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Gaining Access to the Radically Unfamiliar: Religion in Modern Times

Abstract: Postcolonial critique instructed anthropologists to turn to history in order to integrate time into their discourse. Yet historiography, even when undertaken from a postcolonial, subaltern standpoint, has foundered precisely on the challenge of doing justice to religious subjectivity. How then is the non-religious scholar to gain access to religious phenomena? Phenomenological understandings of body, temporality and place provide an alternative account of what it means to come to understand something. Seen from this perspective, disciplines such as anthropology in fact rely radically on time, on the capacity of the scholar's body to slowly effect a new synthesis of body, place and people. In the expansion that takes place lies the potential to come to understand, without any necessary involvement of consent or belief, the continuum between religious and non-religious experience.

Keywords: modernity, historical time, postcolonial and feminist critiques of modernity, temporality of anthropological practice, phenomenology, bodily access to the unfamiliar, spirit possession, continuities of experience, religious agency

The study of certain kinds of religious phenomena can reveal our own presuppositions precisely to the extent that it places a strain on the categories we use. This is the orientation with which I explored the phenomenon of 'spirit possession' in my recent work (Ram 2013). Men and women in rural Tamil Nadu are capable of experiencing divinity and the dead not simply as a visitation, but in their bodies, as a more or less explicit presence. Such experience has no unequivocal meaning – it may constitute affliction or divine favor. The interpretative challenge may be described as 'ethnographic'. It is undertaken regularly as part of anthropology's ongoing wager that it is indeed possible to extend our knowledge even of cultural phenomena that are initially radically alien and unfamiliar to oneself. The methods I employ are also derived from phenomenology. In phenomenology, spirit possession would constitute an exemplary 'limit case', where ordinary presumptions that sustain us in everyday interactions no longer support us. We can and do stave off the instability that ensues. We can dismiss the challenge or simply diminish it by re-absorbing it into existing categories. If we were to take spirit possession as a genuine phenomenon, it would profoundly call into ques-

tion a network of assumptions about what it is to be human, alive or dead, what it is to worship, what it is to be divine. Instead, we re-absorb spirit possession into the language of consciousness ('altered' states of consciousness, but consciousness nevertheless), or into the language of biology (measuring brain activity alterations to see if anything 'real' is happening). More frequently still we simply dismiss it as falsehood.

We may not be able to step outside our own epistemologies, because they are in fact our ontologies. We apprehend the world not just cognitively but emotionally, affectively, and practically. Or – we could allow ourselves to be unsettled. My book titled *Fertile Disorder. Spirit Possession and its Provocation of the Modern* (Ram 2013) tries to persuade readers to come on a journey with me, through dense ethnographic exploration of what possession means for different women, in order to return to more common scholarly and political preoccupations, newly enriched by new hypotheses and ways of re-imagining at least some of our assumptions. In the book I deal with a number of such preoccupations such as gender, agency, the body, emotions, as well as justice. Here I want to see if we can extend some of those methods and insights to the themes of religion, change and history which are the binding themes of this volume. For it is not simply extreme phenomena such as spirit possession that act as a 'provocation of the modern'. Something of that provocation seems to cling to all of religion as far as self-consciously modern projects are concerned – whether these be political projects such as feminism, liberalism and socialism – or models of knowledge that take the methods of science as their yardstick of truth. Religion does not have to do much to be constituted as a provocation. Its very visibility to non-religious others seems an eruption into a place (the public sphere) and a time (the present) to which it does not belong. What does this reveal of our understanding of time itself? What understanding of time and of a shared present underlies this response of surprise and discomfort at every manifestation of religion? It is not only that religion is being located in the past, it is also being assumed that the past does not simply flow into the present. Instead, the present is assumed to entirely supersede the past. How might we think differently about the relation between past and present such that even those who do not share the assumptions of a religious phenomenon might nevertheless aspire to gain a form of access to it?

In what follows I take up two bodies of work that help us think differently about time.

First, I turn to the highly politicized set of discourses bequeathed to us by forty years of questions and critiques raised by feminists, post-structuralists, and post-colonial scholars. All of these coalesce in one respect: they have all, in some form or another, interrogated the linear, progressivist self-image of mod-

ernity. In turn they share elements of an alternative model of history and of time. We may, after Foucault, describe this model as an archaeology of the present.

The second body of work I turn to is the discipline of anthropology. This sits oddly after turning to the political critiques for inspiration. For postcolonial critiques in particular have tended to see anthropology as singularly lacking in an adequate sense of time. Anthropological traditions have been strongly indicted for failing to incorporate the time of colonial rule into their accounts of what they see and describe as 'tribal' societies for example (Asad 1975, 103–120). The explicit models of time anthropologists have offered for the non-western societies they have studied – as non-linear, cyclical time in India for example – might be seen from a post-colonial perspective as too homogenizing (Sarkar 2002, 15), and as adding to a 'time distance' between the western 'us' and 'them' (Fabian 1983).

