record their traditional songs, stories, and performances in order to “safeguard” them. I quickly learned that Aaji is a lower-caste rice farmer, storyteller, singer, and spirit medium in her 70s. In our first meeting, her youngest son asked me about my full name and immediately deduced that I hail from an upper-caste Punjabi family. Despite discovering that I hail from an upper-caste family, Aaji has treated me the same way as she would treat any of her family members and friends. Whenever I visit Badhuli village, although I sleep in the outdoor areas where men usually sleep, I eat all my meals with Aaji and her family at her house.

In my early encounters with her, I recognized a powerful singer who as a teenage girl had learned from her mother a vast repertoire of ropani (a genre of rice farming songs) and many other traditional Bhojpuri songs.² The success of the state-sponsored documentation drive led community members

Figure 1. (previous page) Aaji with her granddaughter. Bihar, 2017. (Photo by Rajat Nayyar)

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2. Bhojpuri is a language spoken primarily in the northern and eastern regions of India, with the largest population of Bhojpuri speakers residing in Bihar, where it is one of the official languages, and in the eastern part of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Bhojpuri is known for its rich literary and cultural traditions, with a history of poetry, songs, and folklore, and Bhojpuri-speaking diasporic communities can be found in various other parts of the world.



Figure 2. Aaji performs the ritual for the seven female deities. Bihar, 2017. (Photo by Rajat Nayyar)

from several of the villages I visited to invite me back for more collaborations. However, it was not these invitations but Aaji's voice that drew me back. I invited her to collaborate on an ethnographic film about her songs. At the outset, I was drawn to her unique "grain" of voice, her repertoire, and a genre of songs that sounded radically different from the songs of upper-caste women whom I had been mainly documenting in my earlier ethnographic film projects such as *Vivah Samskara: Bhojpuri Wedding Rites and Folk Songs* (2014) and *Janeu: Bhojpuri Initiation Rites and Folk Songs* (2016). However, I did not learn about Aaji's entanglement with the spirit of the seven Devis until my visit to Badhuli village in 2017, when she told me that she would perform her Devi rituals with her family at home on the occasion of Raksha Bandhan.³

Aaji had cleaned the courtyard of her house early that morning and was sitting on a wooden cot staring at the sky through a window. I could not comprehend her anticipation, so I joined her in silence, as we watched the rain disarranging the courtyard and the cement platform that Aaji had cleaned in the morning. Her eldest son who works at a garment factory in Punjab phoned to inquire about the ritual proceedings and the festival celebrations at home. Aaji responded by improvising an allegory that there seemed to be a conflict between the god Ram and the goddess Sita that day: whereas Sita had planned to perform her Devi rituals, Ram on the other hand was "playing around" and pouring rain to disrupt her prayers.⁴

There was no electricity in the village because of the thunder and heavy rain, so there was hardly any light in the room. It was equally dark in the courtyard outside as dark clouds moved across the sky. Facing the street, the window next to which Aaji sat provided the only good source of light in the room. I decided to switch on my video camera and aim it at the window to join in Aaji's anticipation and resoluteness to stop the rain that day, thereby defeating Ram. Meanwhile, Aaji began to use her singing to call upon nonhuman agents to assist her in this mission. Her song depicted a crow that had flown away from the courtyard in the middle of a storm, leaving a woman

3. This traditional Hindu festival honors the relationship between brother and sister, symbolizing the brother's vow to protect his sister.

