This book is my sustained response to a puzzlement that has refused to leave me since I began ethnographic research in the early 1980s. Far from losing force, an enigma has remained disturbingly alive. Thinking about it has, in successive stages, slowly shaped my responses to wider issues. Yet until the writing of this book, I have not found the space to consolidate those responses nor to fully acknowledge a persistent source of the shifts in my intellectual outlook.

So what was this enigma? I encountered it first in the very distinctive culture that belongs to the fishing villages of cream-and-pastel-colored churches on the baking sands that snake continuously along the west coast of Tamil Nadu. Here the district of Kanyakumari tapers to a point at the southern-most tip of the Indian subcontinent. Men and women—but more often women—repeatedly attributed illnesses and troubles of all kinds to the interventions of spirits, ghosts, and deities. This in itself was not new to me. Every event and undertaking in India, however “secular,” is likely to contain an element of invocation that appeals to and acknowledges powers other than the living, whether these be deities or ancestors. The distinction between them is often blurred.

What was new was that for many around me, deities, spirits, and ghosts did more than help shape human events. They directly entered human beings, changing them radically, if only for brief periods. 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 those spirits, they too entered the bodies of humans, taking them as mediums in such confrontations.

I learned, from the literature on the subject, to call this phenomenon
spirit possession. But locally, the phenomenon was not easy to capture in a single term. Among the Hindus in agricultural communities of Tamil Nadu the meanings associated with spirit possession were fluid and ambiguous. The same goddess could both heal and afflict. Disease itself could be as much a sign of possession by the goddess as could the cure from disease. Local terminology reflected this fluidity. The phenomenon on some occasions was called pēy piṭittal or āvi piṭittal—being “caught” by demons and ghosts. At other times the same sense of being overtaken by an external force was not deplored but celebrated as cāmi āṭṭam, or “being danced” by a deity. No major ritual dedicated to such goddesses was complete without dance, and it was therefore imperative to bring to the occasion ritual specialists who could become possessed. In this state, they would tell kugi, or deliver the goddess’s response to people’s problems.

Such phenomena have continued to trouble my foundational assumptions for many years. What is a human subject under such conditions? What kind of human subjectivity must already be in place to allow possession to occur? What is religion, if the same deities can be afflictive as well as beneficent? What is a “human” body, if it can be claimed by a whole array of entities? What is agency if people can be “claimed” in this manner? What is gender, if there can be periods when the woman is a woman no longer?

Yet in possession, not all was flux and transformation. The spirits themselves seemed to insist on gender distinctions. Away from the luminous world of rituals, in the ordinary life cycle of men and women, spirits distinguished between men and women and between different phases of the life cycle. They were positively attracted to women, for better but also for worse, in those periods when a woman’s body was undergoing transformation—at first menstruation, at subsequent menstrual periods, in the sexually transformative period early in a marriage, in periods of pregnancy, and at childbirth. Men’s bodies were not marked in the same way, either by spirits or by the social order. Over the years, I had come to know some of the women who had experienced spirit possession in their lives. There was a pattern to these episodes, and they did coincide with the intervals of enhanced vulnerability to the spirit world. But these were the times in which—as unmarried young women, as brides, and as women who wanted to become mothers—they were most vulnerable to social pressures. Both kinds of vulnerability were fused in their experience. Need one restrict oneself to a sociology of power in order to produce an academic analysis of gender? Or was it possible to extend one’s sense of what it is to live as a gendered subject—not only in the world of rural Tamil Nadu—by attempting to do justice to both threads?

None of this is to say that the people around me were clear in their own
minds about such phenomena. There was always skepticism and doubt. Was
the medium genuinely a deity speaking through the medium? Or was it a
demon? Was the medium faking it? Yet for all their skepticism, there remained
for them the distinct possibility of something called genuine possession by
a deity. Such possession was an occasion for awe and reverence. It stood,
too, for the possibility of pragmatic recourse to divine assistance and justice.
Through the mediation provided by mediums, deities would preside over a
“court” in which people sought justice. But what kind of court was this? Was
it simply a court for those too poor to take recourse to ordinary courts? Did
the presence of the deity—since it was no human judge who presided over this
court—redefine the nature of justice itself? And if justice was redefined, was
this achievement confined to the arcane spheres of “folk religion” or “folk
healing”—or could it be allowed to speak to issues encountered in the modern
world?

