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Demons and Ghosts in Indian Folklore

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Among the rural peasantry of South Asia there is a tendency to attribute the misfortunes of life to the attacks of demons and ghosts. Serious attempts to incarnate the gospel message in this context must, therefore, seek to understand this cosmos of malignant spirits and its relevance to the everyday life of the villager. Within Indian folklore, the term bhut represents a large amorphous category of spirit beings with common distinctive characteristics. Twenty-nine demon/ghosts are identified in the nomenclature presented here. Other beliefs and practices associated with bhut are also examined, and several recent field studies indicating the persistence of traditional beliefs concerning these beings are briefly summarized.¹

In contemporary Pakistan, beliefs concerning demons and ghosts clearly fall within the ambit of folk religion. Jarvis (1980:287) defines folk religion as "that cluster of attitudes held by a person or a group of persons, relating existence to the general order of the cosmos and which are neither based on empirical evidence nor incorporated within the institutionalized belief system of a society, as defined by leading representatives of those systems at any particular time." Orthodox Islamic beliefs and practices take little cognizance of the folklore concerning these malignant spirits, and it is the *pir* (saint), the *amil* (exorcist), and the *jadugar* (magician) who perform exorcisms and provide magical protection.

To understand why this state of affairs exists it is necessary to make a

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short digression into the sociology of religion.

In many societies a distinction is made between the great gods and the lesser spirits and forces. The former are unrestricted in their geographical location and reveal themselves in manifold ways, while the latter are bound to definite localities and often assume certain material forms. Whereas the great gods cannot be manipulated by people, the lesser spirits can be controlled by appropriate spells and fetishes (Sahlins 1968:103).

Peasants tend to focus their religious activity around these lesser spirits, while religious specialists center their beliefs and practices on the great gods. Folk religion is utilitarian and action-oriented. It copes with problems of disorder and suffering by locating their meanings within the sphere of lesser spirits, natural objects, and human beings. Ritual activities center on the crucial episodes of life, such as birth, circumcision, marriage, and death, and the seasonal cycle of agriculture (Wolf 1966:101).

Religious specialists in the wider society, however, are more belief-oriented. They concern themselves with "examining symbols and rituals, exploring meanings behind meanings, striving to render meanings and actions more consistent" (Wolf 1966:101). Their focus is ideological and they are more likely than the peasantry to be religious innovators.

Folk religion normally coexists with the religion of the wider society. Traditional forms of religion are often retained by the peasantry, while universal religions are being promoted by their religious specialists. Sometimes attempts are made to synchronize the traditional forms of religion with the beliefs and practices of the universal religion. This process frequently takes the shape of *syncretism*, i.e., "the merging of forms derived from two cultural spheres" (Wolf 1966:103).

The religious specialists of a universal religion, like Islam, therefore, are more concerned with matters of ethics and ideological explanation than with the everyday concerns and life crises of the peasantry. So recourse is made to the *pir*, with his links with pre-Islamic religious traditions, the *amil*, or the *jadugar* for protection and liberation from demons and ghosts.

The remainder of this paper is devoted to a detailed examination of the Indian folklore of demons and ghosts. We begin by focusing on the term *bhut*, a collective name that is used for ghosts and demons in the subcontinent. An attempt is made to define the concept of *bhut* and to identify its salient features. Then as a prelude to presenting a nomenclature of demons and ghosts there is a discussion of the difficulties of adequately classifying them into categories. After the presentation of the nomenclature some other beliefs and practices associated with *bhut* are examined. Finally, a number of field studies which are indicative of the persistence of traditional beliefs and practices concerning demons and ghosts in various regions of the Indian subcontinent are briefly summarized.

Bhut: Definition and Characteristics

In its strictest sense, the term *bhut* means ghost, but it also encompasses a much wider range of malignant spirits (Crooke 1894:147; Blanchet 1984:51).

