



Observation: Irfan's Ghost

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This essay records a series of events that occurred within my Kashmiri family shortly after I moved to India in 2005. Over the years, I had heard many stories of spirit possession from friends living in Himalayan states, but this was the first time I had the opportunity to observe the phenomenon at close quarters. The scenes described in the text took place in Delhi over several weeks in the winter of 2005–2006.

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I am a British woman from a family with a long history in the sub-continent, so in some ways, it was unsurprising that I should end up living there. In June 2005, I married a Kashmiri called Tariq*, who runs a handicrafts business from an office and showroom in South Delhi, and moved to India permanently.

In December 2005, during the fog of a Delhi winter, Tariq's youngest brother, Irfan, came from Kashmir to stay with us. My husband's family is large, with eight children surviving to adulthood. While Tariq is the eldest, Irfan, then 16 years old, is the youngest. In 2005, Irfan was a classic adolescent boy: tall, gangly, with a shock of dark curly hair and a permanently surly expression. He mooched around the neighbourhood, hands sunk deep into jean pockets, and eyes fixed permanently on the ground. On Fridays, however, he would don a white kurta pyjama and go to the mosque to pray.

He and I had just one point of connection. As he was quite tech-savvy and I was trying to master the Photoshop program, I roped him in to help, which he did gladly.

One Saturday morning, Irfan and I were working on the computer in the office, which is separated from the showroom by a glass wall. Tariq called us to the apartment for lunch. Irfan went, but I was not hungry and stayed behind.

About an hour later, I heard voices and looked through the window into the showroom to see Tariq and Irfan on a sofa in deep conversation. Oddly, Irfan was looking Tariq straight in the eye, something he never did, except perhaps with his mother. Curious, I entered the showroom and found Tariq apparently interrogating his brother (I do not speak Kashmiri but understand a few words) and Irfan responding in a strange, deep voice unlike his own, all the while aggressively holding Tariq's gaze.

Tariq stopped the interrogation and called his brother Bashir, one of the more religious family members. The Koran was produced from the cupboard where it is carefully kept; Bashir handed it to Irfan and asked

*All names have been changed

him to read a passage. Shockingly, for a boy who prayed at the mosque every Friday, Irfan pushed the Holy Book away from him with considerable force.

When I finally caught Tariq alone and demanded an explanation, this is what I was told. In short, Irfan had been possessed by a ghost, and during the interrogation in the showroom, Tariq was speaking directly to the entity and not to Irfan. This, apparently, is what the ghost said.

He, the ghost, had been sitting under a tree in Kashmir with his family when Irfan, returning from a cricket match, stopped and urinated on him. Much annoyed, the ghost then attached itself to Irfan but did not manifest as long as the teenager was in Kashmir. However, the journey to Delhi was unsettling, and the entity began to show itself. Tariq had been alerted to the problem during lunch when Irfan greedily consumed the entire communal plate of rice, which should be shared among the family. Ghosts are hungry, it seems, and require feeding. Raised in Kashmir, where nearly every family has instances of possession, Tariq recognized the signs and brought Irfan down to the showroom to speak to him and the entity in a quiet place.

There was much discussion about what to do next. One of the more devout uncles was asked to bring a 'ghost catcher' from Nizamuddin (the settlement around the shrine of Delhi's most revered Sufi saint). The ghost catcher and the uncle arrived. I was told that the ghost catcher had a team of ghosts that could be unleashed like a pack of hounds to round up any unwanted beings. The 'team' checked the showroom, office, and apartment. We were told that the young boy who worked with us, Amir, also had a ghost, which waited for him in the street every morning and accompanied him to the showroom but did not enter the house.

Koranic text was written in yellow (possibly turmeric) on scraps of paper and stuck onto every door and window in the house and showroom. More text was written in ink on paper that was then torn into small pieces and placed in a jug of water, which was kept on a table in the living room.