There is a time-honored tradition in anthropology when dealing with
incomprehension, and I have availed myself of it. Incomprehension, ideally, is
a trigger for reflexivity directed at foundational assumptions. However, there
is nothing automatic about the reflexivity granted by this procedure. The un-
known is continually assimilated to the known. In the vast literature on spirit
possession in anthropology, the challenge of the phenomenon is continually
displaced as frameworks familiar in Western philosophy are selectively reaf-
ffirmed once more. In this book I am particularly concerned with identifying
the persistence of those traditions that equate subjectivity with mental states
and with ideas, thoughts, and inner emotion. Agency in this understanding of
subjectivity, which I have come to describe as mentalist, is equated with the
exercise of will, decision, choice, and planning. In Christianity, the discursive
construction of “possession” has itself played an active role in demarcating
body from spirit, locating “the person” in the soul and later, and more spe-
cifically, in the conscience. This tradition has found in possession one of the
most striking corroborations of this duality. The “person” disappears, to be
replaced by a demon or devil, while the body remains an enduring vessel for
the occupying force.

We have now at our disposal decades of structuralist and poststructur-
alist critique aimed precisely at “philosophies of consciousness,” giving us a
rich legacy of ways of redescribing the traditional “subject” of philosophy, the
human individual, not as the origin of all consciousness and thought but as the
“effect” of discourses, practices, and representations. These critiques contrib-
ute to the language with which I describe the elusive “subject” of possession,
even though I feel impelled to seek fresh alternatives. Nonetheless, for all
the forcefulness of academic critique, the more traditional representations of

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agency, consciousness, and the body are tenacious. They exercise their effects all the more pervasively because so many forms of contemporary critique are intent—as the book will show—on denying any continuity or shaping power to tradition, preferring to view it as a fragmented and thoroughly makeshift affair.

The tenacity of these dominant discourses is not due primarily, however, to the inadequacies of critique. The discourses persist, rather, because they circulate not as academic theory at all but in the form of practical projects of the widest variety. In the postcolony, intellectual discourses on “modern subjectivity” are seldom a description of an existing disposition to be found in existing individuals. They appear instead as projects of modernity, in a pedagogical mode, requiring a class of intellectuals who take up the project of reform and governance. I am particularly concerned in this book with those projects in which modern understandings of agency and subjectivity are mobilized to directly reshape the lives of rural people—through economic planning, family planning, and development but also through projects of reform and emancipation. The book opens as well as ends with a consideration of such projects. Three domains of modern discourses on subjectivity are considered: rationalistic understandings of childbearing as “reproduction” (particularly in demography and state planning), reform and activism (especially feminist and Marxist discourses of emancipation), and the social sciences themselves.

These kinds of discourse would, quite simply, discount any possibility of the genuineness of a phenomenon like spirit possession. What are the wider implications of such denial? What losses may it have inflicted on social science and politics? When we rule out the possibility of spirit possession, what else is ruled out? In this book I try to amplify our sense of what is at stake in continuing to allow certain dimensions of social existence to remain unacknowledged. I am concerned here not only with the stakes for anthropology and within academia but also with the politics of class and caste in India and in the Indian diaspora. When middle-class Indians—otherwise engaged in all manner of traditional practices from yoga to Ayurveda and celebrating some of the most patriarchal of ritual observances—find traditions such as spirit possession wholly incomprehensible, is this merely their distaste, or does it not contribute as an active ingredient to the constitution of class?