4. Such a portrayal of Ram and Sita differs significantly from the mainstream cinematic, theatrical, and scriptural version of the Ramayana in India. It also highlights how north Indian folklore anthropomorphizes Hindu gods and goddesses, allowing humans to embody and imagine more playful and performative versions of the deities.

on her own. The woman is willing to offer rice and milk to the crow if it agrees to return to the sandalwood tree in her courtyard.⁵ In Hinduism, the crow is believed to have access to the realm of the ancestors, which explains why it is being repeatedly called upon and lured through songs and with rice with milk. As we staged our anticipation while observing the sky through song and camera, the rain gradually abated, allowing Aaji to leave to prepare for her ritual. I do not recall very clearly when the rain stopped and Aaji left the room. Her songs had a remarkable effect on me too; they made me nostalgic and have oneiric visions of being sung to sleep by my own grandmother as a child in the city of old Delhi. Or perhaps my sleep was induced by Aaji's grandchildren who were sitting with us on the cot and slowly falling asleep to the sound of the heavy rain blending with Aaji's songs. However, I do remember being awakened by a guttural, low-pitched singing voice echoing from beyond the room.

I stepped outside the room to find that all of Aaji's grandchildren were sitting on the floor facing the cement platform in the courtyard. As I joined them, I noticed that Aaji was singing in another room in the house. The sounds that emanated from that room signaled to me that she was preparing ritual materials. However, I could not recognize the song or its genre at all. Aaji was singing in a very low pitch, as if to herself, and I could only hear a full-throated hum. This song was very different from any other that she had sung throughout our project. Aaji's voice then slowly began to dissolve into a long vocal yawn at regular intervals before returning to singing. Her youngest son Krishna, who was in his early 30s, sat close to the cement platform and lit a small fire using mango wood sticks and ghee. Meanwhile, Aaji emerged from her room singing *Devi geet*, a genre of Bhojpuri traditional songs that I later learned is specifically sung during the worship of the seven Devis.⁶ Aaji's songs were now interspersed with frequent burps. Exerting additional pressure on her vocal cords to sing with strength, Aaji bent down and began to decorate the cement platform while marking it with vermilion to indicate the presence of the seven Devis. The sounds and aromas of the mango wood sticks burning in the ritual fire became stronger. Aaji grew silent as all her family members, including her grandchildren sitting next to me, started to sing other *Devi geet* songs. Meanwhile, Aaji began to shake her arms and rotate her head rapidly. Aaji later interlocked her fingers and moved her hands back and forth as she began to burp loudly. She later told me that she usually shakes her arms because she feels some pain upon the arrival of the Devis in her body. Having grabbed a handful of raw rice from her lap, she stood up and threw it up in the air while chanting loudly to signal the arrival of the Devis in her body.

All throughout the latter part of the ritual, Aaji's family members kept adding to the intensity of the Devis' manifestation by increasing the volume of their singing. I later learned that the seven goddesses (Durga, Kali, Lakshmi, Parvati, Radha, Saraswati, and Sita⁷) arrive as one enchanted, dancing spirit, constituting all of their distinct personalities.⁸ In the context of Indian folklore, each of the Devis represents different symbols and qualities, and these qualities are embodied by women in rural India. For instance, women are said to shift in their everyday life between being as furious as Durga or Kali, and as loving and nurturing as Parvati or Sita.

5. See a video of Aaji performing this song at <https://vimeo.com/rajatnayyar/crow>.

6. Watch Aaji singing this song at <https://vimeo.com/rajatnayyar/pachra>.

7. Durga is a fierce goddess, an embodiment of divine feminine energy. Kali is a fearsome and fierce goddess who represents time, change, and destruction. Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth, prosperity, and good fortune. Parvati is the goddess of love, fertility, and devotion. Radha is revered for her love and devotion to Lord Krishna, and their love story is a central theme in many Hindu texts and folklore. Saraswati is the goddess of knowledge, music, arts, and learning. Sita is revered for her purity, devotion, and strength. According to Aaji, although these are Hindu goddesses who have distinct personalities and representations, they come together all at once in one spirit, and this adds even more to the intensity of their arrival in her body. In fact, before having met Aaji, I did not know that a single spirit could comprise all seven Devis.

