

GHOST ILLNESS IN A NORTH INDIAN VILLAGE

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Abstract—The substantial number of ghost possessions that came to our attention during fieldwork in a North Indian village in 1977–78 led to a thorough study of ghost beliefs as part of a holistic study of village life. Ghosts are not phantoms floating on the periphery of village life, the concern only of children and the credulous. Rather, the study shows that ghosts are linked with basic Hindu beliefs, village lore, ancient curing practices and theories, the diagnosis of illness and treatment of disease, individual stress and anxiety, and family, lineage, and village histories. Ghost possession, a subsidiary and dramatic form of ghost illness, is behavior in which the ghost speaks from its victim who undergoes a range of alternate states. Unpredictable events and heightened personal stress generally precede episodes of ghost possession. Cases of ghost illness and ghost possession include children and adults of both sexes and a range of ages. Our data contradict the village stereotype that only women suffer from ghost possession. Villagers have recourse to both traditional remedies and Western biomedicine to treat ghost illness.

Key words—alternate states of consciousness, ghost illness and possession, exorcism, North India

During two periods of fieldwork in the late 1950s and 1970s in a village in North India, about 11 miles northwest of the city of Delhi, formerly part of the Southern Punjab, we witnessed, heard about, and gathered many details about ghost beliefs, ghost illness, and ghost possession. An epidemic of ghost possessions in 1977–1978 led to a thorough study of ghost beliefs [1]. The data from both field trips were based on holistic ethnographic methods so that our field notes provide many in-depth interviews on most cultural subjects. Our data on ghosts, ghost illness, and ghost possession were obtained through an extensive knowledge of individuals, families, and lineages and many long open-ended interviews. When we witnessed a case of ghost possession, we followed it up with interviews. We recorded 38 substantiated cases with associated demographic and biographical information about the victims and their near relatives. However, a broad survey on the subject was impractical because villagers fear that to mention the name of a ghost may summon it and lead to ghost illness and possession. Therefore, it is almost certain that possessions took place of which we were not told.

Village ideology, including animistic beliefs and Hindu traditions, as well as censuses and genealogies have been vital for understanding those villagers who suffered from ghost illness and those who died and were believed to have become ghosts. This article uses Tylor's finding [2] that animistic beliefs consist of two principles, namely: that souls are capable of existing after the death and destruction of the body; second, that other supernatural beings, in this case, ghosts, also exist. These two principles are used to trace the origin and curing of ghost illness in the village back to ancient Hindu beliefs, which have been perpetuated by the Mahabharata, India's longest epic, and by the Puranas, tales which reinforce the teachings of the Vedas, the most ancient of Sanskrit texts. Specific examples illustrate the persistence of these beliefs

despite the fact that some villagers do not believe in ghosts.

Among the many Hindu beliefs about ghosts, two are central to this research. First, villagers believe that the soul of a person becomes a ghost at death, lingers 13 days in the village cremation grounds, and then is judged by Yama, who rules the land of the dead, or by Bhagwan (God), following which the soul is either reborn, released from the cycle of rebirths, or becomes a wandering ghost. Which of these possibilities befalls a soul is based on the sum of its actions in past lives. Second, many but not all villagers believe that illness and death are caused by a ghost. This belief is related to the villagers' labeling illness as Fever both in the 1950s and 1970s; a similar finding was reported in the Khanna study in Punjab during the 1950s [3].

The labeling of illness as Fever derives from tales in the Mahabharata and the Puranas. One of the deities, Daksha (Ritual Skill), would not allow the great god Shiva to participate in the sacrifices of the gods so Shiva destroyed Daksha's sacrifices. In so doing a drop of sweat fell from Shiva's forehead and became a great fire, which then turned into a short, red-eyed and red-bearded man named Fever. Brahma, another god, warned Shiva that if Fever wandered freely among human beings, the whole world would not be able to bear him, but Brahma added that the gods would give Shiva a share in the sacrifices if he restrained Fever so that Fever would affect animals and humans only in parts of the earth. This tale is linked with the belief that Shiva in his aspect of Hara, god of disease and death, sends his messenger, Fever, to bring disease and death to human beings [4–6]. Thus, Fever in village belief became an index of ghost illness.

