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# Ghosts, Monsters, and Demons of India

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Chennai

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I have been a fan of spooky stories, pulp horror novels, and monster movies since childhood. I also love reading Indian folklore, especially tales about supernatural creatures. Blaft, the publishing company I co-founded twelve years ago, has had some success with horror fiction and books about monsters; our readers seem to enjoy such stories as much as I do.

Bhairav and I began compiling this book because, though India has an astounding diversity of mythological fiends, the vast majority of them are unknown outside a particular region or language group. This situation is a little surprising, since horror stories usually travel well across cultures.

There's something comfortable about sharing monster legends. It's a great way to make friends. When people of different faiths start debating the relative merits of their gods, there's always a danger that they'll end the conversation by drawing weapons; but if the same group sits down to compare their demons and devils, they're more likely to break out the popcorn.

India is an intensely spiritual place. It's also a very superstitious one: a country where politicians see no shame in consulting astrologers, and where almost every house has some talisman for warding off the evil eye. Some of these practices are harmless, approached primarily out of a reverence for cultural tradition and the aesthetics of ritual. On the other hand, witch hunts still result in lynchings with appalling frequency, and there are

very real evildoers who believe that conducting a human sacrifice will help them attain magical power.

Unfortunately the situation seems to be getting worse. Dangerous superstitions are flourishing—encouraged by religious and political leaders, nurtured by a post-truth media environment, and unopposed by a struggling education system. Outspoken skeptics have, in several high-profile cases, been murdered. One victim was Narendra Dabholkar, a doctor-turned-activist from Maharashtra who spent decades campaigning against phony miracle cures and belief in black magic. He was gunned down in August 2013 by two masked assailants who escaped on a motorcycle. Investigations into the assassination unraveled a large conspiracy against Indian advocates for rationalism, and though the Central Board of Investigation has made a few arrests in the case, there are thought to be other culprits still at large.

With all of this going on, we must beg the reader to take our book in the right spirit (so to speak). Some of the tales in these pages come from ancient folklore, and can be appreciated as cultural heritage; others are just gory spook stories meant for cheap thrills. A few entries describe rituals for summoning demons or warding them away, but we suggest you don't take these instructions too seriously. In case the book starts making you feel haunted, I recommend switching over to a good science book—ideally, one on paleontology or astronomy. The slice of spacetime we live in is really very tiny, and I find that keeping this fact in mind makes ghosts less scary.

Or, in case you find cosmic insignificance just as terrifying as the malevolent undead, then perhaps try a nice book about flowers.

Linguistic regions don't always align perfectly with national boundaries, and the same is true for endemic ranges of ghosts. We have used the word "India" in the title, but some entries describe spirits that haunt parts of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Bangladesh, Nepal, Tibet, Myanmar, and the Maldives as well. We trust this won't be misunderstood as an attempt to claim territory for a chthonic Akhand Bharat. It's just that lakhs of Indians speak Tibetic languages like Bhutia and Ladakhi, and so share folkloric traditions with Tibet—not to mention India's sizeable community of

refugees from Tibet proper, and their descendents. Millions more Indians speak Sindhi or Nepali. The country is home to more Zoroastrians than any other in the world, despite the faith having originated far to the west. In the east, the line between India and Myanmar goes right through the homelands of the Kuki, Chin, and Mizo people, in fact cutting across the legendary path taken by souls on their final journey to the afterlife. Like most of India's international borders, this line has been drawn within living memory—hardly long enough to make an impression on the world map of the eternal dead.

Not all regions of the country are equally represented in these pages. There are clear necrodiversity hotspots—the Konkan coast, Kumaon, Chhotanagpur, Sikkim, and the seven sister states of the Northeast—where a startling variety of supernatural beings are concentrated in a small area. Even within each of these regions, some traditions are better attested than others. Folklorists from Mizoram, for example, have published and translated a wealth of their stories into English, with multiple versions widely available in bookstores and on the internet. The Bathouist mythology of the Boros of Assam, on the other hand, is much harder to come by.

Any attempt to collect mythology from a variety of languages and cultures opens itself to allegations of appropriation. We have done our best to take this issue seriously, seeking out input on the book from people all over the country. It was impossible, though, for us to get feedback from every state and every tribe. Dear Reader, if you come across anything we have misrepresented or goofed up in any way, we would greatly appreciate it if you would contact us, so we can correct it in a future printing.