8. See a video of Aaji performing this ritual at <https://vimeo.com/rajatnayyar/devis>.



Figure 3. Aaji rotates her head as the Devis arrive. Bihar, 2017. (Photo by Rajat Nayyar)

When Aaji finally sat down again, she was neither singing nor visibly feeling any pain in her body. Finding Aaji in a meditative state, her family, along with some community members, approached her one after the other. They knelt, seeking the Devis' blessings. After offering all of us her blessings and some raw rice, Aaji moved the ritual fire to a clay pot, which she then balanced on her hand. She walked out of the house carrying the ritual fire, followed by her son Krishna, who also brought other ritual materials (ghee, rice, flowers, and fruit) that would be offered along with the fire in the Kali goddess temple. I followed them with my camera and noticed how quickly Aaji was walking towards the temple despite the light rain. "Never before have I felt so much uncertainty and divine phenomenon around rain," I thought to myself while trying to catch up with both Aaji and Krishna. (I also had to protect my camera from getting too wet.) At the temple, Aaji hailed the Devis: "Jai jai, jai jai!" and placed the clay pot with the ritual fire in front of the *Kali murti* (stone image of the goddess Kali), thus concluding the ritual for the day.⁹

The next morning, I greeted Aaji and asked her if we could speak about the previous day's ritual. She insisted that we go outside and set the camera up in the community space next to the temple where her friends and other community members would usually gather in the evenings to sing, exchanging their repertoires as part of our larger community project. As we walked through the street with the camera, we slowly gathered a small audience consisting of children and youths who also followed us to the community space and sat on the platform around the village well. Meanwhile, Aaji sat facing the camera to begin the discussion with me about her ritual.

I started off the conversation by asking about the role of voice and songs in her rituals. "When the Devis arrive, I just sit calmly with them inside me; anyone can ask a question and they will keep on talking," she replied.¹⁰ Unfamiliar with the songs she was singing before the ritual started, I asked her if they were ropani songs,¹¹ and she responded, "When the Devis come, then Devi songs are sung—why would someone sing ropani at that time?" She later confirmed that her Devis ritual songs are also

9. See a video of this ritual at <https://vimeo.com/rajatnayyar/kali>.

10. Aaji always spoke with me in Bhojpuri, her native tongue. I always had an interpreter present and later got the interview transcripts translated into English. The conversations I had with Aaji about her relationship with the spirit of the seven Devis all took place in 2017 and 2021.

11. Ropani songs are sung by lower-caste women in Bihar while working in the rice fields.



Figure 4. The author films Aaji speaking about the Devis in her home. Bihar, 2017. (Photo by Rajat Nayyar)

commonly known as pachra, which is a genre of traditional songs that are sung to worship and welcome the seven Devis before any auspicious Bhojpuri rite of passage at both upper-caste and lower-caste homes. Aaji's mother and other women in her birth village had taught her many pachra songs. She has been reviving these songs in her attempts to develop ways of pleasing and negotiating with the spirit of the Devis to make her corporeal and agentive entanglements with them more bearable.

The Devis, who are already in a festive mood as they arrive, are highly enchanted with Aaji's singing and worship. Wedding processions in rural India usually involve the groom and his family approaching the bride's home with a band playing loud and intense music, only to fall silent upon arriving, thus making space for women to begin singing traditional wedding songs. Similarly, the Devis arrive swiftly in Aaji's body, swinging and dancing boisterously as if in such a wedding procession. Aaji told me that, in fact, burping and yawning are signs of the Devis' arrival: they enter like audible air through her vocal cords, flooding her entire body and senses. Aaji added that she considers the vocal aspects of her ritual, such as her singing voice, burping voice, and yawning voice, as part of her vocal tradition, part of her repertoire. I asked her if yawning might also signify her fatigue upon the arrival of the Devis. She insisted that her yawning did not indicate sleepiness or languor; she asked me to consider its repetition during the ritual and how neatly it is intermeshed with her singing voice. Similarly, Aaji noted that burping after a meal is quite different from the frequent burping that she more deliberately performs in an effort to summon the Devis' arrival in her body. After the arrival and settling of the Devis' dance procession, Aaji's mind slowly calms; she stops singing, burping, and yawning. Her entire focus at that point is on the intentions and doings of the Devis within her body; she notices how they feel pleased when people come to worship them. She is keenly aware of how they use her voice and body to respond to people's prayers by providing their blessings.