In taking such charges to heart, social change became a central motif for anthropology. In my book (Ram 2013) I closely examine the many ways in which spirit possession has been positioned as an index or concrete expression of the tensions introduced by capitalism into a pre-capitalist culture. In some cases, as in the factories of Malaysia (Ong 1987), the arrival or consolidation of capitalism takes the form of new relations of production and new disciplines of work. Others follow the lead of Taussig (1997) in describing cults of spirit queens as mimetic amplifications of different qualities of the modern state (Morris 2000; Tsing 1993). My own work in rural India began in the 1980s directly concerned with questions of social change, exploring the changing nature of the sexual division of labor with the adoption of new technology and capitalist relations of production. I went on to research the involvement of women in projects of social reform and development, and the changing conditions under which women 'came of age', gave birth and mothered. But the enigmatic qualities of spirit possession made me dissatisfied with extending this kind of analysis to every aspect of phenomena we encounter in the world. In this case it meant ignoring the very features which were most spectacular not only to me, but to those around me in Tamil Nadu. What stood out for all of us was the radical change in the very people who were 'entered' by spirits. During such intervals, their behavior, gait and language would alter. In the shrines of Catholic saints where people went to seek relief from the troublesome spirits, the Catholic deities did battle with the demonic. In Tamil Nadu, the Christian powers shared certain characteristics of the demonic world. Like them, they too entered the bodies of humans, taking them as mediums in such confrontations. It is true that one cannot simply remain with the sensory and the spectacular moment even in order to explore the meanings of such moments. Those meanings turned out to be distributed across the interrelationship between diverse sets of practices

– some were ritual practices that took place in temples and in Christian shrines, others were constructions of gendered life cycles, yet others were concerned with death and its effects on the flow of life energies. The changes I came to explore were more personal, as possession brought changes to the lives not only of the person directly involved, but of all who were touched by it.

In what follows I first trace the kind of alternatives postcolonial and feminist critiques forged in relation to what Ballard critically describes as the 'precepts or conventions of a singular historical consciousness, which is that of modern, professional, Western, or now global historicity' (Ballard 2014,102). This singular historical consciousness, argues Ballard, is particularly resistant to religion, for it could be said to have 'cut its teeth' on questioning the authenticity of the events described in the Bible (Ballard 2014, 102). I then trace some of the difficulties experienced in attempts by postcolonial historians to pluralize those conventions in relation to religion when writing the history of modern India. Finally I turn to phenomenology and anthropology, arguing that there are other ways of understanding temporality and change. My aim here is not to elevate anthropological practice but rather to elicit a dimension that can be applied more widely. Through what version of practice, through what version of time and of change, might non-religious scholars gain access to religious experiences?

1 Religion and the archaeological approach to the time of modernity

In an opening chapter of *Fertile Disorder* I adopt a mode of historical analysis. I explore how it is that spirit possession and many of its attendant practices have come to be so absent from the dominant discourses of modern India (Ram 2013, 42–70). I trace the particular workings of Reason in Indian modernity, specifically in the regional modernity of Tamil Nadu, where rationality was the chosen weapon of twentieth century intellectuals engaged in disputing the power of Brahmanic culture. I trace how 'possession', an eminent candidate for cultural iconicity as a non-Brahmanic complex of practices, came instead to be marginalized. It has become a practice lacking a discourse of its own within the dominant episteme. The ensemble of practices within which 'possession' lives has been carved up by different disciplines to constitute distinctive objects of knowledge. The stories of the local goddess who afflicts and cures people appear in collections of local folk tales. The performances of her epics are represented in performance studies. The wider practices of curing and the diagnoses of misfortune are assigned to anthropology, but are distributed across a number of sub-disci-

plines, from studies of folk religion to medical anthropology. I thus attempt to show that the term 'possession', seemingly unitary, is in fact a 'remainder': something left over after a previously coherent set of practices has been thus distributed. What possession can no longer claim in these dominant discourses is the capacity to generate knowledge in its own right.

But is this history writing in the usual sense of the term? It departs in certain crucial ways from an objectivist version of history, one in which the preoccupations of the enquirer are supposed to play no part in the account she produces of the past. Quite the opposite is the case here. The story I piece together is situated by my concerns with the politics of the present in India. It is a response I share with many of my intellectual peers to a crisis in a secularism we took for granted in 'Nehruvian' post-independence India. Such an upbringing in upper-caste urban Hindu India allowed one to bask in the assumption that one lived in a place where a unique Indian modernity has successfully integrated the best of Indian traditions – this included the best of Hinduism – imbibed as pure spirituality, culled of the taint of caste which was assumed to be on its way out. This version co-existed comfortably enough with an official secularism – until a sustained challenge to secularism came from the direction of a strident and exclusivist Hindu nationalism.