Although I have mentioned losses, the mood of this book is one of hope and optimism rather than of an elegiac mourning for the loss of magic in modernity. I have sought and have to some extent found alternative modes for understanding social existence and modernity itself while reflecting on such dramatic phenomena as spirit possession and hope to communicate this to the reader. Indeed, what I suggest is that magic is not a monopoly of any
particular social formation but is rather an indispensable component of the
most taken for granted of phenomena. Magic is present not only in modern
technologies such as the camera and sound recording, or in the practices of
the modern state (Taussig 1993, 1997) but also, as I wish to show, in an aspect
of everyday life that has been largely shunned by modernity, the dull and ob-
durate zone of habit.

The Tools: Ethnography, Phenomenology, and Research
Experiences in Tamil Nadu

Some of the resources for this understanding have been drawn from the ethnog-
graphic method, as used in anthropology, which, following my initial training
in philosophy and in sociology, has become my disciplinary home since the
1980s. It has taken me a long while to learn to write ethnography. I think of
ethnography now as the effort to provide a phenomenon with as rich a sense of
interpretive contexts as possible. This method is more consequential than
it may seem. Phenomena such as possession have been rendered vulnerable
to practical and intellectual forms of manipulation by being removed from
their context. In providing an interpretive context, one reclothes, as it were, a
phenomenon that has been stripped bare. I have not tried to repeat the ethnog-
graphic endeavor that seeks to represent a particular place in all its complexity
(Ram 1991b). This is not because I celebrate the use of fragments in place
of totalities, as some debates in anthropology and history have advocated.
The interpretive method, properly understood, need make no claim to having
exhausted all that can be said about what counts as context. It need not be
totalizing nor restrictive of the account it produces of people and places. As
interpretation, it is open-ended without being relativistic. It functions as an
invitation, to be joined by other projects of interpretation and to be superseded
by more cogent interpretations as these come along. But in this book, another
set of aims takes the place of the goals of a classic ethnography. I seek to offer
a robust examination of the limitations of modern projects of subjectivity in
the way they understand the relation between human existence and the world.
It is this larger aim that allows me to bring together topics and materials that
are normally kept apart. I move from state-driven projects, in the first part of
the book, to individual case studies, in the second half, of possession in the
lives of women—disparate elements that find their unity in the wider project
of the book.

In pursuing this goal, I have relied for fresh understanding on insights
that have arisen in Western philosophy itself. If philosophy has generated part
of the problem, it has also provided some answers in the form of very differ-
ent understandings of our relationship to the world. The concepts, tools, and alternative ways of thought developed by the phenomenological philosophers Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty have been crucial to my conceptualization of this book. In particular, I take full advantage of the centrality that their phenomenological framework affords to the body, to the active flow of purposive human practice, and to the equally, if not more neglected, dimension of the emotions and affects. Here I join forces with what has been described as an affective turn in the humanities and social sciences (Clough and Halley 2007). I have drawn on diverse models of affect in order to enrich the range available to contemporary scholarship. Although I certainly use the work of Deleuze (see chap. 3 in particular), his legacy has also long dominated cultural studies and cinema studies, and I draw the reader’s attention to certain limitations in rendering emotional dimensions of life exclusively as the flights and assemblages of energy. I have turned therefore to other sources of inspiration. These include the work of Silvan Tomkins on the bodily basis of affect. We owe to the work of the late Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Sedgwick and Frank 1995) a revival of interest in the work of Tomkins and a renewed discussion on much-needed alternatives to viewing culture entirely as a matter of “discursive construction.” For some time now I have been using the Sanskrit rasa theory of aesthetics as a way of understanding not only performing traditions but also a whole range of phenomena, such as the affects that cling to immigrant lives of the Indian diaspora and to the middle-class experience of Indian nationalism (Ram 2000b and 2011a). But I hope to show readers also that the phenomenological work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty provide a rich vocabulary, including subtle concepts such as mood (Ram 2011) and Sorge (care, concern), which might equip us so that we avoid repeating forms of analysis in which the emotions appear as an addition to an already complete understanding of human existence.

