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## Between God and Mind: Divine and Spiritual Possession in the Hills of Uttarakhand

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15845388>

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

**Research Paper**

**Accepted:** 23-06-2025

**Published:** 10-07-2025

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**Keywords:**

*Spirit Possession,  
Uttarakhand, Divine  
Experience, Cultural  
Psychology*

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### ABSTRACT

The study examines the phenomenon of divine and spiritual possession in Uttarakhand, where cultural, religious, and psychological meanings often merge in complex ways. Drawing on interviews with 14 participants—seven who experienced possession firsthand and seven who observed it in others—the research investigates how spirit possession is perceived, lived, and narrated in this Himalayan context. Using open and axial coding within a thematic analysis framework, six major themes emerged: Belief vs. Mind, Trance-state, Culture as Catalyst, Beyond Science, Inherited Divinity, and Hosts of Divine. Ones with first-hand experience often described sudden trance states, emotional transformation, and memory blackouts, interpreting them as spiritual visitations or ancestral presence. Observers, on the other hand, frequently framed these events through psychological, emotional, or cultural lenses—sometimes reverent, sometimes skeptical. The tension between divine faith and mental explanation runs across almost every narrative. Possession, for many, is not just a momentary episode but a life-altering experience—deeply personal, yet socially constructed. implications



## 1. Introduction

Spirit possession has captivated human attention for thousands of years. Across continents and cultures—from the ancient temples of Egypt to Himalayan villages—people have reported moments when something not-themselves spoke through their bodies, shook their limbs, or filled them with energy. These experiences are not new, and they are certainly not disappearing. Whether labelled as divine intervention, madness, trance, psychosis, or healing, the act of being “possessed” is one of the most mysterious, polarizing, and emotionally powerful states a human being can undergo.

What complicates this phenomenon further is that its outer signs—speaking in altered voices, collapsing into trances, losing memory or control—are astonishingly consistent across the globe. Yet, the meanings attached to those signs vary widely. In one culture, a possessed person may be revered as a chosen vessel of a deity. In another, they may be seen as mentally ill, dangerous, or criminal. Still in others, they are sought out as healers, oracles, or seers. This tension between similar symptoms and different meanings lies at the heart of spirit possession.

The diversity of interpretations reveals how spirit possession is deeply embedded in local beliefs, histories, and social structures. For example, what a French physician in the 1800s might have called “hysteria,” a priest in Haiti might interpret as a load riding the body. What a tribal elder in India might recognize as ancestral spirit communication, a modern psychiatrist might see as dissociation due to trauma. These aren’t just different explanations—they are different worldviews. And spirit possession, uniquely, sits at the intersection of them all.

This intersection is precisely why possession resists easy classification. It does not belong to just one field of study. Anthropologists, psychologists, neurologists, theologians, feminists, and folklorists have all tried to claim it, and each discipline brings its own lens: symbolic ritual, identity transformation, trauma response, altered consciousness, or social protest. But none of these explanations can fully capture what it means to those who live it.

For many experiencers, possession is not an abstract concept but a transformative, often life-altering reality. It arrives uninvited, sometimes during moments of extreme emotion, sometimes during ritual, and sometimes with no warning at all. It changes how a person sees themselves—and how their community sees them. It may bring healing, stigma, power, isolation, or all of these at once. Some feel



touched by the divine. Others feel cursed or fractured. Some cannot remember it; others remember only too well.

This is especially true in India, where cultural plurality means that spirit possession takes many forms and names. From the deity-infused dancers of Theyyam in Kerala to the Himalayan women who speak in ancestral voices during Jāgar rituals, India is a tapestry of trance and belief. Here, possession often has a place, a language, a lineage. It is not always pathologized. In fact, in many places, it is expected—sometimes even inherited. Your grandmother hosted the goddess, and now, perhaps, so do you.

Uttarakhand, where this research is based, is particularly rich in such traditions. The region's spiritual geography—its temples, forests, rivers, and mountain shrines—forms more than a backdrop; it is a living participant in these events. People don't just believe in spirits or gods; they live alongside them. Possession here often serves not only as personal expression but also as social communication. A possessed body may deliver warnings, prescribe healing, demand justice, or bless a newborn. The body becomes a messenger, a bridge, a stage on which unseen forces enact their will.

But what are these forces? Are they gods, ancestors, subconscious urges, fragments of memory, chemical surges in the brain? This is the question that divides most researchers. The scientific impulse has long been to reduce these events to neurological patterns or psychological breakdowns. The religious impulse, meanwhile, has been to elevate them as moments of sacred union or divine wrath. Somewhere in between are those who ask not just what these events are but what they mean.

This research takes that in-between approach seriously. It begins not with the question, “Is possession real?” but rather, “What does possession mean to those who experience and witness it?” What are the emotional, psychological, and cultural frameworks that make it intelligible and meaningful? And why, despite centuries of modernization, does spirit possession remain so common, so forceful, and so hard to dismiss?