There have been different kinds of intellectual responses to this challenge, some of them seeking possible alternative models from different strands of religion itself. Nandy is a leading advocate for such a position. He finds in 'everyday' Hinduism a fluidity that lends itself to cutting across the formalities of religious borders. The flexible niche that allows one to adopt a deity as a personal object of devotion has meant for example that Muslim musicians could quite unselfconsciously choose Saraswati, goddess of learning and the arts, as their presiding deity (Nandy 2001). A more widespread response among secular intellectuals has been to invoke the medieval bhakti traditions of Hinduism as an alternative model of religion. At its boldest, bhakti called on worshippers to bypass the mediation of religious institutions and orthodoxies, replacing them with a teacher who could show you the way to find the divine within oneself. Bhakti models of religion also provided the kind of shared language and basic understandings Nandy invokes, providing a habitus which easily crossed between Hinduism and Sufi strands of Islam. As the work of Eaton (Eaton 1985) demonstrates, the largest populations of Muslims were in undivided Punjab and Bengal, well away from the historic heartlands of Islamic states. It was not the state, but rather a state-supported popular Sufism, that brought these communities into Islam, mediated by Sufis who involved themselves not only in worship but in practical help, healing and adjudicating over disputes. Such 'conversion' sat lightly on existing norms and practices, not requiring total transformation of a shared past.

My concern has been that these debates on religion and secularism continue to leave out whole segments of experience of people for whom gods are even more spectacularly accessible to devotees than in bhakti traditions. Moreover these are gods who cure as well as afflict. In 1995, the German scholar Günther D. Sontheimer, who adopted some of the insights and methods of the imaginative Indian Marxist intellectual Damodar D. Kosambi, argued that modernity has made matters worse for what he called the folk and tribal models of religion that historically contributed much to Hinduism. In the *new* Hinduism of the middle class, he concludes, 'bhakti and the philosophical contents of Hinduism' have come to stand for the entirety. There remains, in his view, 'not even a disapproving awareness of folk Hinduism' (Sontheimer 1995).

Such oblivion is part of a much more secure hegemony of the upper caste/classes and I have therefore seen it as an urgent task of the present to acknowledge the continued vitality of non-elite religion. An excavation of the past undertaken in this spirit makes no presumption of being detached from the subjectivity of the enquirer. Then again, it is not 'subjective' in the usual sense of referring to the consciousness of an isolated individual subject. Rather, these are responses to shared concerns, coming out of varied but shared projects (secularism, democracy, socialism etc.), and part of wider shared debates. It is an attempt to see how our subjectivities came to be constituted in certain ways. This reference to a shared constitution of subjectivity does not entail an assumption that we are somehow identical. Rather, the past operates in the manner of a shared archive out of which we can selectively take and adapt according to the needs and purposes of the present.

Such a re-working of history came into postcolonial studies through the work of Foucault. As he describes it in his *Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault 1972), an archive is both embodied in specific enunciations, statements, as well as forming the precondition for those statements.

> The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. But the archive is also that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass, nor are they inscribed in an unbroken linearity, nor do they disappear at the mercy of chance external accidents; but they are grouped together in distinct figures, composed together in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities... (Foucault 1972, 129).

It is *this* version of temporality – as a dominant genealogy to be excavated – which has fed into many of the critical discourses of the past forty years, not only post-structuralism and postcolonial critique, but various strands of feminist critique as well. Thus Said utilizes Foucault's notion of the archive in *Orientalism*

(Said 1979) to characterize the kinds of statements that can routinely be made about 'Islam' or the politics of the Middle East. Such statements can draw on quite different genealogies (colonialism, Christian formulations of Islam, even Greek pronouncements on the irrationalism of Dionysian cults or confrontations with the Persians) in order to create a sense of freshness as well as debate even while the archive regulates what is 'meaningful', legitimate, and what is not, what 'counts' as a statement and what does not.

But if an archive is actually constitutive of who we are as speaking subjects, then how is one to perform an 'archaeology'? Foucault's answer in this text is that one should explore discourses that have 'just ceased to be ours', that is, where a certain historical threshold has been crossed. That threshold, for India, is precisely the crossing of a certain normativity assigned to discourses of secularism. Others have exploited other forms of dissonance. Said exploits the pain and dissonance he experienced as a postcolonial subject, at once part and not part of a privileged location in the North American academy (Said 1979). Feminist intellectuals have used the frustration and pain of having to inhabit a world where it is apparently impossible to be a woman and an intellectual at once. What is shared across these different situations is the capacity to make generative a dissonance that is at once individually lived and socially produced.

Taken together, we now have forty years of cumulative insights into the exclusions that have been constitutive of modernity. Religion is one of those casualties. 'The Moderns have never been modern', says Latour (Latour 2013, 14). And indeed, this is the spirit of my critique as well, ultimately. But first it must be said, as Latour goes on to immediately acknowledge, that the moderns have nevertheless 'believed they were modern, and this belief too is crucial, for it has made them act in a thousand contradictory ways' (Latour 2013, 14). These 'thousand contradictory ways' can still cohere enough to exclude and marginalize socially constituted groups and social phenomena in quite systematic ways. If we look back over the different kinds of exclusions and marginalizations that have been enumerated as constitutive of modernity, we see an overlapping series emerging. In each of these oppositions, religion is pre-framed – each time to its own disadvantage. Depending on the context, contemporary utterances can frame modernity as capitalism versus feudalism, as progress versus tradition, as reason versus irrationality, or science versus superstition, as change versus stagnation, as democracy versus authoritarian absolutism, or indeed, as order and hygiene versus disorder and infection. None of these are simple oppositions. In each case, one term plays an inferior role. In each case, however, religion can take on the coloring of any or all the inferior terms, depending on the context: as

stagnant, authoritarian, feudal, superstitious, corrupt, and the source of unhygienic unscientific practices.