Aaji then asked me about my experience of filming the spirit of the Devis, and I told her that I myself felt like I was in a trance while filming her ritual. During this trance, I simply held onto

Aaji's voice. Given my training as an audiovisual anthropologist, I now see that my responses to Aaji at that time might have been inspired by ethnographic filmmakers such as Jean Rouch, who used the camera not only as a medium to film but as a "ritualistic method itself" (Schäuble 2019:34).¹² Conceptualizing his camera as an important ritual object led Rouch to experience a trance-like euphoria that he called "ciné-trance," a creative state that led him to join the ritual as a participant, introducing new types of dialogue between the filmmaker and the people filmed (Rouch 2003). I experienced such a trance-like state while filming Aaji's ritual. My research has further pushed me to expand upon Rouch's strictly corporeal concept by taking seriously the materiality of voice in developing relations with other/more-than-humans. I note the omission of the spirit's agency from Rouch's conceptualization of ciné-trance. On the contrary, we must begin to consider what filming *with* the spirits might entail, as well as the important role of voice in guiding the filmmaker through this process.

Having recently rewatched some of Rouch's films, as well as other ethnographic films on spirit mediumship, I note the over-usage of the filmmaker's own interpreting, and the reflexive, "confused" (Van de Port 2017) voice as it overshadows the protagonists' voices and sounds. In filming Aaji summoning the Devis, it was the *sound* of her voice and songs that gave me sensory pointers to move myself and/or my camera in a certain direction to film her ritual. As Aaji used her voice to navigate her agentive entanglements with the Devis, I, through the viewfinder of my camera, also found myself and the camera intimately entangled with Aaji's voice, her body movements (such as the shaking of her hands/arms), as well as her family members' songs, the ritual objects, and the spirit of the Devis.

Aaji's singing performances of the arrival of the Devis constitute a theatre of "agentive entanglement" that is grounded in voice, one that is co-led by Aaji and myself through careful cultivation of human, more-than-human, and ethnographic relationships. Furthermore, my research shows how indigenous, materialism-based ethnographic approaches might allow us to more fully account for the role of voice, as well as to collaborate with more-than-human agents by taking their agencies and intentionalities seriously. This approach also addresses the gaps in our understanding of multimodal ethnography as a collaborative and imaginative methodology (Culhane and Elliott 2016; Salazar et al. 2017; Kazubowski-Houston and Auslander 2021) that promises to give "voice" to communities but fails to provide sufficient tools to study the performers' voices as "a technology of selfhood" (Eidsheim 2008).

Agentive Entanglements with the Devis

The Devis first arrived when Aaji's eldest son was taking his high school examinations. Aaji told me that she set up a cemented altar in her home courtyard around the same time. (It is not clear from Aaji's narrative if the altar was created before the arrival of the Devis. However, it *is* clear that it was the anticipation of Devis' arrival that led her to make the altar in the first place.) She would decorate it with Kachnar flowers and draw seven lines symbolizing the seven Devis with vermilion before beginning each of her rituals. Aaji's own mother was still alive when the Devis arrived more than 25 years ago. At that point, Aaji and her mother could rarely meet since Aaji had moved to Badhuli village to reside with her new husband's family after marriage. Aaji's mother passed away a few years later, leaving a huge void within her. She told me, "I have no photograph of my mother, nor do I have any of her songs written or recorded." As a very young girl with a great passion for singing, Aaji would run to visit her mother who worked as a farmer in the rice fields. All day long while bent down, Aaji would assist her mother in the flooded rice fields while listening to her

12. Renowned for his participatory and embodied camera, as well as for his ideas of "shared anthropology," Jean Rouch used his camera to participate and film spirit possession rituals in West Africa. Michaela Schäuble notes that Rouch's anti-tripod corporeal cinematography emphasizes the "body and movement—of both the protagonists and the filmmaker" (2019:35).

singing the ropani songs, accompanying her as she could. Since there was no school for girls in her village, she spent all her time developing the vocal techniques and repertoires needed for singing Bhojpuri women's vocal traditions.