The answer, perhaps, lies in its adaptability. Possession is not static; it evolves. In ancient Greece, oracles channelled Apollo. In medieval Europe, exorcists confronted demons. In contemporary India, a possessed woman may appear on a viral video, drawing both reverence and mockery. Possession adapts to its social conditions and technological settings, just as it adapts to the inner worlds of its hosts. It can be protest, therapy, or performance. It can be gendered—often appearing more frequently in women—or



classed, emerging most visibly among the poor or marginalized. It may be triggered by grief, ritual, music, or silence. It may offer control or strip it away.

Modern psychology has made important strides in understanding possession-related phenomena, especially through the lens of dissociation. The DSM-5 includes dissociative trance disorder and notes cultural context as crucial to diagnosis. Researchers like Kirmayer and Seligman argue that possession experiences can serve as socially sanctioned outlets for emotional distress, especially in contexts where direct expression is discouraged. Neuropsychology, too, has begun to explore how rhythmic ritual, hyperarousal, and trauma influence the brain's default mode network, possibly inducing the sense of “losing oneself” to another.

Yet despite these findings, science often hesitates to fully engage with the emotional, spiritual, or existential weight that possession carries for many. It risks flattening rich, layered experiences into mere pathology. Conversely, purely spiritual interpretations may ignore the psychological suffering that can accompany possession, or the risk of abuse when divine authority is claimed in the name of tradition. Both extremes miss something.

What is needed, then, is an integrative model—one that listens to the voices of the possessed not as case studies, but as narrators. One that respects cultural beliefs without abandoning critical inquiry. One that can hold both neuroscience and mythology in the same breath. As White (2009) notes, ancient Indian states of consciousness like *Turiya* were not about losing control, but about gaining a clearer sense of self beyond illusion. Could possession, in some cases, be a glimpse of that?

In this way, spirit possession forces us to rethink categories we often take for granted: self and other, body and mind, sanity and madness, belief and fact. It invites us into liminal space, where what's real is not what's measurable but what's meaningful. Possession reminds us that human beings are not just biological systems or cultural products—we are also seekers, storytellers, hosts of things we cannot always name.

This study, then, is not just about documenting a set of unusual experiences. It is an attempt to listen, across disciplines and distances, to the voices that speak when the ordinary self steps aside. It is an exploration of how culture and consciousness co-create reality. It is a search for what happens in the moment when someone says, “It wasn't me speaking. It was something else.”



## 2. Review of Literature

Spirit possession has been explored extensively across anthropological, psychological, and theological domains. In the Indian context, it is especially intertwined with ritual practice, gender roles, healing systems, and evolving medical discourses. The following review outlines selected studies that highlight these themes using ethnographic and qualitative approaches.

Sahoo (2023) carried out long-term ethnographic research among the Bhil tribe in southern Rajasthan, focusing on the impact of Pentecostalism. His work revealed that religious transformation through Pentecostal prayer and possession was not merely spiritual but also moral and social. It restructured gender relations and offered women new platforms for agency, often in contrast to traditional patriarchal norms. Another strand of Sahoo's work showed how Pentecostal possession fostered ethical subjectivity and communal identity among converts, suggesting that spirit possession could catalyze deep individual and collective shifts in worldview.

Rao (2023) studied possession phenomena in contemporary Uttarakhand through interviews with possessed individuals, spiritual leaders, and health professionals. The research identified a significant dissonance between traditional religious interpretations and psychiatric understandings of possession. While participants often saw possession as spiritually meaningful, medical practitioners were more likely to interpret such states as pathological. Rao emphasized how people straddled both domains in their healing journeys, reflecting the overlapping spheres of belief and biomedicine.

Bindi (2022) examined exorcistic rituals among married women in Garhwal. Her ethnographic study revealed that these practices often emerged from domestic tensions and offered a symbolic outlet for women's emotional distress. Though not framed explicitly as resistance, these rituals provided women with a voice within a largely patriarchal context, enabling them to assert themselves within the family structure and fulfill spiritual roles that reinforced their social presence.

Gupta (2021) explored the gendered dynamics of possession among female mediums in Uttarakhand. Possession was found to be both empowering and limiting. While women gained recognition and influence through their roles as divine vessels, they were also constrained by expectations that positioned them within traditional spiritual frameworks. Their authority remained conditional on their alignment with accepted ritual norms, highlighting how possession could both subvert and reinforce existing hierarchies.



Simpson et al. (2021) studied the concept of “tension” among women in the Gaddi tribal community in Himachal Pradesh. Although not focused solely on possession, the study revealed how emotional and social strain was embodied and expressed in culturally specific ways. The notion of tension—akin to distress or anxiety—allowed women to articulate psychological suffering shaped by gender, caste, and social change. This framework can be meaningfully related to possession states, which often emerge in similar contexts of embodied tension.

