

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-



**PROFESSIONAL QUALITY
WEATHER STATION
NOW AFFORDABLE
ENOUGH FOR HOME USE!**

The new WeatherPro weather station uses state-of-the-art technology to give you full monitoring capability at an incredibly low price. The WeatherPro includes a weather computer, remote precision wind direction vane, wind speed sensor, external temperature probe, mounting hardware and 40' of cable—all for only \$189!

- WIND SPEED
- TEMPERATURE
- WIND DIRECTION
- TEMPERATURE HI/LO
- RAINFALL (OPTIONAL)*
- WIND GUST
- WIND CHILL
- TIME
- AUTO SCAN
- 1 YEAR WARRANTY
- 14-DAY MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE



**DIGITAL WEATHERPRO
WEATHER STATION: ONLY \$189!**
ORDER TODAY: 1-800-678-3669, ext. NH
M-F 7AM-5:30 PM Pacific Time

*Automatic-emptying electronic rain gauge—\$49.95
Add \$5.00 for shipping. CA residents add sales tax.
Fax 1-415-732-9188 • M/C and VISA

DIGITAL®

3465 DIABLO AVE., HAYWARD, CA 94545

**GIANT
HEAVY DUTY
INFLATABLE BOATS**
2 MAN \$38
3 MAN \$50
4 MAN \$65

Before Midnight October 31

As part of an advertising test Dunlap Boat Mfg. will send any of the above size boats to any reader of this publication who reads and responds to this test before midnight, October 31. This test has been commissioned by the Dunlap Boat International Exchange. Each Boat Lot No. (Z-26 PVC), is constructed of tough high density fabric (resistant to abrasions, sub-freezing temperatures, sunlight, salt & oil), and has electronically welded embossed seams, nylon safety line grommeted all around, heavy duty oar locks, equipped with attachments for a motor mount to handle up to a 2½ h.p. motor, 3 separate air chambers for extra safety (4 air chambers in 4-man), self-locking safety valves, bow lifting and towing handle, has hull identification numbers per the United States Coast Guard Boating Standard, and is recommended for marine, ocean and fresh water recreation, camping, fishing or a family fun boat. Each boat will be accompanied with a **LIFETIME** guarantee that it must perform 100% or it will be replaced free. Add \$7 handling & crating for each boat ordered. Dunlap Boat Mfg. pays all shipping. There is no other monetary requirement. If your order is received within the next ten days you will receive FREE a combined hand/foot inflator/deflator bellows style pump for each boat requested. Should you wish to return your boat you may do so for a refund. LIMIT: one (1) boat per address, no exceptions. Send appropriate sum together with your name and address to: Test Dept. #A209, Dunlap Boat Mfg., 517 W. Garfield Ave., Glendale, CA 91204. Or for fastest service from any part of the country call FREE before midnight seven days a week.

CALL TOLL FREE 1-800-637-3823

Ask operator for BOAT TEST #A209
Before midnight 7 days a week.
Have credit card ready

Shades of Halloween

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 premarital 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 her 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

"A

*kind of song for the wild,
a lament for its loss,*

"McKibben's eye-opening plea ... is likely to prove as important as Rachel Carson's classic *Silent Spring* or Jonathan Schell's *The Fate of the Earth*."

—Cleveland Plain Dealer

"This is a book one hopes and prays all of us ... will read and think of as we go about our lives."

—Dr. Robert Coles

*and a plea for its restoration."**

Printed on recycled paper
*The New York Review of Books

The End of Nature

BILL MCKIBBEN



ANCHOR BOOKS
A division of the Bantam Doubleday
Dell Publishing Group, Inc.



Experience Africa with the American Museum of Natural History

- **LUXURY TENTING IN TANZANIA**
Experience the ultimate safari under canvas during the great wildebeest migration.
January 3-15, 1991
- **GORILLAS OF RWANDA & ZAIRE**
Face-to-face encounters with the endangered primates in their jungle home.
January 13-23, 1991
- **CLASSIC EAST AFRICA SAFARI**
Highlights of Kenya and Tanzania game parks during the great migration.
February 17-March 5, 1991

Toll-free: (800) 462-8687 or (212) 769-5700

Shades of Halloween

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).

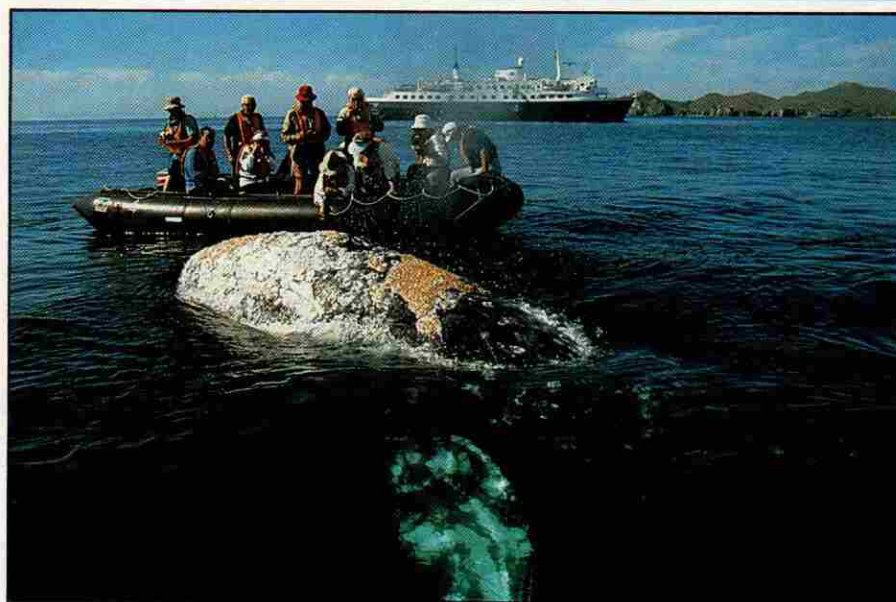
A married woman and her kin are regarded as social inferiors to her husband's kin. A new bride is expected to shoulder harder and more onerous household chores and farm work than the daughters in her husband's family (they too, when they marry and go to live with their husbands, will go through a similar 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 multicasite, 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-