Ghost illness and its subsidiary form, ghost possession, are related but have different symptoms. Ghost illness is primarily identified by Fever. Other symptoms may be convulsions and other bodily movements which indicate pain and discomfort. Choking

or difficult breathing are viewed as the sign of a ghost trying to take the victim's soul and may be interpreted as a death rattle for the same reason. For an infant who has not yet learned to speak, incessant crying is a sign of ghost illness. Older victims may suffer delirium, an alternate state of consciousness, linked with Fever, during which a voice speaks from them.

Ghost possession, a subsidiary form of ghost illness, on the other hand has a different set of symptoms. It is more dramatic and may be classified as dissociative or alternate mental states [7, 8]. The alternate states most often identified as ghost possession are falling into semi-consciousness or unconsciousness with a voice or voices speaking from the possessed. The voices are identified as intrusive ghosts trying to seize the victim's soul. After recovering from possession, the victim does not remember what took place. The possessed may attempt to commit suicide by drowning in a well or by jumping in front of a train and therefore is usually watched and restrained from suicide by relatives and neighbors. In the delirium of ghost illness and in ghost possession, villagers say that the voice of the ghost is 'talking nonsense'. During ghost possession, villagers and exorcists converse with the ghost and verbally abuse it. In psychiatric parlance, ghost possession is classified as a Dissociative Disorder, or, if a biological cause is involved, as a Somatoform-Conversion Disorder [9]. Although villagers are not familiar with these psychiatric terms, they symptomatically separate ghost illness from ghost possession.

Villagers give three main reasons that the souls of the dead become wandering ghosts and cause illness and death: (1) dying before the time allotted a soul to live; (2) dying tortured; and (3) dying after actions contrary to village customs. Included in death before the allotted time are dying without issue and dying without the pleasures and satisfactions of adult life. The most malevolent village ghosts are the souls of those who die tortured, which includes dying from a dread disease, or from murder, suicide, and accident. Death after violating village customs emphasizes the importance of karma (action) and dharma (ethical and correct behavior), thus including many village customs. Violations of marriage and mating tabus, murder, and suicide are particularly serious. Strangers who die in the village fall in this category because their customs differ from village customs. For example, the ghosts of Muslims and wives are feared because they are not natives of the village. Wives who commit suicide or are murdered are especially dreaded because they die tortured. They are believed to haunt the second wives of their husbands and try to seize the souls of the infants of second wives [1].

The villagers claim that the village has always been all-Hindu, but two brothers in the Chamar caste became Buddhists, followers of the famous Chamar Buddhist and Indian leader, Dr B. R. Ambedkar [10]. Two women and one man claim to be atheists. One woman is a member of the Bairagi caste; the other, of the Chamar caste. The man, a young Brahman, had been studying to be a doctor; however, he believed in ghosts and provided information about the ghost illnesses and ghost possessions of some of his relatives

and other villagers. These five people, despite their professed beliefs, observe village festivals and the Hindu rites of passage practiced by their castes for birth, marriage, and death. Almost all villagers hold some animistic beliefs, in Tylor's terms. They believe in the soul and its rebirth and at least one deity. The majority, however, believe in multiple supernatural beings, including deities and various types of ghosts. They also believe that some souls become lingering ghosts, and other souls, who are released from rebirth, join the Universal Absolute, a neuter deity.

The villagers who do not believe in ghosts are primarily followers of the Arya Samaj sect of Hinduism. In 1958, most of them were members of the Jat caste, but one family of Baniyas also followed Arya Samaj beliefs. By the end of the 1970s, a few men in the Nai Barber caste, and one family in the Jhinvar Water-Carrier caste had become followers of the Arya Samaj. However, even in the Jat caste, women continued to believe in ghosts.