What makes these understandings 'stick' is that none of these have operated as purely conceptual oppositions. They have all been realized in projects of power and intervention that are also intertwined. As feminists have long pointed out, such polarities come to us already shaped by hierarchies of power that divide the territory as well as privilege one term over another: objectivity over subjectivity, rationality over other forms of comprehension, the Man of Reason (Lloyd 1985) over the feminized submerged continent of the psyche. Each of these antinomies acts as an affective drive for the institution of a project. Representing the psyche as unknown and dark has been the pretext for Men of Enlightenment to map and bring the psyche to light, mediated by women's bodies as bearers of hysterical symptoms (Koffman 1985). In turn, idioms of mapping and exploring dark continents, or of bringing progress and democracy to authoritarian and decadent dominant groups have functioned as a language shared between the projects of a modernizing patriarchy and of colonialism, which is why gender and the rescue of women can emerge effortlessly at the heart of the language of western interventions in the Middle East, and more generally in what is now termed the global south. Each of the binaries between order and disorder, Enlightenment and darkness, subject and object has been realized as projects: of doctors, missionaries, colonial administrators, scholars and artists.

As colonial projects, they create what Fabian described as 'temporal distancing' between the time of the enquiring observer and that of the object of study (Fabian 1983, 61). This distance is itself internally hierarchized. So while India was distanced as a society run entirely on principles that were not simply religious but fatalistic and irrational, Hinduism and Islam were afforded recognition as 'religions'. By contrast, the anthropologist working in rural villages encounters phenomena that have never made the grade as 'religion' since they fit into the most distant zone reserved by modernity for extreme superstition. European categories such as magic, witchcraft and possession may entail more than simple transpositions of European categories to other places. Some, such as the historian Kathleen Davis, would argue that the 'idea of an irrational, violent, superstitious, feudal "Middle Ages"... came into being *as* and through *colonialism*.' (Davis 2015, 70):

> Colonisers could not have mapped and administered foreign lands and bodies as they did without the simultaneous process of imagining their own 'Middle Ages'. Vice versa 'the Middle Ages' could not have been conceptualised as such, apart from Europeans' attempt to theorise their relations to the people over whose lands they would lay claim. This holds particularly true for India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. ... The linear narrative that the 'idea of the Middle Ages spread unevenly but was generally accepted' by the

time of the nineteenth century not only obscures the colonial history of the becoming me-
dieval of the 'the Middle Ages' – which was also the condition of possibility for the 'denial
of coevalness' – but it also quietly affirms the displacement of this history upon the 'Ren-
aissance', ostensibly before Europe's colonial struggle. (Davis 2015, 70. 71)

2 Postcolonial histories of India and religion as the limit case

The kinds of critiques I have alluded to are able to produce cogent critiques of
modernity's exclusions. But how far do they allow us to produce an account
of that which has been excluded? Here the results are less than satisfactory, al-
though many adherents of such critiques in the broader field of cultural studies
would regard even the attempt to produce an account of the excluded 'Other' as
almost axiomatically romantic and essentialist. Such an undertaking would
hardly be worth the risk. But while practices such as possession may not gener-
ate much of value when viewed in terms of the dominant episteme, they do for
those engaged in such practices. Once during my field work in 1991, I asked a
local potter to make me an image of Icakki, such as I had seen at the temple
of Muppandal. I wished to take it back to Sydney so I had something tangible
to have in front of me while I wrote. The potter taught me a lesson about the dif-
ference between my own stance and that of the people who worshipped her:

> The potter keenly observes me, and asks me if I have *nampikkai* (faith). I say I do, a little, in
> the goddess. Next question: have I had *anubhavam* or experience of her. I am stuck for a
> response. He tries to help me by giving me examples of such experience: have I had an ill-
> ness cured by her? has she ever spoken to me in a dream? I say, no, she has not. Then how,
> he asks me, can I say I have faith? He relents and tells me to come back in four days. But
> when I return to the potter, the version he produces for me to take home is of a demure sari-
> clad female, hair neatly coiled in a bun, responsibly holding a child in her hand – nothing
> at all like the Icakki who made me gape in the temple at Muppandal. There the infant
> would be more likely to emerge mangled from her mouth. It would not be nurtured. Evi-
> dently the potter has decided I would be ill equipped to handle the powers of the image
> I so blithely commission. She is a *kōpakkārī* (a habitually angry female), not to be messed
> with. (Field notes, November 1991).

I may still not have *nampikkai*/belief or direct *anubhavam* of possessing deities,
but my book is in one sense an extended response to the potter's questions. But
how have postcolonial historians responded to such questions? While they may
never have been questioned as directly as I was, religion has been addressed in
some form by virtually every foundational member of the influential Subaltern
Studies group of historians. Religion recurs in their work as that which, lying

outside the framework of modern historiography, must be re-integrated into an account of Indian history. But the impulse is split by a politicized hermeneutics of suspicion. The politics of the group is described by Chakrabarty as emerging from a series of events and social movements in India that 'made official nationalism sound hollow' (Chakrabarty 2002, 6). The task taken on by this group of historians was therefore extraordinarily wide ranging. They sought to reconstruct the history of Indian modernity not only from a decolonizing perspective but also from a 'subaltern' non-elite perspective that would be critical even of anti-colonial nationalist paradigms. No critique can undermine all the assumptions of the discourse it inherits and it is not surprising to find that certain parts were left standing intact. What is significant is that it is the domain of religion which proves to be the recurrent point of instability.