IN THE WAKE OF THE GREAT


WHALES


CRUISING THE BAJA PENINSULA  JAN. 30—FEB. 9, 1991




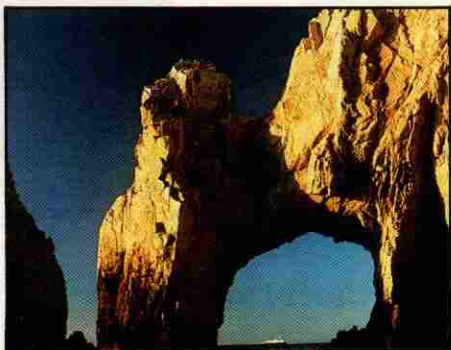
 Aboard the 39-cabin *M.V. Sea Lion* with American Museum Lectures and friends...

 Experience with a team of Museum experts the spectacular marine and desert wilderness of the Baja Peninsula: whales, sea birds, manta rays, sea lions, tropical fish, enormous cacti, rare plants and flowers.

 Encounter the great whales up-close during peak season for their courting and breeding.

 Explore desert islands inhabited by blue-footed boobies, magnificent frigatebirds, ospreys, and thousands of other sea birds.

 Enjoy this comfortable cruise and land program led by a team of Museum experts eager to share their insights and enthusiasm for the splendid animal and plant life of the Baja Peninsula.



For further information write:
American Museum of Natural History
Discovery Cruises
Central Park West at 79th Street
New York, NY 10024-5192.

Toll-free (800) 462-8687 or
in New York State (212) 769-5700.

 American
Museum of
Natural
History
Discovery Cruises

ades may shed light on the underlying physiological mechanism of ghost possession. Under the stress of mental or physical pain, the body produces morphinelike substances called endorphins, which relieve the pain and may trigger mental states called alternate, altered, or dissociative. Ghost possession is one such dissociative 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-

everything goes dark. My legs, hands, and veins stiffen, then a pain goes to my stomach. 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 Brahmans, 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 problems—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 continued 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 fourteen, and her grieving mother had died soon after. Sita's remaining brother became 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 induced 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 physical 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 diagnosed as having tuberculosis, for she feared that she might have it.

Nevertheless, with regard to her ap-

pearance, the maintenance of her household, and care of her children, she managed 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 protection from Taraka's ghost relieved her anxiety and helped to reduce stress. They also brought her other advantages, especially 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 published in "The Psychomedical Case History 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 A. Freed is a curator and Ruth S. Freed is a research associate in the Department of Anthropology at the American Museum.

Great Journeys Go Far

Cruise around the Iberian peninsula from Barcelona, Spain, along the French coast, the Baltic Sea, or around Great Britain aboard our luxurious, 120-passenger vessel, the MS *Caledonian Star*. It's compact size allows us to duck in and out of lovely small ports, affording access to a variety of sites which would be impossible to reach on a journey restricted to land.

And Beyond The Basics.

The British Isles in Bloom: May 17-June 2, 1991
with Robert Pearson (gardening correspondent of the *Sunday Telegraph*)
Sail around the British Isles visiting lovely ports and out-of-the-way islands. View Britain's and Ireland's most beautiful gardens and houses including ports of call to the Scilly Isles, Isle of Mull, Isle of Skye and St. Kilda.

Houses and Gardens of Britain: May 31-June 15, 1991
Circumnavigate the British Isles and discover some of Britain's and Ireland's most spectacular homes and gardens. Visit the Scilly Isles, Cork, Dublin and several other Scottish and English ports.

The Peninsula Cruise: September 6-22, 1991
This cruise offers a delightful combination of visiting small ports and cities in England, France, Portugal, and Spain with experiencing the history, art, wines and scenic beauty of each area.

Great Cities of the Baltic: August 23-September 8, 1991
This music, history and art cruise commences in West Germany and sails along the Baltic coastlines of East Germany, Poland, Latvia, Estonia, Russia, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and finally, the Netherlands.

Prices Start From: \$4,495 Twin. \$5,695 Single.



GREAT JOURNEYS®
by Jameson Travel, Inc.

New Insights Through Hosted Travel™

P.O. Box 669, Ipswich,
MA 01938 800-225-2553
(in MA, call 508-356-1272)

Tour of Interest: _____ Name _____
 _____ Address _____
 _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____
 _____ Telephone _____

010NH