In Bangladesh, and perhaps in Pakistan (Blanchet 1984:51), "many of the spirits now referred to as *bhut*, have been merged into one loose category, either high or low *bhut*, by the requirements of a monotheistic religion which recognizes only one God, Allah." Under this loose category provided by *bhut* Muslim villagers include the *pari*, *jinn*, and other spirits from Islamic tradition (Blanchet 1984:51).

The task of defining *bhut* is no easy matter, especially as the earliest historical sources currently available evince some disagreement as to what this term represents. Crooke (1894:147) defines a *bhut* as "the spirit emanating from a man who has died a violent death, either by accident, suicide, or capital punishment." This spirit, moreover, "reaches an additional malignancy if he has been denied proper funeral ceremonies after death" (Crooke 1894:147). Rose (1978:205), while agreeing with Crooke that a *bhut* is the spirit of one dying a violent death, also reports the common belief in some areas that "every man dying on a bed becomes a *bhut* and every woman so dying a *churel*." He qualifies this view of every dead man becoming a *bhut*, however, by explaining that a disembodied spirit wanders about for twelve months as a *pret*, when he either settles down to a respectable second life, or terrorizes the countryside as a *bhut* or *churel* (Rose 1978:204).

Although *bhut* are difficult to define and form what seems to the observer a large amorphous category of spirit beings, several distinguishing features which characterize this somewhat elusive group can be described here. *Bhut* engage in most of their activities during the hours of darkness, but in other respects lead lives similar to that of human beings (Rose 1978:206). They appear in many forms; but even if they manifest themselves as men or women, they speak with a nasal twang, are frightened by burning tumeric, and cast no shadows when they walk (Crooke 1977:240). *Bhut* eat carrion and are very fond of fresh milk. Women and children are more susceptible than men to attack from these vile creatures, especially if they have recently partaken of sweets or fresh milk (Crooke 1894:147, 149).

Classifications of *Bhut*

Crooke (1977:237) suggests that this amorphous category of spirits consists of two main groups: "vague spiritual beings which inhabit the air, sometimes visit the earth, and are inimical to the human race; secondly, the ghosts of the dead, some of whom are kindly, others malignant." He cites the *rakshasa*, a demon/ogre who corresponds in some respects to the *jinn* of Arabian folklore, as an example of the first group.

Rose (1978:561), however, when discussing the beliefs about spirits among Muslims in India, identifies five main classes of these beings:

Jinn, spirits who form a class of beings between angels and men.

Pari, fairy of entrancing beauty.

Shayatin, or *Shaitans*, devils, demon hosts of *Shaitan*; some regard them as *Jinn* in origin or as fallen angels.

Ifrit, a powerful and malignant genius; the ghosts of the wicked are sometimes so termed.

Marid, an evil genius of the most powerful kind.

This classification is firmly rooted in Arabic sources. It has been superimposed on a complex intermingling of elements from Hinduism and tribal religions, and therefore contributes little to our understanding of indigenous beliefs about spirits.

Any attempt to classify the vast army of demons and ghosts that frequent Indian folklore is an exercise beset with difficulties. Notions about particular spirit beings vary between localities. Descriptions of demons and ghosts are unlikely to be reliable, given the trauma of encountering them, and much in the way of detail is obviously added *ex post facto* from existing folklore. Traditional beliefs about these beings are thus tied to particular localities, as most rural inhabitants being illiterates are to a large extent insulated from the influences which external sources of belief can exert on their understanding of these encounters.

A well-known Punjabi proverb says that "language changes every fifteen miles" (Eglar 1960:xiii). A particular demon or ghost may, therefore, have different names in neighboring districts even though local beliefs concerning this being are broadly similar in their content. The converse is also common: the same name may be given to a spiritual being in two or more districts, but a closer scrutiny of the beliefs associated with that name reveals significant differences indicating that the name has no consistent meaning beyond its purely local context. For example, the description of *masan* differs in various localities. In most places *masan* is believed to be the malignant ghost of a child, but he is occasionally the ghost of a low caste man (Crooke 1894:161) or a goblin who haunts burial places in the Simla Hills (Rose 1978:212).

