

# GHOSTS, MODERNITIES AND TRANSFORMATIONS: A CASE STUDY OF MAHENDIPUR BALAJI

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## Ghosts and Modernities

Writing under the colonial discourse of the enlightenment era, Dalpat Ram Daya, in his prize essay for the Gujarat Vernacular Society in 1849, while conceding that “*bhuts* and other Devas reside in *Bhut lok*” (Daya, 1990: 2), argued that these supernatural beings might have appeared on earth in the past, but now in the present age of science and enlightenment, one could no longer believe in them. Fired with a reformative zeal for what he considered a righteous fight against prevailing superstitions in his native society, he named his book ‘The Destroyer of Superstitions Regarding Bhuts, et cetera’. Ghosts may be as ancient as human existence on this planet, yet true to their nature, they are changelings, capable of assuming shapes as per their cultural contexts. In addition to their cultural specificity, they also transgress limits of temporality by existing within the crevices of primitivism, modernity, and postmodernity simultaneously. Ghosts were baptised within a primitive mind which sought to concretise and externalise psychological experiences in symbols and analogous images. With the rise of empirical science and its attendant rationalism in the modern age, ghosts underwent another transfiguration and became an insignia of a resistance to the relentless march of scientific logic and pragmatism which sought to exclude all unusual experiences and realities from the officially accepted discourse and imposed a positivist framework on the interpretation of felt experiences. The acceptance of the term *shamanism* within the vocabulary of anthropology and psychology to signify a broad range of viable therapies that operated within discourses profoundly different from those recognised within the Western positivist model resulted from certain tendencies which manifested in an increasing denunciation of the cultural hegemony of the universalistic, Eurocentric model.

The Postmodernism of the late twentieth century, often referred to as an ungrateful child of its bourgeoisie parents, appeared more comfortable with spectral phenomena, not only due to its acceptance of cultural relativism but also because of its advocacy of fluidity as a defining marker of all phenomena. In contrast to the rationalist rejection of ghosts as a mere mumbo-jumbo, they became part of a cultural reaction which asserted itself against the growth of ratiocination. This subterranean current represented a shying away of the human mind from the staple, stale diet of cognitive interpretations which had held sway over human mind since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the West. Ghosts received a reinterpretation within the postmodern vocabulary, which resisted such binaries as science/religion and faith/reason through the deconstruction of these oppositions. Postmodern emphasis on variety and alterity brought with it tools which penetrated the label of superstition and primitivism that had formerly been associated with beliefs in spirits and ghosts. By recognising the cultural matrices within which all cognitive phenomena are situated, postmodern ideas made social scientists aware that physical phenomena are always understood and interpreted within the parameters of cultural beliefs and values, and exposed the fallacy of understanding them in universal terms – which were heavily influenced by positivist perspectives. One can thus detect a similarity of position in the effervescence of spectral experiences found in most cultures around the world and the postmodern position which advocated a fluidity of multiple stances, and celebrated the shifting nature of reality.

## Ghosts and the Religious Idiom of Mehandipur Balaji

The temple of Mehandipur Balaji, one of the most prominent centres for the exorcism of spirits in North Indian state of Rajasthan, is visited by multitudes of people from all parts of India who are afflicted by some kind of spirit possession.



Temple of Balaji



Patients before the temple

Some of the figures related to these 'patients', as revealed by studies by D.C. Satija and others, dismantled many myths about the phenomenon of spirit possession. The study revealed that 82% of these patients were in the range of 15-39 years of age. Furthermore, 80% of the patients were educated, and showed a near parity of gender. Again, 80% of these pa-

tients had first tried allopathic medicines, which proved ineffective in solving their maladies, and were then advised by relatives and friends to visit the temple. Another interesting point is that the patients from urban areas comprised 82% of the total, against only 18% from villages. Furthermore, one quarter of the patients, who were mainly psychoneurotics, showed signs of improvement after the development of trance (Satija, 1981:249). Against popular supposition, the study revealed that the phenomenon of spirit possession is not related to illiteracy, ignorance of the modern medicine system, gender, or rural superstitions. Bodily infirmities due to aging are also found to have no relation with mental disorders, which affected mainly the young generation.