The human brain seems to have a natural predilection for describing and classifying demons. Every culture on earth has invented a complex pantheon of bad guys. Whether they are called devils, rakshasas, lords of Xibalba, daikaiju, or Batman supervillains, each character comes complete with an origin story and a distinctive set of powers and weaknesses.

I have wondered, while compiling this book, whether we *evolved* this tendency. Did it confer some selective advantage on our ancestors? Consider that 100,000 years ago, there was a much richer megafauna.

Early hominids who had memorized the hunting schedule of a sabre-tooth tiger, who could recognize the pugmarks of a cave lion, or who knew the best way of dodging an angry woolly rhino might have been more likely to survive. Perhaps our brains are *designed* to store knowledge about a large number of different dangerous monsters; and now that the deadly beasts are mostly extinct or confined to cages, we make up stories to fill the empty space.

Or, perhaps, we tell ghost stories to protect our own sanity. Many people find that a belief in some kind of afterlife—even one filled with everlasting torment—is less psychologically disturbing than the idea of perpetual void.

But “believe” is a fuzzy word. There are things we believe in as children that we reject as adults; and then sometimes in old age we go back to believing them again, in a wiser, less literal way. Hardcore skeptics can be great storytellers, and they can do as much to popularize myths and legends as their more credulous friends. This range of “belief” is worth keeping in mind when reading folklore, especially when reading about tribal superstitions that strike us as bizarre or backward or primitive.

We should make it clear that this is not a work of anthropology. It has not gone through an academic peer review, and we confess to being less than perfectly up to date on contemporary theory. While the relativist nature of the philology of the vernacular as it pertains to demonopathy is certainly worthy of study, our focus here is on fangs and blood and severed heads. Of course, we are heavily indebted to the legion of anthropologists and folklorists whose research we have mined (and who we hope will not be too horrified by our approach)—as well as all the amateur enthusiasts who have shared the stories their grandparents told them, in print, online, and in person.

We have taken some pains not to distort things, and to draw on multiple accounts that can be traced back to different primary sources whenever possible. But in retelling the tales, we’ve removed a lot of information about where and when and how the originals were collected. For anyone who

wants to delve deeper into the particulars, our main sources are listed in the bibliography.

We've also taken few liberties. For one thing, we have tried to omit mention of caste. Many works of Indian demonology extend the caste system into the afterlife: Spirit A is the ghost of a Caste X person, Spirit B is the ghost of a Caste Y. We find this distasteful, and not just because of the affront to social equity. It seems to us that in a good spook story, the nature of a person's spirit should depend on their actions in life and the circumstances of their death, rather than on the circumstances of their birth.

Some may object that this approach is naïve, for belief in supernatural entities intersects with caste in all sorts of complex and interesting ways. In the Theyyam and Bhoota Kola traditions of Northern Kerala and Tulunadu, for example, spirit-channeling mythologies can be seen as an assertion of lower-caste cultural heritage against the dominance of Brahmanical religion. Countless pages have been written on the politics of the wars between the godly Devas and demonic Asuras of Hindu mythology, and whether or not those conflicts should be read as metaphors for the subjugation of indigenous peoples by Aryan invaders. There are also prickly questions about where "tribe" ends and "caste" begins, and how tribal deities change when they are subsumed within Hinduism. But these issues are better dealt with in a more academic book. We have tried to sidestep them, hopefully not too clumsily.\*

Yet another problem is how to decide what counts as a demon and what doesn't. Indian religions don't emphasize good-versus-evil binary dualism the way Western Christianity does. Some of India's most fearsome undead fiends are worshipped and prayed to on a regular basis; and conversely there are deities—such as the goddess Kali—who go about wearing necklaces of skulls and skirts of severed legs, but whose devotees would be offended if you called them demons.

The line we have drawn is somewhat arbitrary. We have attempted to include the union of the following sets: 1) all those supernatural or mythical

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\* There are a few cases where mentioning caste is unavoidable—for example, a ghost like the Brahmadaitya has its certificate baked right into its name.

entities who are primarily malevolent towards humankind, 2) all those who are the ghosts of dead people, and 3) all those who are clearly not objects of worship.\*

One final technical note on a thorny issue: spelling.