Swami Dayananda Saraswati founded the Arya Samaj in the last half of the nineteenth century [11]. Proselytizers introduced it in the village in 1923. Historically the founding of the Arya Samaj is well known as are the teachings of Swami Dayananda Saraswati, himself a Brahman, who was against beliefs in multiple supernatural beings, claiming that there was but one god, Bhagwan, and no ghosts. He instituted a number of reforms, which appealed to the Jats because they annulled the authority of Brahman priests and were aimed at reducing the powers of the twice-born (highest ranking) castes [12, 13].

Villagers who professed not to believe in ghosts nonetheless supplied ideological information that contributed to an understanding of ghost beliefs as well as data about ghost illness and specific possessions. Some self-styled nonbelievers were contradictory or ambivalent about their beliefs [1]. An interview in 1958 with Fence Sitter provides an excellent example of this ambivalence. He belonged to a Brahman lineage which followed Sanatan Dharma, Orthodox Hinduism, whose members differed from followers of the Arya Samaj because they believed in multiple supernatural beings, including ghosts. He described various types of ghosts and his encounters with them late at night on his way home from work in the city. When passing the cremation grounds, he saw a kite (a scavenger bird), which he took for the ghost of a Sweeper who had recently been cremated. He recited the Gayatri Mantra as protection against ghosts and added that on his way home across the fields and past the cremation grounds, he lit a firecracker to ward off animals that might be ghosts.

But he made contradictory statements, such as: "All this about ghosts is a way of saying the actual ghost lies within you. If you are fearful of some place that you are going, you will be afraid there. If you are dishonest, you will have fear. There are some undue deaths. The souls of such dead people cannot find rebirth so they stalk about unhappily. The ghost is within you; otherwise there are no ghosts." Thus, he insisted that ghosts do not exist 'out there'; but he clearly believed that they were stalking about 'out there' because of the means that he took to protect himself from them. The contradictions in Fence

Sitter's statements resemble an example from Deoli, Rajasthan, of a man who claimed he never saw a ghost and 'in the same breath' told about a ghost he had recently seen in the jungle [14].

Fence Sitter also recited a version of the lineage legend of the ancestral ghost of his great, great grandfather, a merchant (pseudonym, Merchant), whom he and the other members of his lineage worshipped at a shrine in their fields. This legend was told in detail to generations of children by Old Priest and Raconteur, who was a descendant of Merchant. Old Priest had been adopted by one of Merchant's sons. This legend is based on what happened to Merchant between 1840 and 1850 when he was traveling as a ghee merchant in the Punjab and chanced to enter a Muslim graveyard in Hansi, Hissar, formerly a region known as Sirhind and part of the Punjab, now in Haryana. When he and his party saw sweets left on a Muslim grave, Merchant boasted that he could eat the sweets and urinate on the grave and nothing would happen to him. Shortly thereafter he fell ill, went home, and was in bed for 6 months, possibly from malaria, which had not yet been identified as a disease but was called Fever and identified as ghost illness. During his illness, he was often delirious. He was cured by a Brahman pandit who said that the ghost troubling him was the Muslim ghost from the grave upon which he had urinated, an act of blasphemy (bad karma). The pandit advised Merchant to take offerings to the Muslim's grave and propitiate the soul of the Muslim for his bad actions. According to the legend, the Muslim ghost then asked Merchant to take it with him, and the Muslim ghost became the familiar of Merchant, who then became an exorcist. This detail about a ghost asking a man to take it with him as his familiar was repeated more than once in our interviews with exorcists [15].

When Merchant died, his family erected a shrine to his ghost in their fields, and family members worship there on festivals and other special occasions. Of more importance from the viewpoint of this family and other members of the lineage, the ghosts of Merchant and the Muslim continue to guard their fields. The ghost of Merchant, as guardian of his fields, is said to appear in the form of a black snake, an attribute of an ancestral ghost reported in nineteenth century sources [16, 17]. Three versions of this legend were gathered during the field work [18]. In detailing the pathway by which Merchant became an exorcist, the legend describes a common method of acquiring a familiar, necessary for an exorcist [19].

