Taraka’s Ghost

For a new bride in North India, stress takes many forms

by Stanley A. Freed and Ruth S. Freed

When we saw our first ghost possession in a North Indian village, on a hot September day in the late 1950s, we were struck by the villagers’ matter-of-fact response to what seemed an extraordinary event. We were seated with a group of low-caste villagers who were softly chatting in front of a mud hut. Sita, a newly married fifteen-year-old girl, was sitting on the ground, and conforming to the proper behavior of a bride, she was inconspicuous and silent. Still wearing her bridal finery, her face veiled below the eyes, she worked her sewing machine, of which she was proud.

A man of her caste, who had recently lost his job, commented that sewing on a machine was man’s work (at that time, it was mainly the province of the village tailor). The remark implied that Sita was doing something inappropriate, an insinuation to which, as a new bride, she could not respond. Moreover, the criticism struck at Sita’s pride and joy, her sewing machine, which was part of her dowry. To her it was a talisman, protecting her and providing her with higher status than other brides of her caste, for she was the first to possess one.

Sita’s mother-in-law, who had witnessed earlier ghost possessions of the girl, realized that the criticism had distressed Sita, and anticipating that Sita would again be possessed, the older woman abruptly began to discuss the ghost attacks that plagued the teen-ager. We couldn’t imagine why the conversation had taken such a turn until Sita began to shiver, a symptom preceding possession. Despite the heat, she complained of feeling cold, so some women covered her with quilts. She moaned, breathed with difficulty, and then collapsed in a semiconscious state.

The spectators accepted that a ghost had possessed her and tried a variety of standard curing techniques. These ranged from engaging the ghost in conversation, identifying it, and trying to satisfy its wishes or demands so that it would leave voluntarily, to attempting to drive it away with verbal abuse and, if necessary, physically painful or unpleasant measures (applied to the victim but aimed at the ghost). First, the women propped Sita up in a sitting position and wafted smoke from some smoldering cow dung under her nose. She jerked violently, so they had to restrain her. Then they shouted at the ghost: “Who are you? Are you going?” The ghost, speaking through Sita, promised to leave, and the women released the girl. But they were not deluded. They suspected that the ghost would not leave permanently and that a cure would be difficult. “Ghosts don’t keep their promises,” they confided to us.

Sita again fell unconscious, a sign that the ghost had returned. To revive her, the women dropped stinging hookah water in her eyes and pulled her braids. Sita returned to semiconsciousness and emitted a high-pitched wail, which announced the ghost’s presence and readiness to talk. There followed a conversation between the ghost (speaking through Sita) and Sita’s in-laws and a few other women, in the course of which the ghost identified herself as Sita’s cousin Taraka, who had committed suicide by drowning in a well. Taraka’s ghost declared that she would not leave Sita. The spectators again attempted to drive out the ghost, but Sita finally relapsed into unconsciousness.

For a fortnight thereafter, Sita experienced a series of possessions, so her father-in-law called various exorcists. They used generally similar techniques, calling on their familiars—supernatural beings who served them—to assist with the cure. Among these familiars were Hanuman, the monkey god; Kalkaji, goddess of the cremation grounds, with whom ghosts are closely linked; Jahar or Guga Pir, a Hindu-Muslim saint, who cut off his maternal cousins’ heads in battle and later buried himself alive; and the ghost of a conjurer from Dacca. Each curer began a session by calling on his familiars, thus reassuring Sita and her relatives as to his curing powers.

When Sita’s possessions persisted, her father was notified. He brought two exorcists to collaborate in an all-night session to drive off the ghost. They first induced possession in Sita by the power of suggestion and by the hypnotic effects of chanting mantras (hymns) believed to have supernatural power and using a fire to focus her concentration. Then they tried to exorcise Taraka’s ghost by verbal abuse, hitting Sita, squeezing rock salt between her fingers (which was painful), pulling her braids, and throwing bits of her hair into the fire. During the session, Sita alternated between seeing a ghost, falling into a semiconscious state while a ghost spoke through her, unconsciousness, and intermittent returns to consciousness. Sita was not cured, however, and soon thereafter left for an extended visit with her parents, who lived in another village.