Aaji would listen intently to her mother's singing while at work, repeating each song line by line, and also on the way back home from the fields, when her mother would often intervene to correct her vocalizing technique, pitch, or range (Nayyar 2022). Aaji's passion for singing also led her to accompany her mother to weddings in upper-caste families where they would be paid to sing alongside upper-caste women. The songs sung solely at upper-caste homes were entirely different in rhythm, pitch, and length from the ropani labor songs that Aaji was learning from her mother. Upper-caste women in Badhuli village do not work outside their homes; therefore, according to Aaji, their songs are always shorter in length and demand a chorus with other women (Nayyar 2022). Caste is widely practiced in Badhuli village, just as in any other Indian village. It is also important to note that many lower-caste women often participate in upper-caste wedding and death rituals because they serve as singers, drummers, turmeric grinders, cooks, and other roles prescribed for their caste in the Hindu scriptures (Tiwari 2015). Despite her lower caste, Aaji developed friendly relations with upper-caste girls and women, and they invited her to learn their song repertoires, which included songs for each rite of passage, such as birth, marriage, death, and Brahmin initiation.

I found Aaji's mother through Aaji's voice. Rarely has she sung a song to me and not had memories of running to her mother in the rice fields and singing kajari (monsoon) and ropani songs with her. Not only do these songs sung by Aaji evoke her mother's absent presence, they also reflect how her mother might have used her own vocal traditions to navigate her relationships and work as a lower-caste rice farmer. Aaji experienced a very difficult few years as a young bride while attempting to navigate patriarchal restrictions in a new community. All throughout, it was only her mother's songs that consoled her, particularly in her 20s when she experienced an unidentified illness following the immense grief of losing her first son, who died shortly after birth. Gradually, Aaji started to move beyond working in the home to working and singing in the rice fields that were owned by her husband's family as well as others. At times, she would sing in a high-pitched voice to catch the attention of young children who would be taking their goats to graze; in this way, these children and their goats became Aaji's first audience in Badhuli village. As the community members from upper-caste and lower-caste families learned about Aaji's singing abilities and repertoire, they began to invite her to sing with other women at their weddings in return for a small amount of money.

Back in her birth village near Dehri-on-Sone, Aaji had never encountered anyone who had experienced entanglements with the spirit of the Devis or ancestors. It was only in Badhuli village that she first encountered the spirit of the seven Devis when it would possess the younger brother of her father-in-law. Her husband's uncle died around the same time that Aaji was recovering from an unknown illness plus the grief of moving away from her mother. "At last, when I recovered, everything came upon me," said Aaji when I asked about her first encounter with the spirit in her late 30s. Aaji told me that in that first meeting with the spirit of the seven Devis she was quite up-front with it; she even took a jab at them by questioning their choice to arrive at a time when she was at last feeling well and happy and not at the time when she, as a young woman suffering from illness and grief, had needed them the most.

I strictly told the Devis that I don't want to carry their baggage inside my body, but they decided to reside inside me of their own volition. Where should I throw them now? Even though I abused them so much, in spite of that they decided not to leave me, so I agreed. What to do...? I just tell them to keep everyone healthy and prosperous. Now that I have decided to keep them, I will keep them properly. What else can you do with these gods and goddesses?