India's languages all have competing schemes for writing words in the English alphabet. One way to standardize everything would have been to use the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration, the way academic Indologists do; but we decided against this. For Indians who read English, *curail* is much harder to recognize than *chudail*—and that diacritical mark makes the word look strangely clinical. Also, many Northeastern languages use the Roman script with their own established systems of orthography, and it didn't seem right to alter the standard spellings of Khasi or Karbi words to match a system devised for a totally unrelated ancient language.

Instead, we have gone with the transliterations that most bilingual speakers of each source language would use, or else the spelling most commonly found in our references—without regard for consistency across languages.

The result, though, is that the spellings in this book are a bit of a mess. For example, for the /ɑ:/ sound, we've used "a" sometimes and "aa" other times; in a few cases, there's inconsistency within the same word (e.g. *Masaan* has two /ɑ:/ sounds). We considered putting together a pronunciation guide—but given that many of the words are used across several languages and dialects with a range of local pronunciations, the project was simply too daunting. If you want to be sure how to pronounce something correctly, you'll just have to look that up that yourself.

Many, many people contributed to this book: of course all the artists, poets, and translators whose work is featured within; all the writers and researchers in the bibliography; and over a hundred other informants—friends, acquaintances, people we chatted with at comic cons and book events, and people who answered questions online. We would like to give special thanks to the following people who made especially important

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\* It was of course impossible to cover them "all". But we tried anyway.



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*Rakesh Khanna*  
*Chennai, October 2020*

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## Aavi

**Aavi** means “vapour” in Tamil. It is the word used for the steam from an idli cooker, the morning haze above a village lake, or the misty cloud of a person’s breath on a chilly night in the Nilgiris.

The word also signifies the vital spirit of a living thing: the sigh that leaves the body at the moment of death, to linger on as a ghost.

Most ghosts in Indian stories can take on a physical form. They disguise themselves as real, solid people that can be touched and felt. They can pick things up, wield weapons, do chores, eat food. They are often colourful: in cartoons and picture books, they’re drawn with bright blue or green or orange skin. They usually have fangs. When they *aren’t* in corporeal form, they either become invisible or transform into thick purple smog. They tend to be raucous and loud and vicious and bloodthirsty, whether or not they had that sort of a personality when they were alive.

The Aavi is an anomaly. In many ways it resembles the ghosts of Western stories more closely than Indian ones. It is wispy, white, forlorn, and brooding. It retains a lot of its personality from life, recalling its friends and loved ones as well as its enemies and its unfulfilled desires. Aavis can have only limited interaction with objects in the material plane, and they have a tendency to disappear into thin air when threatened.

Not to say that they can’t be scary. An Aavi might stretch its spectral arm through a wall, slowly moving its fingers as though grasping for something, sending any witnesses screaming away in terror. Or on a still and moonless night, its transparent head might roll out from underneath a cot, give a few anguished sobs, and then vanish.

But they almost never *eat* anyone.

An Aavi that retains ties to the world of the living is typically a murder victim, or perhaps a lover driven to suicide. It can possess people, but it rarely causes illness or madness. Instead, the Aavi provides information to help others avenge its death. When it enters a living person, it causes them

to start speaking in an unnatural voice; or else it makes the spirit-medium fall into a trance and set its secrets to paper in strange and unfamiliar handwriting.

Some of the similarity between the Aavi and the ghosts of Europe may be traced to the Tamil country's ancient Christian community, or to the long centuries under colonial rule. But much of the influence is probably due to a more specific band of travellers: the Theosophists.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a religious movement known as Spiritualism was ascendant in the Western world. Its adherents believed that the human soul was distinct from matter and that it remained active after death. Many of them rejected mainstream Christianity and set out eastwards in search of ancient secrets and esoteric knowledge.

Several prominent Spiritualists—including Annie Besant, Henry Steel Olcott, Charles Leadbeater, and Helena Blavatsky—made their way to Madras. In the 1880s, on a 260-acre campus on the south bank of the Adyar River, they established the International Headquarters of the Theosophical Society, an organization devoted to “investigating the unexplained laws of Nature”.

Their major preoccupation was making contact with ghosts. The members of the society, and Madame Blavatsky in particular, were famous for holding séances, during which spirit-mediums would channel energies from “the other side”. Some of the mediums would ooze ectoplasm, a viscous supernatural goo that supposedly flowed from the orifices during a visitation. Others would engage in a practice called automatic writing, letting paranormal forces move their pens across the page without their conscious effort.