Two major historical sources have been employed in organizing the following nomenclature of demons and ghosts. The first volume of Rose's (1978) compilation, first published in 1916, entitled *A Glossary of Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North West Frontier Province*, furnishes some useful information about traditional beliefs for the interested scholar. The material, however, is poorly presented: topics which should be linked together are scattered throughout the text, and this makes the clear comprehension of the spirit world an even more difficult task. Well-defined distinctions are not always made between the ghosts of humans and the local deities or demons. Moreover, the text does not seriously attempt to link specific beliefs about spiritual beings to their locality of origin.

In contrast, Crooke's (1894) *Introduction to the Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India* contains a wealth of carefully organized material and handles a difficult subject with great skill. There is a serious attempt to address the problem of locating specific beliefs about spiritual beings to definite localities, but due to the complexity of the material being handled, it is less than adequate for those wishing to assess the relevance of these beliefs to a particular district or region of the subcontinent.

Nomenclature of Demons and Ghosts in Indian Folklore

The following organization of the nomenclature of demons and ghosts reflects the difficulties discussed above. The ambiguity and complexity of the source material was such that it was not possible to establish clearly delineated categories of these spiritual beings. The data did not facilitate a linking of specific beliefs with definite localities, but in a few cases it has been possible to ascribe names to a particular region.

| Name | Alternative names | Characteristics |
|-------------|------------------------|--|
| 1. Vetala | Baital | A spirit of a living person who leaves his own body and occupies a corpse (Crooke 1894:152). |
| 2. Pret | Preta Paret | This term means "deceased" or "departed" and represents the soul between the time of death and the completion of funeral rites. Sometimes the meaning of this term is extended to the spirit of a deformed or handicapped person or to the spirit of a child who has died prematurely due to the omission of certain prescribed ceremonies during pregnancy. Under provocation a <i>pret</i> may be malignant (Crooke 1894:153). Another belief is that the spirit of a deceased person wanders about for twelve months (Rose 1978:204). |
| 3. Pisacha | Pashaj (Bahawalpur) | The ghost of a lunatic, liar, adulterer, murderer, or criminal of any kind (Crooke 1894:153; Crooke 1977:239). In Bahawalpur, diseases of the brain and womb in women are usually ascribed to the <i>pashaj</i> (Rose 1978:217). |
| 4. Rakshasa | Rakas (Chamba) | A demon/ogre whose name means "destroyer" and is considered hostile to humankind (Crooke 1894:153). In cave paintings of the later Buddhist period, the <i>rakshasi</i> (female) is depicted as a goblin in the shape of a beautiful woman who kills men and feeds on their corpses (Crooke 1977:238). She is believed to lure |