Sharabi (2020) conducted case studies on three mediums in Himachal Pradesh to understand how possession experiences are received by the community when they fall outside traditional norms. The study showed that when mediums failed to conform to expected spiritual or behavioral codes, they were frequently pathologized or marginalized. These findings highlight how shifting social and religious landscapes can reshape how possession is interpreted and whether it is legitimized or dismissed.

Sharma (2019) addressed the interface between mental health and divine possession in rural Uttarakhand. Through interviews and observations, the study showed that individuals often turned to both spiritual and medical interventions to manage possession episodes. Sharma emphasized the need for culturally informed mental health frameworks that can accommodate spiritual experiences rather than negate them.

Kapoor (2018) investigated possession rituals in the Kumaon region, with a focus on how spirit mediums serve community health. These rituals were central to maintaining social balance, diagnosing hidden illnesses, and ensuring spiritual harmony. The study illustrated the role of possession in connecting the material and spiritual domains, framing the medium as a conduit for healing rather than as someone afflicted.

Lyngdoh (2017) studied possession rites among the Pnar community in Northeast India. His findings showed that such rituals were vital for maintaining clan justice and social regulation. Possession was not viewed as a personal disorder but as a process through which deities intervened in communal conflicts, reinforcing harmony and resolving grievances. These practices underscored the role of possession as both spiritual and judicial.

Kumari (2016) conducted mixed-methods research on Himalayan possession rituals, revealing their integrative role in social cohesion, conflict resolution, and emotional support. Through surveys and



interviews, she showed how these ceremonies allowed individuals to reconnect with ancestral lineages and communal identity, helping restore psychological balance and interpersonal trust.

### ***Rationale***

Spiritual and divine possession phenomena constitute profound cultural and psychological experiences across many societies, particularly within the Indian context. These experiences are deeply embedded in religious practices, cultural belief systems, and community identity. While previous research has extensively examined the sociocultural and ritualistic dimensions of possession, there remains a significant gap in the exploration of the psychological mechanisms and subjective experiences of those who undergo such phenomena.

Notably, recent studies such as Bindi (2022) have drawn attention to the intersection of spiritual possession with gender dynamics and domestic conflict, particularly within Uttarakhand. These findings suggest that possession may serve complex social functions. However, the lived experiences of individuals (as in how they emotionally cognitively, and existentially interpret these events) are still underrepresented in scholarly discourse. This gap is critical, as research in related domains has shown that understanding the subjective dimensions of experiences like possession can offer valuable insights into coping strategies self-construction, and psychological well-being (Csordas, 1994).

The present study seeks to address this gap by employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, focusing specifically on the personal narratives of individuals in Uttarakhand who have experienced spiritual or divine possession. Through in-depth interviews the research will explore the psychological and emotional impact of possession experiences while also examining the influence of cultural frameworks on meaning-making processes. Additionally, it will investigate the coping mechanisms employed by individuals during and after such experiences.

By centering the voices of those directly affected this study aims to enrich the academic understanding of spiritual possession through an interdisciplinary lens. It will contribute to a more nuanced discourse at the intersection of psychology, culture, and spirituality. Furthermore, the findings have the potential to inform culturally sensitive mental health interventions and offer guidance for researchers, clinicians and anthropologists working in contexts where spiritual possession remains a vital aspect of lived experience.



### **3. Methodology**

#### ***Aim***

This study aims to explore the lived experiences and observations of individuals undergoing spiritual or divine possession in Uttarakhand, India, with attention to their psychological, cultural, and social interpretations.

#### ***Objective***

To systematically examine the phenomenological and interpretive dimensions of spirit possession as experienced or witnessed by individuals within the Uttarakhand region.

#### ***Participants***

The sample comprised 14 adult participants residing in Uttarakhand. Seven individuals reported first-hand experiences of spiritual possession, while the remaining seven had closely observed such phenomena within their communities.

#### **Inclusion Criteria.**

1. Individuals aged 18 years or older
2. Participants who self-identified as having either experienced or closely observed spiritual or divine possession

#### **Exclusion Criteria.**

1. Individuals below 18 years of age
2. Individuals with diagnosed severe psychiatric conditions

#### ***Sampling Method***

Purposive sampling was employed to identify participants with direct or interpretive knowledge of possession experiences. Snowball sampling was used concurrently to access members within closed or rural communities, leveraging social and cultural networks for participant recruitment.



### ***Research Design***

A qualitative, phenomenological design was adopted to capture the nuanced, lived experiences associated with spiritual possession. This approach is well-suited for exploring subjective realities, emotional states, and cultural interpretations that emerge in response to non-ordinary states of consciousness.