 I will be able to refer here only to a few examples. In his landmark study of peasant insurgency in the colonial period, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* (1983), Guha follows the Italian revolutionary Marxist Gramsci in two central respects. On the one hand, we are treated to a more imaginative reading of peasant consciousness. On the other hand, that consciousness is described as 'rather hesitant, inchoate and disjointed perception'. In this inchoate state it cannot but continue to borrow and clothe itself in the received language of the ruling class (Guha 1983, 28). Such a consciousness can only go so far, succeeding in describing 'empirically some aspects of the peasant's conditions of existence', but 'falling far short of conceptualizing the structure of authority which made such conditions possible' (Guha 1983, 28).

I do not question the assertion that such a knowledge is not present in peasant rebellions, or indeed in most subordinate groups – although it is doubtful as to whether *any* intellectual framework could deliver such full knowledge. What is more to the point here is that it is the *religious* consciousness of the peasant leader which is singled out as the 'inherited and uncritically absorbed material of the ruling culture' (Guha 1983, 11), causing an erosion of the radical potential of such rebellion. Religious consciousness marks the peasant leader as both a member of a subordinate group as well as less than a full subject of revolution:

> He is still committed to envisaging the coming war on the Raj as the project of a will independent of himself and his own role in it as no more than instrumental. 'Kanoo and Seedu Manjee are not fighting. The Thacoor [Master, God] himself will fight' stated the parwana in which the authors did not recognise even their own voice, but heard only that of God: 'This is the order of the Thacoor'. (Guha 1983, 28)

The implicit set of contrasts is between the inherited and the newly generated; between the uncritically absorbed and the conscious systematic critique of the past; between attributing agency to others, and claiming it as entirely one's

own. In each case, religion is understood entirely in the terms of the first set of terms.

My next example comes from Pandey's corpus of work. It is centrally concerned with religion. His early work sought to show how communalism – the supposed inability of different religious groups, particularly Hindus and Muslims, to co-exist without violence – was in fact a colonial discourse (Pandey 1990). Subsequent work on the Partition of India (Pandey 2002; Pandey 2006) has been directed at nationalist assumptions in Indian historiography that render Partition and subsequent communal violence either as acts of natural calamity, or as discrete episodes that can never be integrated into the Indian story of nationhood. But the discourse he wishes to abandon, and the one his meticulously historicizing training produces, both ultimately overlap in certain key respects. The discourse he wishes to leave behind is one in which the 'culture and interests, inclinations and "passions" of religious community are already known from the start. They appear as frozen entities, which are denied the possibility of internal difference, political agency and change, even as they become objects of political manipulation and governmentality in a new way' (Pandey 2006, 183). The contrasting politicized account of religious communities differs in one crucial respect: such 'frozenness' has been *politically* produced. Since the nineteenth century, religious communities have been taking over all other forms of difference, so that religious identity has become one of the main markers of difference. The result of this process is a 'freezing of communities' (Pandey 2006, 185). Both accounts give us a picture of religious communities as devoid of agential political change. In the first account this is the result of an essentialist colonial understanding of India as a religious society. In the second case it is the result of historical processes since the nineteenth century. Although Pandey concedes that things were different in the past, he parts company with Nandy who, as we have noted, regards religious communities as still able to generate a different form of cooperation to that posited by secularism. For Pandey on the other hand, these are politicized communities. The only agency he now sees left in religious communities is of a decidedly negative kind, as objects of governmentality. In the process it is not only nationalism that stands indicted of having lost its 'imaginative moment' (Pandey 2006, 182). It is religion as well.

The work of Chakrabarty differs from the others in a crucial respect. Tracking the response of his peers towards religion, much as I have, he concludes that Marxist traditions that seek to 'de-mystify ideology in order to produce a critique that looks forward to a more just social order' are inadequate for understanding India as well as more generally as a method. Instead, it is equally important to represent non-European 'normative and theoretical thought enshrined in other existing life practices and their archives' (Chakrabarty 2000, 20). European cat-

egories are indispensable, he acknowledges, but one needs to 'release into their space' what might be learned through 'close and careful attention to languages, practices, and intellectual traditions present in South Asia' (Chakrabarty 2000, 20). He turns for inspiration to the hermeneutic tradition that 'produces a loving grasp of detail in search of an understanding of the diversity of human life-worlds' (Chakrabarty 2000, 18).