The religious narrative of Balaji, another name for the infant Hanuman, the famous devotee of Rama and Sita in the *Ramayana*, concerns the accidental discovery of the image of Balaji around 1,000 years ago on a rock by a priest who saw wild animals paying obeisance to it. The priest was ordained by a voice in his dream to establish a temple of Balaji so as to alleviate the suffering of mankind. Another related story it is that of the subduing of Pretraj, the king of ghosts, by Balaji. Pretraj used to torment whosoever passed this area with afflictions of metal disorder. When Balaji ordered Pretraj to surrender, there was a conflict between the two, leading to the ultimate defeat of Pretraj, who beseeched Balaji to forgive him and agreed to act as his deputy. Henceforth Pretraj, along with Bhairav, an incarnation of Shiva, became one of the two chief henchmen of Balaji, and now helps him in alleviating the sufferings of people tormented by spirits. The narrative, couched in religious symbolism, metaphorically represents the defeat of uncontrolled, chaotic forces in the human psyche by structural ones in which faith plays the role of an anchor and acts as a stabilizing agent. The wayward and self-destructive energy of 'id' impulses is channelized and tamed towards a useful end. On the sociological plane, the anecdote represents a conflict and eventual assimilation of aboriginal faiths into the Brahmanical system. The myth of Balaji syncretises characters from the classical epic with those of Dravidian/aboriginal belief systems



such as Bhairav and Pretraj. Even Hanuman as Mahavir, meaning a lord of spirits in his connection with Anjani, his mother, who belonged to an aboriginal stratum of the society, bespeaks of this syncretism of Aryan and non-Aryan elements in the myth. The amalgamation of abrahmanical elements with Sanskritic ones shows the displacement and substitution of one set of beliefs with another coexistent culture. Further it shows the polyphonic nature of living traditions wherein classical elements are seamlessly interwoven with the folk traditions.

The exorcism of spirits at the temple of Balaji acts under the template of legal procedure. The Temple of Balaji known as *Balaji ka darbar* (the court of Balaji) acts as a court of justice wherein Balaji is the chief judge, Pretraj and Bhairav are principal prosecutors, the attendant spirits are soldiers/messengers, and the possessing spirit is the criminal. A full trial takes place in the body of the possessed in which the reformed spirits act as messengers of the court of justice. The afflicted person has to make an *arji* or *darkhast* (Urdu terms for legal application) in the court of Balaji. The *darkhast*, comprising rice and *dal* (pulses) worth one and a quarter rupees and two *laddoos*, is in the form of *prasad* (offerings) to the presiding deity from which the afflicted person receives two *laddoos* back, which he/she then has to throw to the beasts and birds. If the *darkhast* fails to produce *peshi* (attendance/trance) due to strong resistance of the malignant spirit, there are further options in the form of *arji*, costing seventeen and a quarter rupees' worth of offering, and *badi arji* (strong application) at a cost of twenty one and a quarter rupees.



Shops offering *prasad* for Balaji

After registering his complaint to the deity regarding unjust suffering caused to him by the spirit, the afflicted person has to wait for some days before he/she receives a *peshi* in which the possessing spirit is visited by the *dut* (messenger) of Balaji. These *duts* are the benign attendant spirits of Balaji who were earlier exorcised from the patients and who have now become the allies of Balaji. In the trance, the possessed person speaks both in the voice of the spirit and in the voice of the messenger of the Balaji. The struggle between these two forces is revealed somatically in the form of convulsions and expressions of rage and fear. Sometimes the possessing spirit surrenders, reveals its identity, and agrees to leave the body of the person after a single trance. More powerful spirits put up a lot of resistance and are exorcised through more trances spread over many days. Sudhir Kakar, who studied the efficacy of trance state in treating psychic patients, considers factors such as the removal of stigma connected with madness, integration of the patient into the community of fellow patients, and the transference of guilt onto the culturally accepted symbols as decisive in treatment (Kakar 1982). Herein culturally induced belief in ghosts and the power of Balaji to control them soothes the unconscious guilt related to traumatic events by recalibrating the unconscious through surrender to the higher power of Balaji. McGuire notes the cathartic role of social beliefs in spectral beings which acts as a source for the transference of patient's guilt: "Dyadic categories, light and darkness, higher and lower worlds, purity and impurity, wellness and illness, good/evil, death/rebirth, *devilpischach* are integral to the language, providing people with surrogates to express their emotions and feelings" (McGuire, 1983: 234).

### Ghosts as an emblem of Suffering

Spirit possession, though a worldwide phenomenon, has cultural nuances located within the religious texts and folk beliefs. In India, there has been "a rich, dramatic, and concrete imagery of the *bhutas*" (Kakar, 1982: 75) which is determined by its rich mythological world surrounding people throughout their childhoods in the form of tales, classical texts, and syncretism