### ***Procedure***

Participants were recruited through local religious institutions, community leaders, and referrals from prior informants. Informed consent was obtained from all individuals prior to participation. Interviews were semi-structured in format and conducted in Hindi or relevant local dialects, allowing participants to articulate their experiences in a familiar and culturally resonant language.

Each interview was audio-recorded with participant permission and later transcribed verbatim. Ethical standards, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any stage, were strictly maintained. Names and identifying details were anonymized during transcription to ensure privacy.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The process began with familiarization through repeated readings of each transcript. Initial codes were generated based on meaningful statements related to possession, psychological states, cultural interpretation, and emotional response. These codes were then clustered into broader themes reflecting shared patterns and contrasting viewpoints. Key themes were synthesized across participant types (experiencers vs. observers) to draw deeper insight into differing perspectives. The final phase of analysis involved interpreting these themes in relation to existing academic literature on possession, embodiment, and culturally situated mental health.

## **4. Results**

### *Table 1*

*Axial Code Table – Observer Accounts (Interviews 1–7)*

Axial Code	Open Codes	Example Quotations
1. <b>Belief in Possession</b>	Strong belief in possession, Perceives possession as truth, Integrates possession into everyday life	"Yeh sab vastav mein sach hai." (Interview 3) "Yeh hamare jeevan ka ek hissa hai." (Interview 3)
2. <b>Cultural and Traditional Framing</b>	Cultural framing of possession, Possession linked to ancestral traditions, Tradition over scientific reasoning	"Hamare purkho ki parampara hai." (Interview 3) "Yeh sab paramparaon se prabhavit hai." (Interview 2)
3. <b>Emotional and Psychological Influence</b>	Emotional disturbance after sudden death, Emotional response, Emotional stress as a trigger	"Jab kabhi kisi ki achanak mrityu ho jaati hai, toh mann hil jaata hai." (Interview 3) "Main maanti hoon ki kai baar emotional stress ya guilt se aisi sthiti utpann hoti hai." (Interview 2)
4. <b>Spiritual Assistance and Protection</b>	Belief in protective function of spirits, Feeling of connection to higher power, Spiritual companionship	"Hamari raksha ke liye yeh hota hai." (Interview 3) "Unhe lagta hai ki koi unka saath de raha hai." (Interview 3)
5. <b>Ritual and Religious Context</b>	Possession linked to religious contexts, Ritual elements involved, Possession during ritual context	"Dev ya pitra atma aksar devi jagran, pooja, ya sankat ke samay prakat hote hain." (Interview 4) "Jab main puja ke kaam se gayi, maa par avesh hua." (Interview 3)
6. <b>Altered State of Consciousness</b>	Observable change in energy or demeanor, Altered perception during possession, Physical strain	"Us samay woh vyakti alag hi urja se bhara hua lagta hai." (Interview 2) "Is dauraan vyakti alag tarah se mehsoos"

Axial Code	Open Codes	Example Quotations
	after possession	karta hai." (Interview 3)
7. <b>Deification and Social Labeling</b>	Deification by community, Social validation, Automatic religious response by community	"Log usse bhagwan ka roop samajhne lagte hain." (Interview 1) "Bina soche-samjhe log unhe poojne lagte hain." (Interview 2)
8. <b>Gendered Experiences of Possession</b>	Gendered pattern in possession experiences, Possession more likely in devout individuals, Possession more common in women	"Kahi jagah mein ladkiyon par zyada avesh hota hai." (Interview 2) "Yeh unhi logon ke saath hota hai jo bhagwan mein gehra vishwas rakhte hain." (Interview 3)
9. <b>Psychosocial and Sociocultural Interpretation</b>	Psychosocial explanation, Sociopsychological framing, Possession as collective psychocultural process	"Main ise sociopsychological process ke roop mein dekhta hoon." (Interview 4) "Mujhe lagta hai yeh ek samudaayik manovaigyanik kriya hai." (Interview 5)
10. <b>Skepticism and Scientific Understanding</b>	Denial of scientific explanation, Lack of scientific proof, Science over tradition	"Yeh sab vaastavik hai, ismein vigyan ka koi role nahi." (Interview 3) "Ab tak science ne ise puri tarah se sabit nahi kiya hai." (Interview 5)

This table presents the axial codes developed from interviews with individuals who had **observed spirit possession** in others but had **not experienced it themselves**. Each axial code aggregates multiple open codes that reflect common perceptions, explanations, and interpretations. The table also includes illustrative quotations to ground each category in real language. The axial codes in this table emphasize **belief systems, cultural framing, emotional triggers, ritual context, and skepticism**. This coding reflects how observers grapple with making sense of possession phenomena through external observation, often filtered by **education, occupation, or community norms**.