Fence Sitter's interview, in which he professed both to believe and not to believe in ghosts, shows the value of pursuing interviews with believers and non-believers, as Hufford [20] found in his study of Old Hag, sleep paralysis, in Newfoundland. The perpetuation of The Legend of the Merchant and the Muslim Ghost shows how members of this Brahman lineage, including Fence Sitter, were influenced as children to believe in ghosts.

The intricate relationships of ghosts, exorcists, Hindu traditions, village and family histories, and village opinions about the special characteristics of caste and gender are illustrated in the legend of the ghost of the Headless Sweeper. Two versions of the

legend were told by Old Codger, a Jat born in 1898. The first was recited in 1958 and the second, in 1978. Both proved to be incorrect, for he identified the Headless Sweeper as the ghost of a Muslim, a stranger, who committed suicide in the village by cutting off his own head. Better informed villagers, among them living descendants of the Headless Sweeper, said that he was a Hindu, a member of the Chuhra Sweeper caste, who had been born in the village. After an absence of many years, he fell ill with the bubonic plague that swept through India for two decades beginning at the end of the nineteenth century. He returned to the village where, tormented by the disease, he cut off his own head. In all likelihood, a buboe in his neck was so painful that he tried to pierce it with a knife, a gesture that later assumed legendary proportions [21]. He was buried outside the village on a lane that passed by the side of the Sweeper quarters; the location of his grave is still known.

The fear of beheading and of malevolent ghosts who have been beheaded is well known in India. Kakar [22] states that one of the core fantasies of Indian culture is the *sirkata* (headless) and tells the story of a policeman asked by the ghost of a headless man for a drink of water at the Jama Masjid in Old Delhi, after which the policeman fell ill. Stories from the Vedas, the Mahabharata and the Puranas about the beheaded have reinforced the village fear of the Ghost of the Headless Sweeper [4-6]. Since these stories were well known in the village, it is not surprising that Old Codger, a man who liked to spin a good yarn and embellish it, had made the ghost of the Headless Sweeper into a boogeyman in village lore by identifying him as a Muslim and stranger, who cut off his own head.

When Old Codger finished reciting his 1978 version of the legend of the Headless Sweeper, some of his lineage mates joined us. They were strict followers of the Arya Samaj, as was Old Codger, who in this company then declared, "I have never seen a ghost myself. Ghosts are just air which can be seen by some people but not by everyone." When he was then asked whether it might not be worthwhile to talk with some women about ghosts because they knew more about them than did men, Old Codger replied, "Yes, you're telling the truth. Women have smaller hearts so they are afraid of ghosts." This statement confirmed a village stereotype regarding men, women, fear, and ghosts, which was often repeated by men who claimed there were no ghosts.

The Headless Sweeper was an exorcist who used a special hookah to call his familiar, a ghost. At least two of his descendants, a son and a grandson, were curers. The son, 80 yr old, was mentally alert but blind. He no longer acted as an *ojha* (exorcist of disease). Formerly he treated people afflicted with the evil eye, headaches, pains in the back or breast, and scorpion bites, but he said he could not cure ghost possessions. The grandson was a *bhagat* (exorcist of ghosts). Like his grandfather, he used his hookah with a hallucinogenic tobacco to call his familiar, a ghost, when treating victims of ghost possession.

Legends like that of the Headless Sweeper reinforce one of the stereotypes of ghost illness and possession held by high-caste men, namely that the condition

affects especially the Harijans (low castes). The second common stereotype is that only women suffer the affliction. Our data show that these beliefs are false; both men and high-caste individuals are often victims. Of our 38 cases of ghost possessions, 21 were females from 8 to 60 yr old and 17 were males, ranging from 4 to 75 yr of age. The 75-yr-old man was first possessed in the 1940s after his wife and infant son died and still suffered possessions in 1977-78. In the case of sufferers whose possessions persisted, a few of them eventually developed fits, *daura*, instead of possessions, not to be confused with epileptic fits, *mirgi*, which the villagers classified separately.