During the rest of our stay in India, we came to learn more about the villagers’ beliefs in ghosts and the particular circumstances that led to Sita’s afflictions. In rural North India, almost all Hindus believe that the soul goes through a cycle of rebirths. Following a person’s death, it becomes a ghost, lingering for thirteen days in the village cremation grounds. Villagers who adhere to the doctrines of the Arya Samaj, a reform sect of Hinduism, believe in only one God, Bhagwan, and expect his judgment after cremation. The majority of villagers, who follow a more traditional version of Hinduism with multiple supernatural beings, believe that the soul travels to the Land of the Dead, ruled by Yama, Lord of the Dead. There Yama and his scribe review the soul’s past actions before deciding on its future.

The important element in what happens to the soul at death is its karma, the sum of its good and bad actions from all its past lives. After being judged, the soul may be reborn or, if the sum of its actions is unusually good, released from the cycle of re-
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births to join with many other souls and the Universal Absolute, a neuter deity known also as the Ultimate Reality, the joining of all souls in one.

Many Hindus believe in an additional possibility: a soul may become a ghost that lingers, possibly for decades, haunting the places where it lived and died. These are the souls of people who die tortured, from disease, accident, suicide, or murder; who violate village norms of behavior; who die before the years allotted to them by Yama; or who never attain the satisfactions of adult life. The ghosts of persons who are murdered or commit suicide are the most malevolent and tarry longest.

Ghosts are feared because they are believed to attack the living to seize their souls. Many villagers, but not all, believe that being seized by a ghost can cause illness or death. Ghost possession is the most vivid form of attack, in which a ghost enters and speaks through its victim, who has fallen into semiconsciousness. After recovering, the victim does not remember what took place. Because people in a state of possession may attempt to commit suicide by drowning in a well or by jumping in front of a train, they are usually watched by relatives and neighbors.

There is often a relationship between a ghost and its victim. For example, we learned that Taraka was not only a cousin but also a very close friend of Sita's. Sita had lived with Taraka's family for six months. Engaged to a man of another village, Taraka had an illicit affair with a boy of her own village. Because she became pregnant, the loss of her premartial chastity could not be long concealed.

The virtue of daughters is crucial to family honor in North India, and a daughter's sexual misbehavior, if it becomes generally known, may force a father to get rid of her by inducing suicide or even by murder. Taraka's parents learned of her pregnancy and quickly arranged her wedding to her fiancé. They handed over only a small dowry, in case Taraka's in-laws, realizing she was pregnant, returned her.

When Taraka went to her husband's family to begin her marital life, her husband's parents immediately discovered that she was pregnant. Renouncing all rights to her, they returned her to her father. Despite Taraka's pleas, her father was unforgiving and told her to commit suicide. Shortly thereafter, when Taraka, Sita, and some other girls were playing, Taraka decided to leave the group and asked Sita to accompany her. Sita refused. Taraka ran from the group, went to a nearby well, jumped in, and drowned. Sita blamed herself for the suicide.

Taraka was one of Sita's three close childhood friends, all of whom she lost during the three years before her own marriage. Prior to Taraka's indiscretions and suicide, a schoolmate had been murdered by her father. She was raped by a schoolteacher, and even though the girl was the victim and the identity of the assailant was known, her father was furious and blamed her. He flew into a rage, raped and murdered her, and threw her into a well (villagers regard such crimes as family business and rarely interfere). Another of Sita's schoolmates died of typhoid and malaria, shortly after beginning sexual relations with her husband.

The episode of the untrustworthy schoolteacher worried Sita's mother, who took her daughter out of school. The abrupt end of her education was a shock to Sita, who wanted to be a schoolteacher herself. Instead, Sita and her mother went to visit her mother's brother in her mother's natal village. This was when Sita's life became entwined with Taraka's, for Taraka was this man's daughter.