Table 2

*Axial Code Table – First-hand Accounts (Interviews 8–14)*

Axial Code	Open Codes (Contributing)	Quotations (Examples)
1. <b>Sudden Trance Induction</b>	Sudden onset, triggerless state, control loss, blackout	"Bas achanak hua... mujhe kuch nahi" "Ek second mein sab kuch change ho gaya"
2. <b>External Force Experience</b>	Not self, another entity overpowering feeling	"Woh main nahi tha, koi aur tha" "Mujhe mehsoos hua jaise kisi aur ne control le liya ho"
3. <b>Physical Symptoms &amp; Reactions</b>	Eye change, unusual strength, change, unconscious movement	voice "Aankhein alag ho jaati hain, awaz badal jaati hai" "Main chilla raha tha bina jaane"
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Axial Code	Open Codes (Contributing)	Quotations (Examples)
4. <b>Emotional/Spiritual Shift</b>	Calmness after possession, crying, spiritual feeling	"Possession ke baad shaanti si mehsoos hoti hai" "Rone lag gaya tha, andar se halka mehsoos kiya"
5. <b>Divine Framing of Possession</b>	of God/spirit sent, bhagwan ka temple relevance	"Woh devi ka aana tha" "Yeh sab bhagwan ke raaste hota hai"
6. <b>Positive Interpretation</b>	Blessed feeling, learning experience, healing	"Uske baad maine zindagi differently sochna shuru kiya"

		"Mujhe laga mujhe kuch mila hai is anubhav se"
<b>7. Negative Aftermath</b>	Headache, body fatigue, mental confusion, emotional breakdown	"Bahut thakan ho gayi thi" "Do din tak kuch samajh nahi aaya"
<b>8. Social Validation &amp; Observation</b>	People confirmed it, family accepted, others feared/respected	"Sab ne kaha woh devi thi" "Log darr gaye the lekin kuch log pair chhoone lage"
<b>9. Uncertainty and Memory Gaps</b>	No recollection, memory fragmented scenes	"Mujhe kuch yaad nahi us samay ka" "Sirf itna yaad hai ki main mandir ke samne tha, baaki sab blank"

Axial Code	Open Codes (Contributing)	Quotations (Examples)
<b>10. Integration into Identity</b>	Still reflects on it, changed beliefs, spiritual identity link	"Aaj bhi sochta hoon ki kya sach mein tha yeh sab" "Tab se bhagwan mein vishwas badh gaya hai"
<b>11. Resistance and Helplessness</b>	Tried to fight but failed, could feel but not stop it	"Main rokna chahta tha par kuch ho nahi raha tha" "Sab kuch dekh raha tha lekin control nahi tha"
<b>12. Environmental/Spiritual Triggers</b>	Mandir presence, religious mood, spiritual gatherings	"Mandir mein hi hua tha pehli baar" "Jaise hi mantra suna, kuch hone laga"



<b>13. Role of Mediums/Deity Possessors</b>	Through tantric or pandit, seen others possessed before, saw own reflection in others	"Ek aurat thi jisme devi aayi thi... kuch waisa hi mere saath hua" "Tantric ne bataya ki yeh devi ka prabhav hai"
<b>14. Scientific Supernatural Conflict</b>	vs Mind or energy?, Mental illness confusion, doubt with belief	"Kabhi lagta hai mental issue hoga, lekin saath mein yeh bhi lagta hai ki kuch toh hai" "Science isko nahi samajh sakta pura"

Axial Code	Open Codes (Contributing)	Quotations (Examples)
<b>15. Personal Transformation</b>	Changed life view, greater faith, cautiousness around spiritual things	"Main ab bahut soch samajh ke kisi jagah jaata hoon" "Us din ke baad meri soch hi badal gayi"

This second axial code table focuses on interviews with individuals who reported **first-hand experiences of spirit possession**. The axial codes in this table were derived from deeply embodied, emotional, and often fragmented narratives. They include themes of **sudden trance, memory loss, physical transformation, divine connection, social confirmation, and internal conflict**. This table captures not only the **symptoms and aftermath** of possession but also the long-term personal and spiritual significance assigned to these events by the experiencers. Quotations included help convey the visceral nature of these altered states and their **psychospiritual impact**.

The third table maps the six core discussion themes to their contributing axial codes.

### Table 3

#### Thematic Analysis Overview



Themes	Associated Axial Codes
<b>1. Belief vs. Mind</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Belief in Possession- Cultural and Traditional Framing</li> <li>- Emotional and Psychological Influence</li> <li>- Psychosocial and Sociocultural Interpretation</li> <li>- Skepticism and Scientific Perspective</li> <li>- Divine Framing of Possession</li> <li>- Scientific vs Supernatural Conflict</li> <li>- Sudden Trance Induction- External Force Experience</li> <li>- Physical Symptoms &amp; Reactions- Emotional/Spiritual Shift</li> </ul>
<b>2. Trance state</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Resistance and Helplessness</li> <li>- Uncertainty and Memory Gaps</li> <li>- Altered State of Consciousness</li> <li>- Negative Aftermath</li> <li>- Social Validation &amp; Observation</li> </ul>
<b>3. Culture as Catalyst</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Deification and Social Labeling</li> <li>- Role of Mediums/Deity Possessors</li> <li>- Skepticism and Scientific Perspective</li> </ul>
<b>4. Beyond Science</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Scientific vs Supernatural Conflict</li> <li>- Psychosocial and Sociocultural Interpretation (again, from a different lens)</li> </ul>