- young men to their destruction (Crooke 1894:158). *Rakshasas* inhabit trees and lead night travelers astray (Crooke 1894:154-155; Rose 1978:216).
5. Deo Another demon/ogre who is also believed to live in trees and to practice cannibalism. In folktales, he is always portrayed as being very stupid (Crooke 1894:158). He is recognized by his long lips, one of which sticks up in the air while the other is pendant (Crooke 1977:238).
6. Daitya A tree-dwelling demon/ogre whose appearance from the front resembles that of a man. Seen from behind, however, he is hollow: a husk without a backbone (Crooke 1894:159; Crooke 1977:238).
7. Bir A very malignant village demon who brings disease on people and cattle (Crooke 1894:158).
8. Dund Skandhahata (Bengal)
Banshira (Simla) A headless horseman who calls to householders at night. Any answer to his summons is believed to cause death for the person concerned. He dwells in the jungle, valleys, and mountains of Simla and in the bogs and fens of Bengal (Crooke 1894:159-161; Rose 1978:212).
9. Masan Mashan Variously believed to be the malignant ghost of a child, the ghost of a low caste person (Crooke 1894:161-162), or in the Simla Hills, a goblin who haunts burial places (Rose 1978:215). Children believed to be "under his shadow" waste away from consumption (Crooke 1894:162).
10. Tola The ghost of a bachelor or of a child that has died too young to undergo the tonsure ceremony. These ghosts are regarded as harmless (Crooke 1894:163).
11. Airi A famous hill *bhut* of a man killed while hunting. He is accompanied by hounds whose bark signals calamity for the hearer (Crooke 1894:163).
12. Acheri Ghosts of little girls who dwell on the summits of mountains. They are believed to cause sudden illness in small girls (Crooke 1894:164).
13. Runiya The demon of the avalanche (Crooke 1894:163-164).
14. Jilaiya (Bihar) A demon who appears in the form of a night bird and sucks the blood of any victim whose name it hears. If this night bird flies over the head of a pregnant woman, it is believed that the child will be born a weakling (Crooke 1894:165).
15. Chordevan Satvai Sathi Birth fiends who are believed to assail a mother and her baby during the period of impurity following birth (Crooke 1894:165).
16. Pari Nuri Parind Peri These are female spirits or fairies of good disposition. They are believed to help good people who find themselves in some sort of trouble (Jones and Bevan 1941:336). On moonlit nights *paris* are apt to attack women. Yet they protect children. It is said they are Muslims and should be propitiated accordingly (Rose 1978:204). Although *pari* have their roots in Indian folklore, beliefs surrounding them have been strongly influenced by exotic sources (Crooke 1894:166).
17. Jinn (a collective term for a large group of spiritual beings) These spiritual beings have been directly imported from Arabia and are scarcely known in Indian folklore (Crooke 1894:166). *Jinns* assume a large variety of shapes, some of which are terrifying. Intimate relationships may be formed between believing spirits and Muslims (Jones and Bevan 1941:333).

18. Ghul Qutrub
Chalawa
(Punjab) (a) A goblin or demon who haunts burial grounds and feeds upon corpses. They are believed to kill and devour any person they encounter. Although they may appear in a variety of shapes, their toes are always turned backward.
(b) The spirits of persons who have died without male issue and who seek the lives of small boys are in some localities termed *ghul* (female) or *qutrub* (male) (Jones and Bevan 1941:338).
19. Gyal Gayal The ghost of a sonless man who roams about seeking the lives of young boys (Rose 1978:202; Crooke 1894:147).
20. Churel Churail
Chardhail (a) The ghost of a woman dying during pregnancy, childbirth, or the period of impurity following parturition. A *churel* assumes the form of a lovely young woman whose feet have the heels in front and the toes behind. She seduces young men and is believed to be especially malignant to her own family (Crooke 1894:168-169; Rose 1978:206; Jones and Bevan 1941:339; Irwin 1978:7-9).
(b) The term *churel* is also associated with the *chuhra* or sweeper caste. A ghost of a *chuhra* or other low caste person is notoriously malignant (Crooke 1894:168; Rose 1978:204).
21. Sayyid Shahid This term means "martyr." *Sayyids* are extremely malevolent ghosts who cause illness and death among both humans and cattle. In East Punjab many Muslim shrines were erected to appease these creatures (Rose 1978:203).
22. Bahro An ugly male spirit who causes disease (Rose 1978:212).
23. Banasat A female spirit who dwells in forests and on the slopes of mountains (Rose 1978:212).

24. Banbir These are heroes of ancient times. They live in a variety of trees and can cause sickness in women (Rose 1978:212).
25. Chungu A male demon who inhabits walnut and mulberry trees. He is usually under the control of a sorcerer (Rose 1978:213).
26. Jogini A malignant spirit which haunts forests, waterfalls, and hilltops (Rose 1978:215).
27. Jaljogan These spirits cast spells over women and children which cause illness and death. They dwell in wells, springs, and streams (Rose 1978:215).
28. Dag A field demon. If a crop produces less than a normal yield, it is believed that the difference has been taken by the *dag* (Rose 1978:217).
29. Dakan Shakan
(Bahawalpur) These terms may refer to the same evil spirit. In Bahawalpur brain and womb diseases are attributed to these spirits (Rose 1978:217).

