

Fertile Disorder: Spirit Possession and its Provocation of the Modern



Kalpana Ram

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In this talk, based on her new book of the same title (University of Hawai'i Press), Kalpana Ram reflects on the way spirit possession unsettles some of the foundational assumptions of modernity. What is a human subject under the varied conditions commonly associated with possession? What kind of subjectivity must already be in place to allow such a transformation to occur? How does it alter our understanding of memory and emotion if these assail us in the form of ghosts rather than as attributes of subjective experience? What does it mean to worship deities who are afflictive and capricious, yet bear an intimate relationship to justice? What is a "human" body if it can be taken over by a whole array of entities? What is agency if people can be "claimed" in this manner? What is gender if, while possessed, a woman is a woman no longer? Drawing on spirit possession among women and the rich traditions of subaltern religion in Tamil Nadu, South India, Ram concludes that the basis for constructing an alternative understanding of human agency need not rest on the usual requirements of a fully present consciousness or on the exercise of choice and planning. Instead of relegating possession, ghosts, and demons to the domain of the exotic, Ram uses spirit possession to illuminate ordinary experiences and relationships. In doing so, she uncovers fundamental instabilities that continue to haunt modern formulations of gender, human agency, and political emancipation. The book is particularly concerned with assumptions that directly shape people's lives in rural Tamil Nadu: projects of family planning, development, reform, and emancipation.

Associate Professor Kalpana Ram lectures on power and performance in India, gender, social movements and embodiment at the Department of Anthropology, Macquarie University, where she is also the Director of the India Research Centre.

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