between diverse faiths such as Hinduism, Islam, Jainism etc. The *bhuta-preta* (ghosts) in the cultural context of folk beliefs of north India are seen as '*upri hawa*' (the airy ones), which have presences both within and without. They are capable of shifting, temporarily abandoning and coming back in the body, and there can be multiple presences in the single body of the afflicted person. The dialogic speech of an afflicted person during trances has a dramatic quality representing the exchange between warring spirits. This constantly shifting stance from subjectivity to objectivity, self to other, projects the duality of subjective-objective positioning and reveals the difficulty and inevitability of leading a life on the margins. The affliction of spirits in popular idiom is also connected with the weakening of strength/mind/'id' impulses, and is known as '*gan kamjor hona*' (weakening of *gan*s). '*Gan*' in conjunction with the word '*gunn*', meaning nature/quality/strength, as well as with another word '*gan*s', the body of attendant spirits of lord Shiva, represent the presence of Dionysian elements in the human psyche. The weakening of these Dionysian elements, which represents the ebbing of vitality and strength, leads to the opening of the human mind to disorder and confusion. The mind can be restored to health only through a reordering of elements and reconfiguring of these dominant passions.

*Bhuta-pretas* are further seen as '*dukh*' (suffering), an embodiment of unsatisfied desires which travel from one person to another. This idea of 'suffering' having a material presence which travels from person to person is close to Greek concept of Ate, a goddess of mischief and delusion who treads over the heads of men. These sufferings are a result of intra- as well as interpersonal encounters in the world, and have a life of their own. They afflict a person and can only be removed from him/her when they are made to pass from one person to another. These possessing spirits under the cultural context of North India are not evil *a priori* and in essence. They are *atript atma* (unsatisfied souls) which, when they enter a victim's body, transfer their unhappiness to him. Through their possession they themselves seek release (*moksha*) which is their eventual pur-

pose. But this does not mean these spirits would leave the body easily; they put up a great fight, and it is only when faced by a stronger force that they surrender, and are ultimately released from the body. Physical pain is often used as an antidote against psychic suffering, as the spirit-afflicted persons are frequently beaten, loaded with heavy stones, or put in chains. Even after a patient is cured, many erstwhile patients undertake arduous journeys to the temple by repeatedly prostrating themselves (*pet palinya*) and measuring the distance with the length of their bodies.



*Pet palinya*, Covering distance by bodily measurement

*Bhuta-pretas* are marked by a liminality of existence, remaining at a peripheral stage due to the incompleteness of their lives. They occupy a state between the mortal world and *pitr lok*, a plane where ancestral spirits reside. This liminality of their existence is noticed by Pakaslahti: "the *bhutas* are unhappy spirits of deceased people who have not found a fulfillment of their life due to untimely death caused by illness, accident, violence or, sometimes, because of non-performance of the last funeral rites (*antim sanskār*). They are still hungry for life and roam around looking for a human body into which they could enter in order to enjoy life once more." (Pakaslahti, 1998: 140). While they originate in the dissatisfaction of life's utmost passions, they haunt those who transgress their boundaries. Hence if a person urinates under a particular tree or strays into a certain house, he/she might become haunted by the spirit. Most of these spirits live on the boundaries—a secluded dilapidated house of an owner who died

tragically, a tree which is located at a strategic position and is uncommonly shady, a cross-roads etc. These spirits afflict persons when either some act of transgression/pollution has taken place or due to the volition of a tantric (sorcerer) who is prompted by some person having some 'lack' in his life – often childless or envious of a neighbour due to his/her better position. This feature of liminality, while positioning them between and betwixt, does not mark off their existence as separate from ordinary life; along with *pitris*, they have a tangible presence for most people. In the words of Kakar, they seem to populate a mental region that is “contiguous and has open borders with the land of ordinary consciousness in which normal everyday life takes place” (Kakar, 1982: 57).

The sufferings which manifest in the host's body as *bhuta-preta* cannot be destroyed, but can only be transmuted from negative energy to a positive one. The transformation from malignant to benign spirits, who act as prospective *saniks* (soldiers) for Balaji, connects them with unconscious forces which can be harnessed for recovery and healing. The ambiguity in the position of Pretraj, as a defendant of spirits as well as an adjudicator, indicates the complexity of separation and lack of clear-cut boundaries in this structural model of psyche. Ghosts as materializations of suffering are felt as living presences, wherein the transmutation of suffering from an abstractedly felt pain to symbolism of *bhuta-preta* is a culturally assigned framework which avoids the stigma associated with mental disorders. A conventional society which finds little sympathy for transgressors and envelops people in a normative structure of behaviour while proscribing deviancy, assimilates 'abnormality' and 'disorder' through a symbolic normalization under its religious paraphernalia. The healing centres like Balaji provide a space wherein 'self' regains its rightful place in the 'social self', and this reintegration takes place through the creation of trance, a psychodrama, which is rightly considered a “postmodern therapeutic technique” (Casoon, 2004 in Davar, 2009: 65 ).

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