We all returned to the house for the catcher to interview the ghost. He drew a two-inch square on a piece of paper with biro and filled it in with ink. He then invited Irfan to look at it. Later, Irfan told me that it was like looking at a television screen. He could see the entity on the screen looking back at him.

Tariq told me that the ghost catcher had explained that ghosts tend to attach to young, good-looking boys who have never touched alcohol. When we were all together in the living room, Tariq pointed at me and asked if I was ever likely to be attacked by a ghost. The catcher gave me a long, hard look and then said, 'No, never'. While relieved at the news, I was unsure what this said about my moral character.

Employing some technique that I did not see, the ghost catcher extracted the ghosts from Irfan and Amir, respectively, and tied them tightly with string. The uncle and ghost catcher then departed, apparently to dispose of the ghosts safely. Except that they did not quite. In a comic turn among all the drama, they forgot Amir's ghost and had to return to collect it.

It has to be said that Irfan was different after the ghost catcher's visit. Much of the time, he was back to his sulky, adolescent self, but every so often the ghost would return, and Irfan would twitch strangely and glare at whoever was speaking to him.

Each evening, there was a ritual with serious intent that was comic to watch. At 10 p.m., Bashir would take the jug of water containing the holy writings and spray each member of the family with it as we sat together in the living room. Now, Delhi winter nights can be chilly, and the apartment had no heating, so being sprinkled with cold water was extremely unpleasant. One family member, Ahmed, who was sceptical about the whole situation, used to become extremely irritable each time the cold-water performance was enacted.

On one of those evenings, we were all in the living room as usual. In those days, we had no chairs, and everyone sat on the floor, Kashmiri-style. I was right on the edge of the group, and Irfan was lying on the floor in the middle, close to Bashir. He began to twitch, and Bashir massaged his legs to soothe him. Wanting to stop the weirdness, which seemed to have gone on long enough, I said the Lord's Prayer in my head without moving a muscle. Irfan sat bolt upright, gave me one of his penetrating glares, and said, 'She's praying something'. For me, that was proof that I was not hallucinating.

Irfan's 'ghost attacks' gradually became less and less frequent. The last one I witnessed occurred one night when I was sitting on the end of his bed, talking about inconsequential things. He suddenly said, 'The ghost is coming', and a few seconds later, he became strange and restive for about half an hour before returning to normal.

It was decided that he must go back to Kashmir for 'treatment' by the family Sufi guru. The day they were due to drive to Anantnag, where the guru lived, Irfan got in the car. But it would not start. Rashid, the driver, tried and tried, but the engine would not fire despite the fact that it had started perfectly well earlier in the day. Eventually they got going and arrived safely in Anantnag.

Sometime after, Irfan told me that the guru, who knew him well, took him under his grey woollen *pheran*¹ and held him close. Irfan felt a powerful wave of heat coursing through his body before the guru released him and he returned home. After that, the ghost was gone for good. The only apparent consequence, which may not be connected at all, was that Bashir, who was deeply upset by the whole business, began to follow a 'guru' in Kashmir, not the family one, who, Tariq said, taught him 'wrong mantras'. Later, Bashir developed signs of mental illness and was eventually diagnosed with mild schizophrenia.

So, what did I make of it all? I kept meticulous notes throughout the event, which lasted for about a month. For me, the clincher was the 'Lord's Prayer' incident. There was no way Irfan could have known that I was praying, and I'm not openly religious at all. It did all happen. The part I doubt is that Amir ever had a ghost and that this was a ploy by the ghost catcher to charge the family more money.

Catriona Child is an environmentalist and editor with a particular interest in ethnoecology and the culture of the indigenous communities of northeast India. She is currently Acting Director of the Highland Institute, Kohima, and divides her time between her duties in Nagaland and her family in Delhi and Kashmir.

1. A *pheran* or *phiran* is the traditional outfit for both males and females in Kashmir. Usually made of wool, it has full sleeves and extends to the knees or below. Unlike a coat, the front opening extends only a short way below the neck.