We recorded possessions among the non-Harijan castes (Brahman Priest, Jat Farmer, Bairagi Mendicant, Lohar Blacksmith, and Gola Potter) as well as among the Harijans (Chamar Leatherworker, and Chuhra Sweeper). Even high-caste Jats, the caste most opposed to ghost beliefs, had five sufferers from ghost possession: two girls, 8 and 10 yr old, one 34-yr-old married woman, and two Jat men, 18 and 50 yr old are among the cases [1]. The 8-yr-old girl suffered a renewal of her possession at the time of her first mating (*gauna*). The 50-yr-old man suffered attacks for 3 months in 1978.

The case of the 18-yr-old Jat man is of interest on a number of counts. It took place in 1924 shortly after the introduction of the Arya Samaj in the village. The young man first suffered ghost possessions and then ghost illness; his possessions were triggered in part because his bride's family would not send her to him for first mating, *gauna*. This particular problem still remains serious for young men and leads to heightened psychological tension. In the case of this 18-yr-old Jat, the problem was aggravated by family responsibilities unusually heavy for a youth. He had been left alone to take care of the land and three widowed women in his household (his mother and two aunts) while his eldest brother joined the army and the next eldest was away on family business. Although he was married, his bride's family would not allow her to come to him because there was no older man at the head of the family. He first suffered a series of possessions by the ghosts of his father and two uncles, the husbands of two of the widows, who had died during the plague and influenza epidemics (ca 1900-21) [3]. Then he came down with Fever and died of ghost illness. His possessions and later ghost illness were treated by Old Priest, who lived nearby. These events were described in detail by his two aunts in 1958.

Even when confronted with such cases, men who profess not to believe in ghosts maintain that the belief in ghosts is due to fear and that only women fear ghosts and suffer from ghost possession and/or that only Harijans believe in ghosts. For example, an urbanized Brahman, whose mother, wife, and daughter-in-law had through the years suffered from possessions, the daughter-in-law in 1977-78, said that only Harijans believe in ghosts. When it was pointed out that two Jat females had recently been possessed, one of whom was currently living just across the lane from his house, he claimed that possession was a disease of women. Finally, when he was told about the recent possession of the 50-yr-old Jat man, he

said, "some men may also have it," but added that he did not believe in ghosts. However, his position on ghosts was qualified by the hierarchy of supernatural beings. Belief in a high-ranking ghost may obscure belief in lower ranking ghosts, as indicated by his account of the death of his eldest son. He told us that he died tortured from a dread disease and without issue, which meant that his soul had become a ghost although he did not say so. He arranged a marriage between his younger son and his dead son's widow. When their first child, a son, was born, he immediately had the infant dedicated to his dead son's ghost (*bhut*), thus promoting his ghost to an ancestral ghost (*pitr*). Other informants also accepted ancestral ghosts while at the same time claiming not to believe in ghosts. In ancient Hinduism the soul of an ancestral ghost, *pitr*, had a higher status after death than the soul of a *bhut* or *pret* [5]. This status difference is important in Hinduism. Once a *bhut* has been converted to a *pitr*, people may ignore the transient status of a *bhut* and maintain that they do not believe in ghosts.

Psychological stress was often one of the factors in ghost possession. In 1977-78, three young men who were under greater than usual stress were troubled by ghosts. One man, 22 yr of age whom we call Job Hunter, was a member of the Potters' caste. Although he was married, his wife's parents would not let her come to him for first mating until he found a job. He could not expect to follow in the footsteps of his father. There were already two practicing potters in the village and no need for another. Moreover, he had four older brothers, one of whom, the eldest, would succeed to his father's craft. Therefore, he had to find employment outside the village. He had finished tenth grade and hoped to become a bus conductor or to enter military service. In the meantime, he worked in the fields and at a nearby brick kiln, helped his father, and studied typing to enhance his chances for a permanent job. Because his wife's parents would not allow their daughter to come for first mating until he had a good job, he was under considerable pressure. He had been possessed a number of times for more than a year by a ghost whom he called The Lady.