Aaji had felt so intimately related to the seven Devis during that first encounter that she found herself complaining to them about their absence earlier in her life. The goddesses should

have come when there was misery in life, “or at the least they could have come in the dreams to suggest a way out of it,” she told me. As such, Aaji insisted during that meeting with the spirit of the seven Devis that she would not be carrying their “baggage” in her body. Having personally encountered the pride with which spirit mediums usually view their unique entanglement with the spirits, as well as scholars’ writings on how this ability affords people access to religious power in their communities, I was surprised that Aaji thought of her entanglement with the spirit of the Devis as a burden, and I was compelled to ask her why she considered it as such. At once, Aaji responded to me,

Why should I not have complaints [about the Devis]? You or anyone can come tomorrow and start calling me a witch. How many people will I keep explaining and arguing with? Witches, spirits, ghosts, ancestors—how do they all look? I know nothing. What to do? How many people will I keep explaining and arguing with?

Although Aaji knows each of the Devis through their images and scriptures, she does not know anything about their appearance when they arrive as a single spirit. The only physical manifestation that she can attribute to the Devis is the cemented altar in her courtyard, which for her is a kind of divine seat at her home. Indeed, accepting entanglement with the spirit is a serious affair; not only does it involve a completely renewed embodiment and performative agency for Aaji, but it also brings about major shifts in familial and social relationships as she fulfills her responsibilities to the Devis through her rituals. For Aaji, this involves a shift in her singing voice and changing relationships with her family members, friends, and community members as they seek blessings from the Devis. Although the manifestation of the Devis is a relatively common phenomenon throughout rural north India, it can be a daunting task for the spirit medium to prove the authenticity of their entanglement with the spirit. Beatrix Hauser, who extensively studied spirit possession rituals in east India, has noted that “deity possession is often subjected to critique and mockery,” not only by young boys and men but also by the “pious who may challenge the authenticity of possession” (Hauser 2012:138). In Badhuli village, many of these pious men and young boys are from upper-caste families, and they, much like Hauser’s interlocutors, often argue that entanglement with the spirit is an act put on by lower-caste people, especially women, to gain some social attention and wealth (138). I find it interesting that the skeptical, disparaging views expressed by “pious” upper-caste men in Hauser’s ethnography (2012) align very closely with those of Western scholars such as anthropologist I.M. Lewis (1966), who tend to either critique these rituals for their alleged lack of authenticity or academically theorize the phenomenon with a complete disregard for the intentions of the spirits. Most importantly, they argue, for social purposes (to maintain caste boundaries) or for scholarly ones, that the rituals might allow (lower-caste) women to gain some, if not all, kind of access to power (Pintchman 2007; Erndl 2007; Sered 1996).

In contrast, Aaji highlights how entanglement with the spirit, especially when it involves one that incorporates the seven Devis, who at times have their own distinct personalities, is a demanding, exhausting, and burdensome responsibility that takes away a lot of freedom from the spirit medium, impacting their personal and social life. Upon its arrival, the spirit of the seven Devis starts to dance swiftly, quite literally shaking Aaji’s entire body and causing pain in her arms and her head, which begins to rotate rapidly. The ritual also brings about an immense pressure on her vocal cords, as she tries to stay focused by forcefully singing the Devis’ songs in a very low pitch. Here it is also important to note that, regardless of her entanglement with the spirit of the Devis, Aaji has been a sought-after and respectable figure in the community because of her hard work as a rice farmer, her singing abilities, and her vast knowledge of (upper- and lower-caste) Bhojpuri women’s vocal traditions. Aaji’s passion for singing and her ability to bring together women from all caste groups to sing and exchange vocal traditions was also evident throughout the singing gatherings that we collaboratively organized as part of our multimodal ethnography project (Nayyar 2022). I believe this is partly why Aaji has never mentioned any kind of mockery or critique by community members, young or old, in Badhuli village, nor did I find anyone in the audience who was mocking her when we screened the ethnographic film that incorporated the domestic rituals of her entanglement



Figure 5. Aaji sings songs with her friends in the village. Bihar, 2017. (Photo by Rajat Nayyar)

with the spirit.¹³ Notably, the film screening was the first time many community members witnessed Aaji’s ritual with the Devis. The film and the images that were captured by people during the screening were subsequently shared digitally via the community’s WhatsApp group. Seeing this, Aaji noted to me that the Devis have now infused the digital world as well as her own domestic sphere.