Other Beliefs and Practices Associated with *Bhut*

There are a number of other beliefs and practices concerning *bhut* that need elaboration here.

Certain places are reputed to be frequented by *bhut*, and people who linger in their vicinity put themselves in great peril. The *bhut* population congregates in graveyards, ancient ruins, empty old houses, mines, caves, deserts, and at crossroads and boundaries (Crooke 1894:173-181). They also lurk around houses, dwelling in such places as roofs, hearths, latrines, rubbish pits, and even sweet-smelling flowers (Crooke 1894:182-184).

Many prophylactic devices are prescribed in folklore to protect persons from *bhut*. Rose (1978:211-212) describes a few of these devices: black marks placed on children's foreheads, amulets worn around the neck and arms, and iron kept in close proximity to a person's body. An iron knife or scythe placed on the bed after childbirth is believed to be especially efficacious in protecting mothers and newborn children from the attack of *bhut* (Crooke 1894:165).

Protection from *bhut* is seldom perfect, however, and many people, particularly women, are believed to be possessed by these malignant spirits. Widespread practices have evolved to combat this threat to social harmony. Several researchers (Rose 1978:208; Jones and Bevan 1941:345-357; Hoch

1974:670; and Pfeleiderer 1985:222-226) report various methods of exorcism that are employed to cast out *bhut* from their unfortunate victims. Some of the remedies prescribed, such as the twice daily dropping of a concoction of mustard oil, chillies, and black peppers in the victim's eyes, are rather drastic, and one can easily understand a *bhut's* haste to depart from his hitherto comfortable home.

Persistence of Beliefs About *Bhut*

Our focus in this paper has been on the historical sources documenting traditional Indian beliefs about ghosts and demons. A number of recent field studies, moreover, suggest that these beliefs, albeit in a somewhat modified form, continue to persist in various regions of the subcontinent.

Irwin (1978:5-9) conducted field research in northern Pakistan and describes several encounters his informants had with *jinn* and *chardhail*. He concludes that "one thing remains certain in the minds of the people: there are strange creatures in the woods, shaped like people, who can cause grave misfortune to anyone who beholds them" (1978:9). Raza (1969:35), the author of a sociological study of two Punjabi villages, reports that some of his respondents narrated their encounters with *jinn*, *bhut*, and *churel*. He infers that in the rural areas of the Punjab there is a widespread belief in these beings.

Accounts of field studies elsewhere on the subcontinent confirm that traditional beliefs in demons and ghosts remain an integral part of the South Asian worldview. Rural women in Bangladesh take precautionary measures against *bhut* during pregnancy and after childbirth (Blanchet 1984). Studies in Kashmir (Hoch 1974) and near Ahmedabad (Pfeleiderer 1985) indicate that mental illness continues to be attributed to spirit possession. And in a village near Hyderabad, Dube (1955:129) undertook a census of ghosts and "listed more than forty of them."

Conclusion

Folk religion copes with problems of disorder and suffering by locating their meaning within a cosmos of lesser spirits, natural objects, and human beings. The misery and distress of rural life is frequently attributed to the attacks of demons and ghosts, and aid is sought from religious/magical practitioners such as the *pir*, *amil*, and *jadugar*.

It is incumbent on persons bent on contextualizing the gospel among the rural peasantry of South Asia to grapple seriously with a worldview that perceives the misfortunes of life as attributable to some supernatural agency. Unless serious attempts are made by outsiders to understand this cosmos of demons and ghosts and its relevance to the everyday life of the rural villager, then efforts to incarnate the gospel message in a South Asian context will fail, and new believers will continue to be entangled in the web of syncretism.

Note

1. This is a revised version of a paper presented to a Communicators Fellowship meeting in Lahore, Pakistan.

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