His eldest brother had himself been possessed by the ghost of The Lady (a euphemism sometimes used for a female ghost because ghosts were not identified by their real name for fear the naming would call the ghost). His possessions took place 20 yr previously when he was 14 yr old shortly after having been wedded, but as was customary he had not yet mated because his wife was only 12 yr old. First mating, known as *gauna*, was deterred until the wife attained menarche, which averaged around 15.8 yr of age [13].

The Lady was the ghost of the mother of the competing potter in the village; she died when he was an infant. (See Fig. 1 for diagram of relationships.) His father married again; then he died, and his widow married the succeeding potter, who was called to the village to marry the widow and take over the clientele of the dead potter. After remarrying, she left the care of her stepson to his grandfather. In time the succeeding potter and the son of the first potter competed with each other, for both were practicing potters.

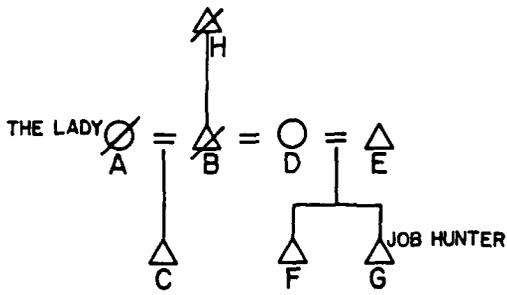


Fig. 1. Diagram of the relationship of The Lady to some of her victims. (A) The Lady. (B) The Lady's husband. (C) The Lady's son who, when he grew up, became a competitor of (E) and (F). (D) The second wife of (B), step-mother of (C), and then the wife of (E). (E) The potter who succeeded (B). (F) Elder brother of Job Hunter, possessed by The Lady. (G) Job Hunter. Diagonal lines indicate persons who died before 1977-78.

The Lady attacked only the members of her husband's second wife's family. This behavior is characteristic of many female ghosts, representing a persistent motif in village culture, namely: when a first wife dies tortured before her allotted time, she becomes a wandering ghost, haunts the second wife, and tries to seize her children [16]. In this case, the second wife remarried, and her children were the children of her second husband. When the eldest son of this couple was possessed, they called a relative from his father's village in Rajasthan to exorcise the ghost. Thus, both the tradition of ghost illness and curing by exorcism existed in this family. When the younger son was possessed by The Lady in 1977-78, the relative had died so they alternately asked a Brahman, who customarily cast their horoscopes, to exorcise the ghost, or a Chamar *bhagat*, both of whom lived in the village. When family members were interviewed in 1978, Job Hunter's mother and sister stated that a number of family members had been occasionally possessed by The Lady.

Although the two other young men who had problems with ghosts in 1977-78 were Brahmans, they were under similar pressures of modern life as was Job Hunter, a member of the much lower Potter caste. One of the young Brahmans suffered from ghost possession; the other from ghost illness. Both were unmarried. The Brahman who was possessed, 22 yr old, had finished higher secondary school and trained to be a welder, but had not yet found a job. Once again, the stress of job-hunting appears to be significant. In this case, anxiety about finding employment was enhanced by family tension. Earlier in the year, the young Brahman's grandfather died. Although the members of his joint family remained in mourning for a year, they separated into three different families and households, which created economic problems. The grandfather's ghost was believed to be haunting the region in which all the family lived until the end of the year of mourning, at which time he was expected to become a benevolent ancestral ghost. The belief that he haunted the family during the year of mourning was not unusual in the village, although it did not fit in with the general belief that after 13 days the soul traveled to the land of the dead. The young man was not possessed by his

grandfather's ghost but by the ghost of his cousin, an 8-yr-old girl of whom he had been very fond. She had drowned in the village pond in 1976. His first possession was reported as due to having passed the cremation grounds after eating sweets. Before reaching the cremation grounds, he first had to pass the village crossroads and then the pond where his cousin died. All three places are traditionally haunted by ghosts. Therefore, one should not eat sweets when passing near or through these locations, for ghosts are fond of sweets. The first time that the young man was possessed, a village Brahman exorcised the ghost. When the possessions continued and became quite severe, another Brahman was fetched from a nearby town to drive off the ghost.