In Sita's mind, the deaths of her friends were linked with mating, marriage, childbirth, and disappointed dreams of further education. This link was reinforced by other painful memories. As her parents' first-born child, Sita had lived through the deaths of four infant brothers and five infant sisters, who had died because they could not digest their mother's milk. Mother, daughter, and other villagers believed that a ghost had taken these infants' souls. (Two brothers born subsequently had survived.) With the memory of the deaths of her friends and infant siblings, the fifteen-year-old Sita went to her husband to consummate her marriage, on her second visit to her in-laws.

On the first night, Sita told her sister-in-law that she was afraid to sleep with her husband and implored him to stay with her instead. The sister-in-law did so, but when Sita awoke in the night, she found her husband sleeping beside her. They did not have sexual relations that night. The following day, Sita went to the well for water and either jumped or accidentally slipped and fell in. Fortunately, two men who were nearby threw her a rope and pulled her out. As a result of this incident, the young couple did not have sexual relations that night either, and the next day Sita returned to her parents' home.

The marriage was finally consummated on Sita's next visit to her husband, some
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months later. During the fourth night of sexual relations, however, Sita was possessed by Taraka's ghost, who said that Sita's husband was her husband. The statement indicated that Taraka's ghost had been with Sita at the time of Sita's wedding, which meant that both women were married to Sita's husband.

At best, a North Indian rural woman must make an extraordinary social and psychological adjustment when she marries. At an early age, she moves from her natal family, where she is loved, cherished, and indulged, to her marital family, where she is chaperoned and required to restrict her movements. She leaves her natal village to settle in the unfamiliar surroundings of her husband's village. She must adjust to her husband and his often large family, especially his parents, sisters, and brothers' wives. And in this rural society, where marriages are arranged by parents, the bride may not have even seen her husband before the wedding day (although nowadays at least some families arrange for the young couple to meet at the time of the engagement).

A married woman and her kin are regarded as social inferiors to her husband's kin. A new bride is expected to shoulder harder and more onerous household chores and farm work than the daughters in her husband's family (they too, when they marry and go to live with their husbands, will go through a similar experience). A new bride also is generally uninformed about the relation between menarche and childbirth and is apprehensive about beginning sexual relations with her husband. The social and psychological vulnerability of a bride makes her a prime candidate for attacks by ghosts. In Sita's case, with three friends who had all died before their allotted time and without issue, the ghosts were waiting in the wings. All three possessed Sita at one time or another, but Taraka's ghost was her main tormentor.

The transition from beloved and only surviving daughter to daughter-in-law was particularly stressful for Sita. Moreover, having been raised in a one-caste village, she had faced little caste discrimination, but her husband's village was mult caste, and her caste was near the bottom of the hierarchy. Her fear of mating and bearing infants whose souls might be seized by ghosts was a source of stress, as were various physical ailments. These cultural, psychological, and physical stresses were preconditions for her possessions. Research by neuroscientists during the past two de-
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cades may shed light on the underlying physiological mechanism of ghost possession. Under the stress of mental or physical pain, the body produces morphinolike substances called endorphins, which relieve the pain and may trigger mental states called alternate, altered, or disassociative. Ghost possession is one such disassociative mental state.

Stress is not confined to brides or women in North India nor is ghost possession. On a return visit to the village in 1978, we recorded the cases of three young men who were troubled by ghosts. Although some of the details of the cases were different, they all involved the stresses of modern life, especially school examinations and job hunting. Education and employment are signs of economic responsibility that a girl's parents often require before entrusting their daughter to a young husband. For example, one of the young men, a 22-year-old member of the Potter caste, was desperate for a job because his wife's parents would not let their daughter come to live with him unless he found one.