Phenomenological philosophy is enjoying something of a resurgence in the discipline of anthropology (see, e.g., the overview offered by Desjarlais and Throop 2011). Like these anthropologists, I seek to take phenomenology out of the philosophical domain into an empirical context, in my case that of modernity to be found in Tamil villages. In those villages, oppositions between body and mind and between reason and unreason function not as elements of philosophical tradition but as well-honed weapons of war, bristling with sharp edges, wielded to mobilize groups and individuals, to pit the present against the past, to equip reformers with agency in opposing the dead-weight of superstition. I do not propose to reduce the notion of modernity to such a war. Nor do I suggest we simply reverse the values by elevating tradition over modernity or unreason over reason. But to restore some understand-
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...ing of the power and affective force of modernity requires us to depart from the dominant discourses.

The uses I propose for phenomenology in this book range beyond the empirical context of India and beyond the disciplinary context of anthropology. I engage here with feminist theory, postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, and cultural studies. All of these have been part of my socialization, and by now they constitute elements in my habits of thought. I try to address areas in which I have long sensed inadequacies but for which I have only recently begun to propose more systematic alternatives. Some of the weaknesses I seek to illuminate and address concern concepts that are at the center of attention. This is the case with the concept of agency, which continues to enjoy wide debate. Others, such as the concept of experience, languish quietly in the corner, chastened by the ferocity of critiques directed at them. In both cases, I seek to move away from the attitude of pure critique and to adopt a constructive role in suggesting better modes of understanding.

Different kinds of research locations are represented in this book, and different research methods. Most of my research comes from a coastal village located in Kanyakumari District where I first worked in the 1980s. I returned to the village in 1991 to more systematically explore women’s experiences of puberty and maternity. I conducted interviews with all generations and age-groups. The fact that I had known many of the women as young girls helped a great deal in encouraging them to speak intimately of their experiences of marriage, maternity, and, for those who had become mothers of female children, their aspirations for their daughters. Some of the women in this book, such as Vijaya (chap. 3), had moved away from the village, but others, like Santi (chap. 4), continue to live there and allowed me to renew our acquaintance. My most recent visit to the coastal village was in 2006. I went then to pay my respects to people who had suffered terribly from the tsunami that devastated this part of the world. More than two hundred residents of the village had died, over a hundred of them children. The church bell tolled constantly, summoning villagers to an anniversary memorial service. Photographs of the dead children were pasted up all over the village. My old room was still standing, the walls pockmarked by the salt of the receding tidal wave. People I knew were keen to share stories of their experience, many asking for practical forms of assistance. I have written elsewhere about the young women who found the energy to organize collective forms of aid in the aftermath of the disaster even while looking for their own missing family members (Ram 2008a).

In 1996 I began to spend time in Dalit agricultural laboring communities around the township of Chengalpattu, near Chennai. I was keen to widen my
sense of rural Tamil Nadu, to move away from those particularities of Catholicism and fishing community that had come to dominate my ethnographic experience. I wished to gain a sense of women’s lives in agricultural communities. The ties in being the mother of a young child and the uncertainties of the early career of an academic did not allow for a repetition of my earlier experience of fieldwork. I never lived in any of these communities, instead following networks already established by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). I reflect, in the opening pages of the first chapter, on the weaknesses of an exclusive reliance on such methods. These stand out for me when I compare the results with the kind of knowledge that is generated by living with people over a long period of time. All the same, there were certain advantages in being accompanied to their own villages by women from Dalit communities who were already working as “animators” for the NGOs. I was never positioned as a complete outsider, nor even simply as an upper-caste Tamil woman. Instead, I was readily assimilated to that category of visitors with whom these women were already familiar. I was yet another middle-class NGO professional interested in bringing improvement to the lives of Dalit women. Their readiness to share their life histories with me flows from this perception. In keeping with the conventions of the genre of “the complaint” and the lament (see chap. 7), they shared life experiences with an outsider whom they perceived as more powerful than themselves and as capable of helping if she could be moved by the rhetoric of painful experience.