The second young Brahman with ghost problems was the 18-yr-old son of the Fence Sitters. In 1978, he fell ill with Fever and became delirious, signs of ghost illness. He had just failed his matriculation examination given after the tenth grade and was studying to take it again. The pressure on him to pass the examination was great because obtaining a job and then having a marriage arranged for him by his father depended on the examination and the job.

The situation was even more stressful because his father's career served as an example of the importance of the matriculation examination. He had once failed the examination and thereafter never earned a very good living. Fence Sitter's own father had never given him his share of the family land, nor had he done much for Fence Sitter and his elder brother, for their mother committed suicide after the birth and subsequent death of her third son. She was said to be a ghost who haunted Fence Sitter's stepmother, his father's second wife, and caused her to miscarry 4 of her 15 pregnancies, one infant to die shortly after birth, and a 2-yr-old son to die. Because of these deaths, she feared the ghost of the first wife, and she and her husband neglected the two surviving sons of the first wife, which often happened when a first wife died in childbirth or committed suicide, thus becoming a ghost. This belief about first and second wives was reported by Crooke in the nineteenth century and persists in village lore [16]. As a result of neglect by his father and failing his exams, Fence Sitter was somewhat insecure and became an unskilled factory worker. By 1978, he had become more sure of himself and was a watchman and general superintendent of agricultural work for a large landowner in a nearby village. Mrs Fence Sitter added to the family income by sewing clothing for women and children.

When Fence Sitter's 18-yr-old son fell ill with Fever, he began 'talking nonsense', i.e. the voice of the ghost of a man spoke from him. Mrs Fence Sitter knew that he was attacked by a ghost because Fever and talking nonsense are two criteria of ghost illness. Furthermore he had eaten sweets before passing the cremation grounds. Although Mrs Fence Sitter knew her son was suffering from ghost illness, she first took him to a biomedical physician in a nearby town, and then she exorcised the ghost.

Mrs Fence Sitter used a commercial product called *Loban*, which she bought in Delhi, to exorcise the ghost. She kept a supply to use whenever any of her children fell ill. The word *Loban* is translated as benzoin and is sometimes identified as gum benzoin.

The commercial product consists of several substances: resins used in ointments, perfumes and medicines, and extracts from shrubs and trees. These substances form crystals. Benzoin has also been called benjamin, and the term and substances derive from the Arabs [23, 24].

Mrs Fence Sitter began by starting a small fire. She had her son sit close to the fire looking into it; then she threw crystals of *Loban* on the fire and had her son smell and inhale the fumes. For good measure, she had him smell chili peppers, a time honored substance used by villagers and exorcists when a person was believed to be possessed by a ghost. Mrs Fence Sitter followed this procedure for all her children. Sometimes she put black pepper in their eyes or mouth and/or placed ashes on their forehead if the other procedures did not work. Exorcists regularly used incense, black pepper, and chili pepper in exorcising ghosts; and in the absence of an exorcist so did the villagers.

Mrs Fence Sitter had early been exposed to the belief in supernatural beings as a child. She well remembered that her mother expected Bemata, a goddess, to visit her at night 6 days after childbirth, at which time Bemata wrote the infant's future on its skull. When Mrs Fence Sitter became a mother, she tried to stay awake to see if Bemata came but she always dozed off. The future written on the infant's skull was believed to be based on the past actions of the soul vested in the infant. During the 6-day period after birth, many newborns died, usually of *Tetanus neonatorum*, but village women believed the deaths were caused by a ghost taking the soul of the infant [3, 25, 26]. This belief is directly related to Mrs Fence Sitter's belief that a ghost has to be exorcised or the ghost will take the soul of the victim. Mrs Fence Sitter began her practice of consulting a biomedical practitioner and also exorcising the ghost when an infant daughter born in 1959 died 6 months after birth from a pain in her throat. Shortly thereafter, another young daughter had a similar pain, so she took the girl to a physician who diagnosed and treated the child for diphtheria. Mrs Fence Sitter also exorcised the ghost. The twin treatments worked so she continued to use them.