Despite my persistent inquiries about the relationship between spirit mediumship and access to power, Aaji never claimed to have achieved any more power than she had before her entanglement with the Devis. In fact, the only promise that the Devis ever made to her is that they will ensure that she and her family members will remain healthy. One day, when I asked about the connection between the spirit of the Devis and her health, Aaji said, “I am healthy because of them. Even if I catch a disease or sickness, it will have only half of the intensity. I can only feel half of the pain, as the remaining half is endured by the Devis.” For Aaji, her entanglement with the spirit of the seven Devis is a partnering of sorts, where they engage in a dialogue through her rituals, and both intend to benefit each other. While Aaji provides a powerful mediumship for the spirit to infuse the physical worlds, the spirit takes responsibility for Aaji’s health as well as her family’s.

Reconceptualizing Spirit Mediumship and Vocal Traditions

Many scholars have researched Indian women’s spirit possession as domestic religious rituals that entail the “reproduction of and resistance to hegemonic images of female subjectivity” (Hancock 1999:32; see also Pintchman 2007). This scholarship mainly falls into two schools of thought that either support or challenge the Western colonial “deprivation theory” proposed by anthropologist I.M. Lewis (1966). Lewis stresses that women and other “low status people” are attracted to spirit possession to make up for their “powerlessness” in everyday life (in Erndl 2007). Susan Sered has critiqued all deprivation theories (social deprivation, sexual deprivation, calcium deprivation, and overdetermination of gender) because they are based on the assumption that possession trance is an “abnormal phenomenon.” Sered proposes that we consider spirit possession as “one of a range

13. The film *Ropani* is currently a work in progress. You can watch it at <https://vimeo.com/rajatnayyar/ropani>.



Figure 6. Aaji presents our ethnographic film to the Badhuli community. Bihar, 2017. (Photo by Rajat Nayyar)

of *normal* human abilities or talents” (1996:190). Rather than focusing on human abilities and behaviors as “normal” versus “abnormal,” my concern is with Western scholars’ anthropocentric persistence in studying spirit possession using a purely human lens, disregarding other key actors in these rituals. According to posthumanist scholars such as Jonggab Kim (2020), Western scholarship has long attributed agency solely to the human consciousness, while failing to recognize the “intentionality” of more-than-human and beyond-human forms such as spirits.

In response, my work draws specifically upon Mary Keller’s proposed concept of “instrumental agency,” which describes the overall dynamic between the numinous being and the spirit: possessed individuals act as “vehicles” or “instrumental agencies” for “the ancestors, deities, or spirits that possess them” (2002:22). Keller and Kathleen Erndl further argue that, through their status as instruments for the spirit of the Devis, women gain religious authority that is denied them in patriarchal societies (Keller 2002:79; Erndl 2007:157). As I have laid out here, we need to move beyond this fixation on the impact of spirit possession on *human* social relations and access to power and instead take seriously the relational ontologies and vocal traditions that allow entanglements with more-than-human agents. As Hervé Guay, Jean-Marc Larrue, and Nicole Nolette note in their article that critically looks at the “newness” of new materialisms, indigenous philosophies have long “decentred human agency by evoking the relationships between humans and more-than-human agents, as well as the spiritual responsibility ensuing from these relations” (2022:13).