The young man was possessed, according to his mother and sister, by the ghost of his mother's first husband's first wife. The belief that the ghost of a first wife will haunt her husband's next wife and children was a strong motif in village culture. In this case, the husband had subsequently passed away too, and his next wife had remarried and the children were of this marriage; but the principle was similar. Known as the Lady, this ghost had possessed the young man's older brother twenty years before under similar circumstances and was now intermittently possessing the younger man.

The young man was treated by two village exorcists. One was a high-caste Brahman. The other was the man whose remark had disturbed Sita twenty years before: unemployed at the time and subsequently saddened by the deaths of many of his infants and by his wife's long illness, he believed that the great god Shiva visited his home. Following this experience, he became an exorcist.

During our 1978 stay, we also interviewed Sita, who recounted her medical history. Now a poised, intelligent, 35-year-old woman, she recalled her early possessions, which had lasted three years until the birth of her first child. Then the possessions had become fits, which she described as follows:

They start from the head. I feel giddy and drowsy. Then I can't see anything and ev-
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everything goes dark. My legs, hands, and veins stiffen, then a pain goes to my stom-
ach. I don't know what happens, but I have a pain in my heart, my eyes shut, and my
tongue comes out. I shriek so loud that the whole village, even the Brahman, know
that I am having a fit. I have a weak heart. Whenever there is a fight in the family or
elsewhere, or if I see a dead body, I have fits.

In 1978 Sita's fits were still taking place. Well acquainted with modern
medicine—she went to modern hospitals for what she recognized as biological prob-
lems—she nonetheless blamed her twenty years of possessions and fits on Taraka's
ghost. According to Sita, Taraka's ghost had possessed Taraka's mother, and she
herself had then been infected through contact with Taraka's mother. She con-
tinued to consult indigenous curers, mainly exorcists, who drove off the ghost or gave
her amulets to control it.

In the intervening years, Sita told us, her mother had given birth to three more
infants who had died. The older of Sita's surviving brothers had died at age four-
teen, and her grieving mother had died soon after. Sita's remaining brother be-
came a schoolteacher with Sita's assistance, and she accompanied him and his
wife on their honeymoon.

Sita's father was still alive, retired from
military service. As a small child, Sita had
idolized him—a soldier who traveled to
other countries but came home every year
for two months. The relationship persisted
through the years. When she visited him
every summer, free from the stress and
anxiety of life in her marital family, she
never had fits.

Sita detailed her pregnancies, illnesses,
and operations in the years since we first
met her. Pregnant nine times, she had six
children born alive (one of whom died at
age three), two miscarriages, and one in-
duced abortion, prior to being sterilized in
1972. Sita's family had a history of an
inability to digest milk, and her first child,
a daughter, did not take Sita's milk. Sita's
father arranged for Sita and her daughter
to be hospitalized while the infant was fed
glucose. Because of her father's influence,
Sita thereafter went to hospitals for physi-
cal problems that she considered serious.
She had an operation for kidney stones.
She suffered from menstrual complaints
and side effects from being sterilized. A
constant worrier, she was badly disturbed
when one of her brothers-in-law was diag-
nosed as having tuberculosis, for she
feared that she might have it.

Nevertheless, with regard to her ap-
pearance, the maintenance of her house-
hold, and care of her children, she man-
aged very well and, except for her fits, was
in control of her life. The treatment for
ghost possession and fits by exorcists and
the various amulets they gave her for pro-
tection from Taraka's ghost relieved her
anxiety and helped to reduce stress. They
also brought her other advantages, espe-
cially support from her natal and marital
families, a reduction in her workload, and
permission to visit her retired father every
summer. When we last saw her, Sita was
the leader of the women of her family,
confidently planning the education and
future of her children.

Details of this study were previously pub-
lished in "The Psychomedical Case His-
tory of a Low-Caste Woman of North
India," by Ruth S. Freed and Stanley A.
Freed (Anthropological Papers of the
American Museum of Natural History,
vol. 60, part 2, pp. 101–228, 1985). Stanley
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