Not all of the early Theosophists were pure in their motives. Blavatsky was accused of being a fraudster who used cheap magic tricks to fool people. Others confessed to darker crimes. Nevertheless, their “occult investigations” had an outsized impact on the South Indian imagination.

For example, Blavatsky had a theory, expounded in her 1888 book *The Secret Doctrine*, regarding an ancient sunken continent called Lemuria. In the ancient past, this continent was supposed to have occupied most of what is now the Indian Ocean, connecting Sri Lanka to Madagascar and Australia. Blavatsky proposed Lemuria as the land of what she called the “Third Root Race”—ancestral humans who had lived alongside the

dinosaurs. Her idea was taken up by native writers of the Tamil renaissance, who gave the ancient landmass the name Kumarikandam (or Tamilagam). A popular pseudohistory emerged in which Kumarikandam was the birthplace of Tamil civilization. Some said it had been a land ruled by a succession of powerful women; others asserted that it had been the seat of the Pandian Dynasty for 10,000 years, before sea levels rose and the ocean claimed it.

By the 1950s, the scientific community had turned to embrace the theory of plate tectonics, which showed that Lemuria could never have existed. The southern landmasses of the world were indeed once connected—but that was some 150 million years ago, long before the evolution of humans. They have been drifting apart ever since.

Despite these revelations, the legend of the lost continent endures. Tamil politicians and orators still draw allusions to a mythical homeland sunk beneath the waves, and Kumarikandam remains a popular subject in Tamil poetry and speculative fiction.

Though Blavatsky died in 1891, the Theosophists' efforts to contact the spirit world continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, the Society remains active today, though it is less focused on generating ectoplasm than it once was.

In the meantime, the city of Madras, now Chennai, expanded and grew around it, developing into a major center for publishing and filmmaking. Generations of writers grew up hearing stories about spirit mediums and astral bodies. It would seem that the Aavi of Tamil popular culture, of countless television serials and pulp horror novels, is modelled at least in part after the spirits that were channeled at the séances in Adyar.

Akin to the Aavi, but more powerful and malevolent, is the **Pey**, sometimes called Pey Aavi. These more volatile South Indian spirits probably represent an older stratum of belief. The word *Achuthaavi* or “unclean spirit” is also used, especially in Christian contexts, for a possessing demon which must be exorcised.

Ref: 1, 15, 174, 291

## Ahmaw

Ahmaw is a sort of vampire soul or jealousy demon found in the traditional belief of the Mara people, whose homeland is an autonomous district in the southeast corner of the state of Mizoram, on the border with Myanmar. This spirit can project itself from one body into another.

If a person is Ahmaw, he is perpetually envious. When he covets something that belongs to another—it might be fancy clothes, jewellery, or real estate—he sends part of his spirit inside the owner. This causes an excruciating stomach ache, so severe that it can be fatal if untreated. The affected person dreams of being chased by a horse or a dog, or of a leech crawling over his body.

When a person falls sick and the cause of the sickness is believed to be someone else's Ahmaw, the victim's relatives make offerings in order to satiate the spirit and drive it out of the afflicted person. If the sickness does not subside, the gifts become progressively more generous. First a large gourd-*spoon* full of food is offered; then a slaughtered chicken; then a slaughtered pig; then expensive jewellery; and finally a lick of human blood, drawn from the big toe of a loved one.

The head of someone who is Ahmaw can detach from the body at night.\* The head goes rolling around into kitchens in search of meat to gobble up, or outside in search of livestock to kill. Some say the head can fly through the air in the form of a flickering flame. The head can also reduplicate itself; an Ahmaw may have as many as ten ghost-heads prowling for food. If *all* of these heads are captured and confined before they can roll back to rejoin the body at dawn, then the host body as well as the heads will die.

In days past, people suspected of being Ahmaw—that is, those who were thought to be the cause of the sickness—were shunned and ostracized by society. If a woman was believed to be Ahmaw, she might find it impossible to get married. A shopkeeper might be unable to attract customers. Accusing someone of being Ahmaw, therefore, was a very serious

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\* Thus the Ahmaw bears some resemblance to the **Than-Thin Daini** of Garo lore and the Krasue of Thailand. However, unlike these demons, the Ahmaw host is often male.



matter, and anyone who made an allegation later judged to be false could be forced to pay fines of restitution.