'Hermeneutical loving grasp of detail', the 'understanding of diversity of life worlds', the 'careful attention to language and practice': all these descriptions belong as much to anthropology as they do to the phenomenological traditions. If these phrases describe the domain of phenomenology within the traditions of philosophy, then they describe anthropology's project in the domain of the empirical disciplines. This is no coincidence. I have argued elsewhere for the substantial overlap between the two (Ram 2013, 2015). The phenomenological principle of describing a life world before moving on too quickly to producing a more abstract account of it – let alone one that begins with the presumption of critique – is one that is shared with central aspects of anthropology. Chakrabarty's conclusion has been resoundingly prefigured in forthright statements by anthropologists such as Sahlins, who finds in 'different cultural orders their own modes of historical action, consciousness, and determination – their own historical practice' (Sahlins 1983, 518).

3 The cleaving of time and place: can we put Humpty Dumpty together again?

We have come full circle in the argument. A postcolonial or de-colonizing critique of anthropology instructed anthropologists to turn to history in order to integrate time into its account. Historians similarly moved by de-colonizing impulses found history to be based on a 'singular historical consciousness, which is that of modern, professional, Western, or now global historicity' (Ballard 2014, 102). Postcolonial critique helped to locate the reasons why religion suffers from interpretations that based themselves on such a modern historical consciousness. However, the politics of critique has itself been too reliant on certain categories of modernity to be able to accord any positive capacity for conscious critical change within religious consciousness and religious communities. Historians troubled by this have called for a hermeneutical phenomenology which, particularly where it entails involvement with non-European languages and practices, is virtually a description also of anthropology.

We are in effect witnessing an oscillation between a discourse that concerns itself with time and a discourse that concerns itself with place. The absences in each, taken together, point to a deeper underlying problem which is the artificial cleaving of time and place. The problem of the colonial politics of knowledge does not lie within one discipline. It is rather located in the division of labor in which both history and anthropology participated. By the late nineteenth century, time and place became the subject matter of two different disciplines. Both disciplines shared an orientation towards a critique of universalism. In this sense, yet another disciplinary demarcation was taking place, one which separated the relativizing disciplines of history and anthropology from philosophy. Henceforth, the universalisms of philosophy would be subject to relativizing critique based either on historicity or the particularities of place. *Both* are to some extent impoverished by this division of labor, as indeed is the bifurcation between utter relativism and a premature universalism. Thus if anthropology is interpreted exclusively as a relativizing discipline, then it does indeed encourage a tendency to continually presuppose and separate the west and the rest. Once the domains are separated in this manner, the best we can argue for is an ethical attitude of respect and tolerance for alterity and of critical reflection on one's own differences from the 'Other'.

One of the reasons it is possible for both a historian and an anthropologist to turn to phenomenology at this point is because it offers a way of recapturing what phenomenology would describe as a more 'primordial' unity of time and place. Phenomenology also orients us to recognizing continuities of experience – neither identity nor the polarized 'us' and 'them' of relativism. Temporality is no more the prerogative of one discipline than place is a prerogative of another. Rather, both time and place are embedded and embodied in the synthesis we create through our practical involvement with wider ecologies that entail the non-human environment as much as the human. These ecologies constitute places in their concreteness, unlike the abstractions of space derived from geometry and science (Casey 1996). But such syntheses are themselves temporal. This is true both across generations and in the course of an individual's lifetime. We inherit ecologies, we are born into them, and these ecologies we inherit are nothing other than the syntheses already effected by previous generations, bequeathed to us both as material culture and the practices that enable us to inhabit that material culture. There is also temporality in the synthesis we each of us effect in our embodied activities over a lifetime, making it uniquely individual as well as part of a tradition.

In this sense, temporalities are as varied as our activities and practices. The time of music making is as distinctive as the time of gardening or of writing a paper. And these rhythms will vary according to the degree to which we have per-

formed that synthesis between body, tasks and environment – the rhythm of a skilled musician is very different to that of a novice, the rhythm of the final draft of a paper is very different to the awkwardness that afflicts every fresh beginning.

What does this mean for the scholar of religion? How does one gain access to syntheses one is not born into nor has acquired by adulthood? The question is one I faced in relation to spirit possession. But let us note that the way we have posed this question already moves us away from the domain of asking whether we have to believe and consent to the beliefs of others. I still do not have *nampikkai* or belief in the sense that the potter spoke of. But understanding is something that can proceed without necessarily entailing belief and in fact can happen even without choosing to do so. Agreement, faith and belief may count for less ultimately in the relationship between the non-religious scholar and the worshipper, than for the scholar to arrive at a slow incorporative mode of understanding which is born of the other dimension the potter questioned me about, namely *anubhavam*, experience. Even if I have not had the direct *anubhavam* of the goddess – although I am not sure even of that any longer – I have certainly had direct experience of many others who have. And some elements of this understanding pass over into one's own embodied activities. Over a period of time, I knew which parts of the village held ghosts, which routes were shorter but meant passing an old temple of the fiery goddess. Guided initially by the fear and circumspection of my companions, by the end I did not need others to guide me – my feet would steer me away from there. To recover and value the full potential of anthropological practice requires moving away from the model of knowledge that is described as objectivism by phenomenologists, and which has prevailed within anthropology as well as history. Writing of anthropology from an existential phenomenological perspective, Jackson lists the legacies of this tendency:

> Subjectivity was conflated with roles, rules, routines….And just as the natural sciences created the appearance of objectivity through specialized, analytical language, so the social sciences cultivated an image of objectivity by reducing persons to functions and identities: individuals filled roles, fulfilled obligations, followed rules, performed rituals and internalized beliefs. (Jackson 2013, 3)

The charges take us back to the critique of overly static account, though Jackson is less concerned with historical time and more with existential time in all its eddies and flux. On the other hand, the *same* discipline that can objectify knowledge also provides us with the wherewithal for quite a different conception of what it is to know something. And the same phenomenology that can be used to locate omissions in anthropology can also be used to instead 'uncover', or

'disclose' as Heidegger would put it, a very different understanding that already exists in anthropology of what it is to understand something initially foreign to oneself. That understanding lies not so much in the strictly hermeneutical moment of trying to interpret another culture as if it were an alien text (Bourdieu's trenchant critique of this model remains unsurpassed, Bourdieu 1977), but rather in the practice of living with others over a prolonged period of time. This is also a process that creates shared time, not just in terms of larger events that the anthropologist participates in along with others, but in the shared time of doing everyday things together. Buried under the rather prosaic and naturalistic title of 'field work' is a thoroughly phenomenological understanding of 'being' as 'being-with'. This is one of Heidegger's central theses in *Being and Time*, such that 'Even Dasein's Being-alone is Being-with in the world (Heidegger 1962, 156–157). This understanding exists in a practical form in anthropology. But it might be strengthened by the explicit framework supplied by a philosophical alternative to a long standing epistemological tradition, such as we encounter in Heidegger's opening in *Being and Time* or in Merleau-Ponty's radical integration of bodily activity and sensory perception into philosophies of subjectivity in *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 1986).

For in relation to field work we stand at what Foucault describes as the cusp of a discourse that has just ceased to be ours. It is precisely the temporality of research, as long term engagement and involvement in the lives of others, which is being rapidly whittled away, certainly in Australia, by the rise of the market model within university research funding. We are speaking here of the mere three and a half years allotted for Ph.D.s in Australia, allowing no time even for acquiring language. Being on such a cusp affords the opportunity to make explicit what has often remained implicit. Of the many dimensions one could discuss, I focus on the one involving change. Reformulations of fieldwork as 'inter-subjective' constructions obscure a number of aspects of the interaction. I have elaborated on this elsewhere in terms of the need for a concept like the 'habitus', which indicates that there is already a history flowing into the present moment of inter-subjectivity (Ram 2015, 41–42). For the very same reason the change that occurs in the interactions of field work is not equally distributed – it is far more radical for the researcher than for those around her. She is there without the supports of her wider social and physical ecology (another way of describing the habitus) while others continue to enjoy those supports. It is she who must adapt – or suffer further isolation, and the more radical the difference between her current situation and her past, the more she must change and adapt to the subjectivity of others.

Ethnography gives us many instances of such alterations, although given the centrality of the process for anthropology, there should be a lot more. In a piece

published in 1990, Hastrup describes her experience of field work in Iceland as involving months of 'loneliness, of sexual assaults, loss of identity, and offensive enemy spirits' – yet one of her greatest shocks was, 'to be reminded about h e r own world' (Hastrup 1990, 46). At the end of a year, she receives letters addressed to an academic called Kirsten Hastrup she no longer recognizes. While she acknowledges that that is just what she had to return to, she nevertheless insists on the radical nature of field work which 'implies that the well-established opposition between subject and object dissolves' (Hastrup 1990, 46).

My own experience of field work in a fishing community on the west coast of Kanyakumari was much happier. I spoke the language, though I discovered that what I thought of as an undifferentiated Tamil was in fact marked by my caste background as well as the particular parts of Tamil country my parents came from. I lived with an affectionate family, with whom I developed deep bonds and through them, with their relatives in the village as well. But an early intimation of the changes I had undergone came after I had been living in the fishing community for nearly a year. A young Nordic couple pulled up in their sailing craft in the neighboring larger port town of Colachel. My companions, some younger than myself, were very curious and I went along with them. I found myself pushed to the foreground to act as an intermediary, at which point I discovered I was goggling at the visitors like any villager – as 'white' people, utterly exotic and alien – as if friends and my own husband back in Australia were not 'white' and 'western'. I felt nothing like an intermediary, although I forced myself to chat and translate for the benefit of others.

A few years later it happened again. This time I had come back to catch up with my adoptive family. At the time I felt they were closer to me than my own family in India, and I was very emotional about seeing them again in their new home near Chennai. I was with young teenagers Sheela and Babu – their mother had shooed us out for the day so she could prepare a special dinner for my return – and we were at the seashore town of Mahabalipuram, whose splendid Pallava dynasty rock carvings make it a notable tourist attraction. Suddenly Sheela averted her eyes, abashed by something she had seen. When I enquired, she pointed to tourists who were, in her eyes, wearing next to nothing. I found myself invaded by a shared sense of embarrassment and indignation at white tourists with no sense of propriety. My Sydney self, utterly used to the beaches and beachwear, had disappeared.