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<b>Themes</b>	<b>Associated Axial Codes</b>
	- Cultural and Traditional Framing
	- Ritual and Religious Context
	- Environmental/Spiritual Triggers
<b>5. Inherited Divinity</b>	- Gendered Experiences of Possession
	- Integration into Identity
	- Personal Transformation
	- Spiritual Assistance and Protection
<b>6.Hosts of Divine</b>	- Gendered Experiences of Possession
	- Role of Mediums/Deity Possessors

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The third table maps the six core discussion themes to their contributing axial codes. These themes were not arbitrarily assigned but **emerged through constant comparison** of the codes across participant *Axial to Themes Table* narratives. Each theme integrates **conceptually related axial codes** that, when clustered together, revealed deeper interpretive patterns. Here's how and why each theme developed.

#### *Belief vs. Mind*

This theme emerged from codes that reflected the **core ontological tension** in the study: whether possession is a **spiritual truth** or a **psychological or cultural reaction**. Axial codes like *Belief in Possession*, *Divine Framing of Possession*, and *Cultural and Traditional Framing* reflect the strong faith-based interpretations of both observers and experiencers. In contrast, *Psychosocial Interpretation* and *Skepticism and Scientific Perspective* reveal attempts to rationalize or distance the phenomenon using psychological, cultural, or scientific frameworks. This theme captures that conflict and its emotional undertone.



### *Trance state*

This theme was built from axial codes centered on **dissociation, altered states, and loss of control**, especially among first-hand experiencers. Codes like *Sudden Trance Induction*, *External Force Experience*, *Physical Symptoms*, and *Memory Gaps* all point to a phenomenon where the **body behaves autonomously while the mind disconnects**. *Resistance and Helplessness* further supports this, revealing how experiencers felt powerless during these episodes. This theme articulates the **bodily reality and perceptual shift** that accompany possession, regardless of its interpretation.

### *Culture as Catalyst*

This theme emerged from axial codes reflecting **social responses and collective meaning-making**. Codes such as *Social Validation & Observation* and *Deification and Social Labeling* show how **community belief shapes** the possession experience, often reinforcing or escalating it. *Role of Mediums/Deity Possessors* also contributes by demonstrating how **ritual specialists** or known figures influence the legitimacy or interpretation of a possession event. This theme addresses the **external social construction** of spiritual identity.

### *Beyond Science*

This theme overlaps conceptually with Theme 1 but is focused more specifically on the **epistemological tension** between **scientific rationality** and **faith-based experience**. It includes *Skepticism and Scientific Perspective*, *Scientific vs Supernatural Conflict*, and *Psychosocial Interpretation* (again) to show how people negotiate, dismiss, or attempt to reconcile two competing worldviews. This theme reflects how participants toggle between **modern, medicalized explanations** and **traditional, spiritual narratives**—and how both fall short in fully capturing the lived experience.

### *Inherited Divinity*

This theme draws on axial codes that show **possession as a cultural inheritance** rather than an individual anomaly. Codes like *Cultural and Traditional Framing*, *Ritual and Religious Context*, *Environmental/Spiritual Triggers*, and *Gendered Experiences* all support the view that possession is **passed down across generations**, embedded in ritual life, and often taken for granted in rural or traditional settings. *Integration into Identity* and *Personal Transformation* suggest how such experiences



become part of the self. This theme is about **ancestral continuity, rural worldview, and the fading bridge between tradition and modernity.**

### *Hosts of Divine*

This final theme was created to include **previously under-discussed but meaningful axial codes.** *Spiritual Assistance and Protection* reflects the interpretation of possession as a **guardian-like force**, rather than an affliction. *Gendered Experiences* is revisited here, not just to show frequency but to highlight **social roles and predisposition**, especially among women and the devout. *Role of Mediums* again contributes by showing how previous exposure or ritual status can “invite” possession. This theme reframes possession as a **culturally meaningful role**, often linked to both **spiritual service and vulnerability.**

## **5. Discussion**

This study explored spirit possession in Uttarakhand through qualitative interviews with two groups: individuals who experienced possession firsthand and observers who witnessed it in others. Using thematic coding, the research uncovered how possession is perceived and interpreted, revealing both shared beliefs and divergent explanations. This chapter discusses key themes—belief vs. mind, trance, culture as catalyst, beyond science, inherited divinity, and hosting the divine—comparing experiencers’ and observers’ perspectives to contextualize findings within cultural, psychological, and theoretical frameworks.