In trying to identify the male ghost who caused the ghost illness of the 18-yr-old son of the Fence Sitters, we found that the most feared ghost was Fence Sitter's father's first wife, who committed suicide. As Mrs Fence Sitter said: "We in this family are afraid that we might have the ghost of a daughter-in-law in the lineage attack us because my father-in-law had two wives. The first one died so that there is danger that her ghost is causing ghost illness. My father-in-law's second wife was troubled by this ghost." Mrs Fence Sitter did not mention the names of two other ghosts: her husband's elder brother, who lived with the Fence Sitters and died tortured from Fever before his allotted time without issue in the early 1960s, and the ghost of the first wife of one of Fence Sitter's husband's half brothers. This woman's first pregnancy was difficult. Her body became bloated and she was in such pain that she committed suicide, thus dying tortured without surviving issue, making her soul eligible for ghosthood [1]. These two ghosts were much closer to the Fence Sitters because the brother

lived with them when he died, and the half brother and his second wife lived in the same compound although in a separate apartment. Therefore, Mrs Fence Sitter avoided naming the ghosts because to do so was the equivalent of calling them and would result in the ghosts trying to possess the soul of any individual who mentioned them. However, the ghosts were identified through daughters-in-law, friends, and neighbors who used kinship terms to talk about the ghosts. The ghost of Fence Sitter's elder brother, who died of Fever without issue, was believed to be the one causing the illness of the Fence Sitter's 18-yr-old son.

The cases of the two Gola Potter brothers and the two Brahmins, the first three called ghost possession and the fourth, ghost illness, by villagers, have elements of another folk psychiatric syndrome found in India, identified as *Jirjan* or *Dhat* by Carstairs and Hughes [14, 27]. The symptoms are severe anxiety and hypochondriasis associated with discharge of semen and feelings of weakness and exhaustion. This condition is related to the well-known tabu in India against wasting semen, the associated tabu on masturbation, and the belief in the impropriety of parents discussing sexual matters with their offspring. It is possible that this complex of beliefs contributed to the ghost possession and ghost illness of the four young men.

Ghost illness and ghost possession in North India form a tenacious system of belief and practice with roots in Hinduism, mythology, and ancient animistic medical theories. The details of specific cases, that is, the identity of particular ghosts and their relations with victims, derive from village, lineage, family, and personal histories. Heightened stress generally precedes attacks. Women are especially vulnerable when they go to their husband's family after marriage. They are then young and faced with formidable problems of adjusting to new social and sexual roles in the absence of the support that their natal family, living in another village, could provide. Men also face the stress that family problems can generate; young men may be especially vulnerable because of the tabus regarding semen and sexuality. In addition they have to contend with problems of modern life such as examinations and urban job-hunting. Everyone has to cope with the crowding that accompanies a growing population, governmental initiatives that may appear to be threatening, and routine ecological disasters such as too little or too much rain. An especially unfavorable conjunction of stress factors can lead to an epidemic of ghost possession.

It is noteworthy that ghost illness and ghost possession, both theory and treatment, and Western biomedicine are not exclusive domains. Reluctant to admit that they can be afraid, men deny the existence of ghosts and propose physiological explanations for ghost possession, such as high blood pressure. We have emphasized ghost illness and possession of males in this paper to counter the stereotype that only females suffer ghost possession or even that they are more vulnerable than males. In fact, cases abound among both males and females. As for treatment, individuals such as Mrs Fence Sitter may turn to Western biomedicine in cases of ghost illness, especially since one of its symptoms, Fever, may

be reduced with modern remedies. But Western biomedicine does not replace traditional beliefs and curing practices, nor is it likely to do so in the foreseeable future. Village medicine will continue to be a composite variety of ancient and modern traditions. Mrs Fence Sitter's eclectic approach is more or less typical of today's villagers, who go to clinics, hospitals, consult exorcists and other indigenous curers, and continue to believe in ghosts.

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