Such responses point to a permeability, a porosity in us, which means the 'social' in social science succeeds in radically re-defining what it means to be a science at all. This does not mean we have 'gone native', as the colonial phrase had it. The shared identity I felt at these moments might easily be replaced by a sense of being quite alien in another context. Indeed, how else can we explain

the fact that 'possession' – precisely the quintessential situation where subject and object completely collapse into one – remained a provocation for me for so many years. Yet it is worth emphasizing these moments where the subject/object dichotomy dissolves, however temporarily, since they are easily obscured by intellectualist theories of knowledge. A method which integrates *mitsein* as a central feature allows for modes of understanding that are not simply a matter of cognitive comprehension of initially unfamiliar categories employed by others. We move magically, as it were, into adopting the gestures and orientations of the social group we are with. Such magic is not merely a matter of 'performance' in the conventional sense since there is a bodily movement into the situation of others. Nor is it a matter of empathy since it entails a slow alteration and change on the part of the researcher to the point where she can move into the stance and orientation required by those she is with at the time.

Here we might connect the *longue duree* of change in the researcher herself to the distinction drawn by phenomenologists between knowing about something and understanding something. The former preserves a radical distinction between the enquiring subject and the object of enquiry. 'Understanding', in contrast, presupposes a period of bodily involvement and familiarization on the part of the ethnographer. We might then call this form of temporality the embodied time it takes for a modicum of human *re*-socialization to take place. Such re-socialization is not confined to the time spent 'in the field' – it carries over into the practices of sustained writing, teaching, reading and ongoing reflection; all of which are part of anthropological practice. In my book I call the work done by the spirit medium a process of 'making room' for the alien spirit. What the ethnographer performs over a lifetime is not so different. But the sign of absorbing and 'understanding' a phenomenon, even a radically alien experience such as spirit possession, lies not in being able to say one now 'believes' in it – a question my students frequently ask me. Rather it lies in being able to place one's own experiences on a continuum with that which initially seemed utterly alien. In my book I write about the many intermediary states we all inhabit from time to time, states in which it is hardly appropriate to describe ourselves as a subject facing an entirely external object. We 'lose ourselves' in creativity, in writing, making music but also in those quotidian moments of flow such as driving along a well-known route. In both cases, if we are asked to formally state how we 'got there', we would be at a loss. In all these cases, the loss of self-consciousness is not the opposite of agency, it is the very essence of a certain kind of agency.

These are not just analogies with possession. They are located on a continuum of experiences that are not simply states of consciousness, since they radically involve bodily skills, aptitudes and orientations. Moreover we could be

propelled at any point to a lesser or more extreme end of that continuum – in extreme states of love and grief, for instance. The ancient Greeks thought of love as a form of possession by the deity Aphrodite. Death too can generate a state where possession can seem a more apt description than many others. At the time when I am writing this paper, my husband has just died, only a few months ago. He died very reluctantly and sadly, since his whole being was burgeoning with fresh and potential projects for new novels, essays, writings of all kinds, as well as his love for his wife, daughter and friends. He died keenly aware that his skills as a novelist were now honed to a fine craft, and at the peak of the powers he valued the most. I have learned that there is injustice not only in a 'bad death' such as the ones that led to possession, there is a lingering sense of injustice in deaths such as his. Perhaps there is a sense of injustice in all death insofar as it extinguishes the potentiality we all carry with us to varying degrees right until the moment of death.

I realize that all such unspent potential has the potential to haunt and to possess the living who are closely intertwined with the dead. In the time immediately following his death, I found myself attending the plays and films *he* would have attended, reading poetry *h*e would have read. Suddenly Islam, something he spent a lifetime reflecting on since his period in Pakistan as a very young man, meant a good deal to me as well in a new way. I wrote a new lecture on Islam in South Asia, following the footprints he had left in the sand into his library. It has been much more than a way of feeling close to him, although that is part of it. His tastes and preoccupations were coming through as urgent needs on my part. No doubt the ground for shared tastes had been laid slowly for both of us over thirty five years together. But it was now happening in a particularly dramatic and urgent fashion. What is equally notable is that it has also simultaneously been an expansion of my agency – not in the sense of an expansion of deliberate choices, for I experienced it as simply being drawn to *his* kind of films, books, and plays. It is an expansion in the sense that it is a dilation of my older self and new experiences and tastes are being born out of the experience. As it is with Tamil villagers, such experience opens up more than just an experience of the dead – the actions they prompt lead in turn to an expanded range of possibilities for the living, as well as a curtailment of others.

My arguments about possession and agency are no longer an ethnographic argument. They are no longer a description of something outside myself. They have become integrated into my own experience, my *anubhavam*, of life and death. And out of that integration can come new possibilities – of reflecting back more deeply on the existential truths in the widespread tendency found in cultures around the world to link violent death with possession. Equally,

the possibilities generated may spill outside of the subject matter of possession, and extend into a new phenomenological interest in death and bereavement.

Understanding religion if one is not religious, or indeed understanding any framework that is initially alien, does entail temporality. But it is not the temporality of progress and evolution, or the decisive temporality of choice, but rather the slow time that is more akin to acquiring a taste for unfamiliar cuisines.

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