### ***Belief vs. Mind***

A striking contrast emerged between experiencers’ unwavering conviction and observers’ ambivalence. For those who underwent possession, the experience was undeniably real. One woman stated, “Yeh sab vastav mein sach hai,” reflecting a certainty rooted in lived experience. Another described it as “hamare jeevan ka ek hissa,” suggesting possession is an inherited, integral part of identity. These accounts convey not just belief but a bodily, emotional truth, often accompanied by sensations of heaviness, altered voices, or post-event clarity.

Observers, particularly those with education or professional backgrounds, expressed skepticism or hesitation. One journalist labeled possession a “psychosocial reaction,” distancing the phenomenon through analytical language. Others remained undecided, saying, “Shayad yeh kuch haan tak sahi lage,



lekin main isse poori tarah sehmata nahi hoon.” This reluctance to fully embrace or reject possession reflects a fear of misjudgment, often leading to explanations like stress or cultural influence. Some observers even attributed possession to “ashikshit logon ke beech,” revealing class or caste biases.

This divide—experiencers’ visceral certainty versus observers’ rational doubt—highlights how possession resists neat categorization. For experiencers, questioning its reality is secondary to its impact; even those who reflected, like one who wondered, “Aaj bhi sochta hoon ki kya sach mein tha yeh sab,” did so with reverence. Observers, however, often reduce possession to psychological or social factors, missing its subjective weight. Rather than asking if possession is real, this study suggests it’s more fruitful to explore how belief, body, and culture intertwine to shape its meaning.

### *Trance state*

A defining feature of possession is the trance state, described by experiencers as a profound absence of self. Phrases like “Mujhe kuch yaad nahi” or “Main chilla raha tha bina jaane” capture literal memory gaps, where the body acts—screaming, shaking, or speaking—while the self seems to vanish. One man recounted, “Achanak gir gaya... samajh nahi aaya kya hua,” stunned by his family’s claim that he spoke as a goddess. These accounts convey transformation, not just forgetting, often accepted calmly as part of the experience.

Observers, unable to feel this absence, describe it as a sudden shift. One noted, “Vyakti kuch time ke liye apne vyaktitva se hatkar kuch aur ban jaata hai,” blending clinical observation with awe. Another said, “Log apni daily life se alag ho jaate hain,” emphasizing the visible rift. Trances often occur without warning, typically in emotionally charged settings like temples or rituals, distinguishing possession from pretense. Experiencers reported exhaustion, headaches, or feeling “halka” afterward, underscoring the physical toll.

For observers, memory loss raises suspicion—“Kya sach mein yaad nahi raha?”—yet experiencers’ vulnerability, like one saying, “Main rokna chahta tha par kuch ho nahi raha tha,” suggests genuine loss of control. This trance state blurs memory, identity, and agency, marking possession as an altered state where psychological, cultural, or spiritual forces converge, leaving a lasting impact regardless of its cause.



### ***Culture as Catalyst***

Possession is not solely an individual experience but a social event shaped by community reactions. One experiencer noted, “Sab ne kaha woh devi thi,” highlighting how others’ interpretations defined her state. This collective framing transforms possession into a sacred act, as seen when “log pair chhoone lage” or treated the possessed as divine. Such worship elevates the individual but also reinforces the experience, creating a feedback loop where belief becomes reality.

Observers, even skeptics, admitted feeling swept up in the moment. One described a possessed person’s face as radiating “prakash,” suggesting the atmosphere’s power to blur doubt. However, this collective belief can isolate experiencers, who may struggle to return to normalcy after being labeled divine. One participant reflected, “Us ladki ko laga ki usne kuch acha kiya hai,” hinting at the pride or burden of such a role.

Skeptical observers sometimes conformed to group belief, with one admitting, “Main yeh nahi kehti ki sach mein aatma thi, lekin sab ne mana.” This collective agreement illustrates possession’s social power: truth emerges not from evidence but from shared conviction. In Uttarakhand, possession thus becomes a cultural catalyst, transforming individuals into sacred figures and reinforcing communal identity through ritual and belief.

### ***Beyond Science***

The tension between science and spirituality permeated discussions, with varied responses to scientific explanations. Some experiencers dismissed science outright, stating, “Yeh sab vaastavik hai, ismein vigyan ka koi role nahi,” with a confidence that framed possession as beyond empirical reach. Others sought integration, with an observer noting, “Ab tak science ne ise puri tarah se sabit nahi kiya hai,” expressing hope for a scientific bridge.

Some observers proposed psychological explanations, like a teacher calling possession a “mansik dharna” or a social worker citing trauma. These attempts ground possession in familiar terms but often fall short for experiencers, who prioritize feeling over analysis. One said, “Kabhi lagta hai mental issue hoga, lekin saath mein yeh bhi lagta hai ki kuch toh hai,” capturing a human reluctance to reduce mystery to pathology.