In my research with Aaji, I work diffractively with the scholarship on spirit possession by drawing upon indigenous relational ontologies. Anishinaabe scholar Dolleen Tisawii’ashii Manning articulates a “mnidoo-philosophy” that emphasizes the “interconnected and autonomous living status inherent to all of existence, recognizing the agency not only of humans, but also of animals, plants, inanimate ‘objects’ and invisible and intangible forces” (2017:1). In her dissertation, “Mnidoo-Worloding: Merleau-Ponty and Anishinaabe Philosophical Translations,” Manning critiques the disembodied “rational self” (2017) embedded within the discourses of Western knowledge production that “floats above the world and surveys it as if it is not immersed in it” (De Line and Manning 2020). Such a disembodied researcher is positioned as a detached participant-observer, an expert who studies the world as an object. Embodying relational ontological frameworks might sound to many Western scholars like an impossible task because they have traditionally refused to acknowledge agency beyond human actors, thus maintaining the Cartesian split between mind and body.



Figure 7. The author discusses Devis rituals with Aaji in her home. Bihar, 2021. (Photo by Chitraang Nayyar)

In contrast, Manning insists that we *become* (rather than acquire) knowledge through an ethical, reciprocal, and honest “practice of openness to these multiple (more-than-human) realities and interdependent entities” by nurturing our relationships with other human and more-than-human agents (such as ancestors) through “storytelling, dreams, visions and ceremonies” (Manning 2017:149). Such a relational framework resonates with Aaji’s world-making and embodied practices that blur the boundaries between humans, Gods, spirits, ancestors, animals, and the natural environment.

Interestingly, Keller briefly mentions the role of “negotiation” (2002:44) as a key element in the human-spirit dynamic but fails to elaborate on what that entails. I have extended Keller’s concept of instrumental agency to take into consideration the role of voice and performance as a means to navigate the complex reciprocal relationship between humans and more-than-humans. Specifically, Aaji conceives of and navigates her relationship with the spirit of the Devis using her voice and vast knowledge of Bhojpuri vocal traditions, including songs and stories.

Singing across Physical, Spiritual, and Digital Worlds

In our conversations, Aaji always notes that her entanglements with the spirit have radically transformed and affected her voice and the vocal repertoires she learned from her mother. At the same time, Aaji highlights how she has long been modulating her singing voice and carefully blending her burping and yawning voice within her vocal repertoires upon the arrival of Devis. Although spirit mediumship is a very common practice in rural north India, Aaji’s practice as a spirit medium is unique in that it is inextricably tied to her mastery of vocal repertoires.

Notably, Aaji does not see herself as merely an instrument for the enactment of the Devis’ agency. Instead, she emphasizes the complexities of her physical and spiritual *dialogue* with the spirit of the Devis. While speaking about the spirit’s intentions, Aaji highlights how her dialogue with the spirit is filled with negotiations leading to resolutions as they cocreate a nurturing relationship. Drawing on indigenous relational ontologies and new materialisms as a framework for a multimodal ethnography, I use the term “agentive entanglements” to move beyond analytical lenses that gauge the level of religious power ingrained within and as a consequence of women’s “spirit possession” rituals, focusing on “embodied ways of knowing that are pivotal to vocal traditions” (Magnat 2022:30). Indigenous philosophy and relational ontologies have long not only challenged notions of human centrism but also ensured that human responsibility for environmental stewardship is not altogether disowned (Manning 2017:88) in a posthuman quest “to emphasize other-than-human or more-than-human materiality” (87).

Highlighting autoethnographic details of filming the spirit during Aaji’s rituals through a focus on embodied voice and vocal traditions, our work blurs the boundaries between the physical, spiritual, and digital worlds. While Rouch omitted the spirit from his concept of ciné-trance, I argue

that we must begin to think through what filming *with* the spirits entails, particularly considering the role of voice in guiding the filmmaker through this process. The materiality and performativity of voice and vocality is, importantly, inherent in women's spirit rituals and the everyday life of spirit mediums.

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Supplemental Material

To view supplemental materials related to this article, please visit <https://vimeo.com/904964930/ff3864aef6>.