

CORTH Doctoral Forum with Dr. Kalpana Ram: 'Spirit Possession and its Provocation of the Modern: Re-casting Frameworks for Researching Women's Health'

By Dr. Sajida Ally, CORTH Graduate Associate

For our final Doctoral Forum of 2016 – held on 16th November 2016 – CORTH was delighted to have Dr. Ram from Macquarie University with us to share her insights from her latest book on spirit possession. The forum focused on the ways in which social scientists can draw on phenomenology to unpack inherited modern dichotomies that are often used to research subaltern persons' experiences of agency, including those of women's fertility and health. Drawing on her findings from *Fertile Disorders: Spirit Possession and its Provocation of the Modern* (2013 University of Hawaii), problematized the mission of 'bringing progress' to people and discussed the ways in which phenomenology can be a tool to reduce the divide between research and informants' lives. She provided a rich overview of phenomenology as a methodological and theoretical approach and the advantages it holds over critical post-structuralist styles of feminism, referring to the context of rural women in Tamil Nadu, India, while offering ways to link her material to other geographic and empirical contexts.

The forum was attended by an engaged group of Sussex doctoral students and postdoctoral affiliates within the School of Global Studies and the School of Education and Social Work. Participants had a range of research interests – health and wellness; perceptions of witchcraft among minority students, teachers and parents within secondary education; class constructions within elite education; economy, money and kinship; and transnational migration. At the same time, they shared an interest in exploring the questions that arose from the nexus between Dr. Ram's work and their own. As with previous CORTH doctoral events, the forum was designed to get participants thinking about their own work in engagement with peers and experts. This particular forum provided a space for reflection and discussion on the added value of phenomenology as a theoretical and methodological framework and spirit possession as a topic of research – both of which are poorly understood within the social sciences as well as public health.

In Dr. Ram's talk and the subsequent discussion, several inter-connected themes were explored:

'State Intellectuals' and Moral Authority: Dr. Ram described all of us belonging to one, broad class that she refers to as 'state intellectuals' – as coined by Gramsci – who are part of a larger undertaking of bringing improvement to peoples' lives. Even if anthropologists state that their endeavour is a scholarly one, in one way or another, Dr. Ram suggested that they do in fact contribute to the governmentality of peoples' everyday experiences. She encourages, as such, the need for academic researchers to question where our moral authority comes from, along with that of government officials, NGOs and quasi-NGOs that have become 'GONGOs' (NGOs that are heavily influenced by state agendas). One way to embark on this questioning is to re-examine the face-to-face encounters that we have with informants, which Dr. Ram asserted have become fetishized in many ways. Instead we should be examining the many ways in which power inequalities and histories form part of the background of face-to-face encounters that we describe as ethnographers. This will help us to see ways in which power shapes the face-to-face, even though each encounter will also open up fresh interpretations and possibilities that are to some extent novel.

What does Phenomenology Entail?: Dr. Ram continued this discussion by talking us through the fundamentals of phenomenology. She explained that phenomenology means taking the

body seriously and emphasizing the visible as well as the invisible, and what is underlying these processes. While many scholars reduce phenomenology to experience, the tricky thing about experience is that it assumes that one is conscious about it. Consequently, Dr. Ram highlighted the importance of understanding the centrality of what is 'not conscious', though without necessarily assuming 'the unconscious' states of Freudian thought. She explained 'not conscious' as being a bodily disposition to the world that begins as something that is initially conscious, yet it becomes an unconscious set of actions or behaviours through it being learned and absorbed in the body, for example, as with the action of riding a bicycle. Dr. Ram encouraged us as researchers to look out for ways to document such embodied synthesis in informants' lives, including physically involving one's own body in the lives of our informants so that we could learn in a sensorial and embodied way.

Embodied Violations, (In)Justice and Agency: It was through such immersion in the lives of rural, Tamil women that Dr. Ram was able to initially grasp and later elucidate her informants' experiences of spirit possession. Describing possession as a multi-variam, Dr. Ram stressed its fundamental ambiguity as something that could be 'bad' or involve a benevolent goddess. Among her informants, she found human beings becoming part of the goddess, and while different goddesses were involved for different women, these experiences collectively highlighted broad existential feelings of injustice. These women had experienced embodied violations involving deep intimate ties and emotional and hierarchical relationships involving mother and child, and lovers and spouses, wherein women's sense of ethics had been severed. As Dr. Ram lucidly explained, spirit possession, as such, becomes a volatile force to unleash injustice and in doing so, it is a way for bodies to enact its own history without selectively drawing on things.

"Limit Cases" Versus Universalism: Having laid out some basic strands of this work, Dr. Ram continued to discuss its broader relevance, and in doing so, she provided forum participants with ways to further understand the convergences between their work with hers and each others. Dr. Ram explained that while the ontological turn has been invaluable in unearthing the deep assumptions that plague the study of specific groups, she suggested the importance of bringing different regions together to reintroduce a certain level of comparison. While understanding the inherent dangers of talking about universalism – as stressed by post-colonial and post-feminist critiques among others – Dr. Ram proposed that we can still talk about "a very low level of universalism" that does not assume too much. With the body, affect and embodied ways of sustaining our lives through movements and mind, we can possibly discuss across contexts and go beyond what she describes as "limit cases/situations", or things that are not ordinary or part of the everyday. At the same time, Dr. Ram cautioned against raising the level too high, as is done with the case of human rights.

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Participants engaged with these ideas as they presented their own projects to the forum and reflected on the added value of phenomenology and Dr. Ram's analysis of spirit possession to them. Despite many having had no or little experience with phenomenology, they were able to engage and contribute to this conversation. Dr. Ram expertly guided us through certain inter-disciplinary debates occurring within feminism, postcolonial theory, Marxism, anthropology and philosophy to explain a seemingly distant theory and bring it closer to participants' understandings. By the end of the session, many were able to re-cast their understanding of agency not as conscious and instrumental, but as a processual shifting of things that we can become aware of through embodied memory, which is not necessarily conscious.

[Kalpana Ram](#) is a senior anthropologist at Macquarie University in Sydney. She has worked extensively on themes around postcolonialism, social movements and modernity in India, with specific reference to the lives of rural women in Tamil Nadu. Her empirical work began with women's experiences of a changing sexual division of labour (with her early monograph *Mukkuvar Women*), and moved into other areas of embodied experience such as maternity, puberty, state programs of health education, and fertility control. She draws on a range of inter-disciplinary debates and theories, including feminism, postcolonial theory, Marxism, anthropology and philosophy, and she is also interested in popular subaltern religion in India. Her work has increasingly taken inspiration from phenomenological philosophy, and she has just published a coedited volume *Phenomenology in Anthropology* (Indiana Press 2015). Some of these themes come to an integrated fruition in *Fertile Disorder*.

[Sajida Ally](#) is a CORTH Graduate Associate. Her doctoral research examines Sri Lankan migrant women's subjectivities of the body, health and wellness and their enmeshment in socio-political and juridical processes surrounding migration to the Arab Gulf.