The material I gathered during this period did give me a stronger sense of the lives of Dalit Hindu women, particularly the connections between their lived experience and goddess worship. It was here that I encountered the spirit medium Mutamma (chap. 6), as well as the women to whose life stories I refer in chapter 7. In different parts of the book I incorporate direct quotations as well as descriptions from field notes. Unless otherwise stated, these are from notes I took during different periods in the fishing village as well as in the agricultural villages of Chengalpattu.

The reliance on NGOs had the further effect of hastening a process already under way. I had developed a long-standing interest in the category of intellectuals who work directly with coastal villagers, such as parish priests and Catholic social workers, and in 1992 I had begun to train a direct and explicit ethnographic focus on professionals such as teachers in coastal villages. By 1996, I was extending this work to include NGOs, social workers, and doctors who worked in maternity wards of the public hospital at Chengalpattu, as well as in a family-planning clinic in Chennai. I participated in workshops run by NGOs to educate girls in a new awareness of their bodies. The chapters in part 1 are based on this strand of research.
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In the decade that followed I tried to investigate the relationship between the possession I encountered in the village, usually episodic and uninvited, and the possession that occurred in the valued world of public rituals. The latter often involved long periods of informal apprenticeship on the part of performers. In 2000 and then again in 2006, I attended ritual performances of epic theater in such genres as the vil pāṭtu, or “bow song” traditions of Kanyakumari, and the terukkāṭtu in Chengalpatti. The latter is a genre of performance whose title literally translates as “street performance” and is often mistakenly glossed as “entertainment” by residents of metropolitan Chennai. However, in rural Tamil Nadu it continues to be a valued ritual form (Frasca 1990, 1). I also attended a festival of the kuthūṟṟam of Kerala, which I viewed as part of a theater season of evening performances, consummately rendered by the dedicated artists of the Natanakairali theater company in Irinjalakuda. My reflections on performance in the ritual sphere of possession, and on the performance of affective possession, have been sharpened by the research I continue to undertake on the involvement of the middle classes (both in India and in the Indian diaspora) with the classical performing arts of dance and music (see, e.g., Ram 2000, 2002, 2005, 2010b, 2011a).

The Structure of the Book

The structure of the book is shaped by the form of my argument, which is conceived in the form of a journey from the familiar to the unfamiliar, not in order to stay there but to be able to revisit the known with a fresh gaze. In part 1, I interrogate the practical projects of demographers, planners, and medical professionals, with a particular emphasis on the construction of fertility in the modernizing discourses of such intellectuals. The specific Tamil regional traditions of rationalism are given special attention in the second chapter. There I consider the way modern discourses have distinguished and parcelled out the range of practices that pertain to possession, thus reducing it to an isolated phenomenon that lacks any language of its own.

The chapters in part 2 move quite sharply away from the preoccupations of state intellectuals. They engage instead with those forms of spirit possession that erupt as unlooked-for crises in women’s lives. I am guided here by de Certeau’s methodological recommendation that we diverge from Foucault by examining “minor practices” rather than exclusively attending to the practices that forged a successful dominance. As part of my examination of spirit possession as a minor practice, I explore the relationship between the crises in women’s lives and their experiences of marriage and maternity. The chapters make use of individual life stories, to show how they continuously integrate
the setbacks and instabilities of life as it is lived in and through meanings that are to some extent simply pregiven by local cultural practices.

But by the second half of part 2 we slowly start to move back toward more general considerations of agency, politics, and justice. Is it possible to reconceptualize agency within the framework of possession? How does possession become redefined in the process? Can we reexamine the scope of justice by understanding the nature of the complaints that are brought to the “courts” over which deities preside?

Part 3 returns definitively to the preoccupations of modern social theory and politics, but in the spirit of a traveler who returns refreshed from a sojourn in a radically different land and sees the old and the familiar in a new light.