The Mara believe that Ahmaw is not native to Maraland. It is thought to have been introduced by a visitor from the East, a man who befriended a Mara family and sometimes came to stay with them. Whenever this man visited, there would be sudden and mysterious deaths of handsome men and beautiful women. Pigs and cows would die as well. Eventually becoming suspicious, the villagers burst into the man's room one night to find his headless body lying there. They prevented the wandering head from reattaching itself, thus killing him. Then they threw the Ahmaw's corpse into the river.

A little while later, a pheasant bird called *fachari* came to feed on the worms that were eating the corpse, and in this way the Ahmaw possessed the body of the pheasant. Later on, the catfish called *ngalei* also nibbled the decaying flesh, and so the Ahmaw entered the fish's body as well. Later on, both the pheasant and the catfish were caught and eaten by some Mara people, and this is how Ahmaw came to infect people in Maraland.

Some say that there are two distinct types of Ahmaw: the Ngalei Ahmaw, descended from the catfish, is more dangerous than the Fachari Ahmaw, descended from the pheasant. The condition is believed to run in families, and to be transmittable through sexual intercourse.

Today, though nearly all Mara people have converted to Christianity, belief in Ahmaw persists. It is sometimes discussed in the context of Christian theology as one of the works of the Devil.

Ref: 33, 180, 216, 259

## Airi

Airi haunts the dense and hilly jungles of Kumaon in Uttarakhand. He has a hideous face with eyes on top of his head. Some say he has four arms which carry different weapons; others say his arms themselves are bows and arrows.

Airi is said to be the ghost of a wealthy man and avid hunter who died while on shikar. He can be heard in the middle of the night crashing through the trees with his hunting party. Airi is carried aloft by his two

ghostly litter-bearers, Sau and Bhau, who call out “Sau, sau” as they walk. He is also accompanied by his loyal ghost-hounds and a pair of **Anchheri** bodyguards with backwards-turned feet. Other attendant ghosts beat the bushes ahead of the palanquin to drive out the animals.

Airi is in the habit of spitting a lot. His saliva is extremely poisonous. If a glob of it lands on someone, that person is doomed to die within a few days unless healing rituals are performed.

Getting spat on is bad enough; but coming face to face with Airi is *instantly* fatal. The unlucky person who looks him in the eye will either be burnt to a pile of ashes or ripped into shreds by his ferocious dogs.

Though human blood is not his main source of nourishment, Airi enjoys a taste of it from time to time. To get it, he uses his supernatural powers to inflict wounds on people. One way in which he does this is to cause small accidents, making people trip and scrape themselves as they walk through the forest or as they work in the fields. Another method is to stir up arguments between friends and relatives, pit them against each other in fistfights, and wait for someone’s nose to get busted.

Airi is also blamed when people wake up to find themselves partially paralysed or extremely weak. It is thought that this happens because one of his invisible arrows has flown through a smokehole in the wall and struck the victim. Thus the Kumaoni proverb *Dalamuni se jano, jalamuni ni seno*: “Stoop under a branch, but never sleep under a niche.”

Despite all this, many Kumaonis consider Airi Devata to be a benevolent deity and protector of livestock. There are temples devoted to him throughout the region. Airi’s shrines are roofless; the deity within is represented by a trident, around which stones are placed to represent his dogs and attendants. Devotees give offerings of bows and arrows. Goat kids are also sometimes sacrificed to Airi, and pieces of cotton cloth stained red with their blood are flown as flags above the temple. The tail is cut off and kept beside the trident.

It is believed that if he is properly worshipped at the time of conception of a child, Airi protects the young life in the womb, in infancy, and all the



way up through adolescence. However, if the child grows up and waits too long to get married, Airi will turn against him or her.

Some devotees associate Airi with Arjuna, the archer hero of the *Mahabharata* epic. Connections can also be drawn to the “Wild Hunt” of European folklore—a roving nocturnal band of supernatural game-hunters, usually led by the god Woden.

An even closer relative is Hantu Pemburu, the spectre huntsman of Malay legend. This spirit, too, travels with demon-hounds, spits venom, carries different weapons in his four arms, and has eyes on the top of his head. Hantu Pemburu is said to be on the eternal search for a buck