

Centre for the Humanities and Medicine
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Convergence and Collisions: Disease, Religion, and Healing in Asia

Ghost Exorcism, Memory, and Healing in Contemporary Hinduism

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Productive approaches to cultural models of disease should examine how narrative constructs of illness and healing are framed within specific rituals and ideologies. In India, ghost exorcism rituals provide a way for people to deal with a range of problems, while generating explanations that connect with the larger landscape of Hindu eschatology.

I discuss ghost exorcism rituals performed in Varanasi, India, based on extensive research I conducted among exorcists and their clients. My central theme is the complex relationship between ritual, narrative, memory, and healing. Hindu ghost exorcism narratives establish meanings for a wide range of ailments through the language of ghost affliction, and specific types of ghost affliction may be identified as the primary cause of an illness.

Ghosts represent lexical devices that reflect on the suffering of the living, whose ritual treatment involves an interactive system of communication. Exorcism practices provide a striking example of the use of traditional cultural resources in dealing with physical and mental problems in a country where modern psychiatry and psychotherapy are not available (nor often relevant) to a significant portion of the population. The interactive narratives that occur in exorcism rituals create empowered solutions within a socially controlled and religiously sanctioned context.