Even skeptics wavered when faced with possession's emotional intensity, noting how precise divine messages moved audiences. This suggests science explains symptoms but struggles with meaning, which is paramount for experiencers. Rather than a conflict, science and spirituality engage in a dynamic interplay, each offering partial truths about possession's complex reality.

### *Inherited Divinity*

Possession in Uttarakhand is often framed as an inherited tradition, woven into family and cultural narratives. One woman said, "Hamare purkho ki parampara hai," describing possession as a natural part of life, named locally as "elk k." This integration contrasts with urban skepticism, highlighting rural acceptance of possession as a ritual response to grief or divine will.

However, generational shifts emerge, with older participants lamenting, "Aajkal ke bacche nahi samajhte." Younger observers, exposed to modern influences, question possession's authenticity, turning to science or media. This disconnect saddens elders, for whom possession is a framework for meaning-making, addressing loss or injustice through rituals like offerings. One noted, "Jab hum bhool jaate hain unhe, toh ve naraaz hote hain," linking possession to ancestral memory.

This tension reflects a broader clash between tradition and modernity. Possession's persistence suggests it carries cultural wisdom, a language for pain and connection that resists dismissal. Ignoring it risks losing ancestral narratives that sustain community resilience.

### *Hosts of divine*

A quieter theme is possession's protective role, where it is seen as divine assistance rather than disruption. Participants said, "Hamari raksha ke liye yeh hota hai" or "Koi unka saath de raha hai," framing spirits as guardians intervening in crises. This recasts possession as purposeful, with experiencers as "chosen" vessels.

This theme intersects with gender, as observers noted possession's prevalence among women or devout individuals: "Kahi jagah mein ladkiyon par zyada avesh hota hai." This may reflect cultural beliefs about women's spiritual openness or societal roles. Prior exposure to possession, often through community mediums, also primes individuals, as one man noted, "Ek aurat jisme devi aayi thi... kuch waisa hi mere saath hua."



However, being chosen carries burdens. One woman described how, post-possession, “Log usse bhagwan ka roop samajhne lagte hain,” highlighting the isolating weight of divine status. Possession thus empowers but constrains, situating individuals within a cultural logic of protection, ritual, and responsibility.

## 6. Conclusion

Spirit possession, in all its forms, defies singular explanation. This study has not attempted to define it conclusively, but to hold space for the lived voices of those who undergo it and those who witness it. In the hills of Uttarakhand, these are not myths or abstractions—they are lived experiences, deeply woven into belief, emotion, memory, and community.

Across the interviews, responses ranged from reverence to skepticism, from pain to curiosity. Some called it “masaan,” others “mental state,” but all sought to make sense of something intimate yet ineffable. Possession may never be reducible to science, psychology, or faith alone—it often holds elements of all at once.

Open and axial coding allowed some organization of these narratives, but it is their emotional texture that lingers: a teacher's phrase, “mansik dharna”; a woman saying it was “raksha ke liye”; another feeling “shakti aa gayi hai.” These are not contradictions, but coexisting truths—psychological, cultural, and spiritual layers of the same phenomenon.

Rather than resolving the mystery, this research invites a more compassionate and interdisciplinary understanding: one that honors belief without dismissing analysis, and sees healing not only in therapy but in ritual and relationship. Possession is, in many ways, a mirror—reflecting both the individual and the society that surrounds them.

### *Limitations*

This study must acknowledge its own boundaries. First, Uttarakhand's vast cultural diversity cannot be represented through a small sample. Local interpretations of possession vary widely across caste, gender, history, and community.

Second, the challenge of translation looms large. Terms like “shakti” or “devta” carry meanings not easily captured in academic language, and some nuance is inevitably lost.



Third, interpretation is shaped by the researcher's own lens. Thematic codes reflect both participant voices and the researcher's perspective, leaving much unsaid between the lines.

Finally, possession is an embodied, ephemeral state. Capturing it in transcripts or codes risks reducing it to text, when its essence lies in movement, voice, and presence.

### ***Implications***

Despite these limitations, the stories shared here open up important reflections.

For mental health practitioners, this research highlights the need to see healing not only in clinics but also in temples, rituals, and embodied expressions. Dismissing possession as superstition risks ignoring the deep emotional and cultural truths it may carry.

For anthropologists and cultural scholars, the findings affirm the importance of listening—especially to experiences that fall outside conventional categories of reason or diagnosis.

For communities and policymakers, rituals of possession may offer more than spectacle—they can become spaces for shared emotion, resilience, and symbolic justice.

For future researchers, the task is not to prove or disprove possession, but to understand its meaning across different lives. This requires moving beyond binaries—between spirit and science, between belief and pathology—and instead embracing the layered, lived nature of possession in today's world.

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