

ALEXA SHARMA

A Ministry Response to Demonic Harassment and Possession among Contemporary Hindus

Introduction

Our family has witnessed many people in India plagued with strange diseases, mental illnesses, and unexplainable relational strife. We have often listened as the people discuss among themselves: “Are we cursed? Is the *boori atma* [evil spirit] to blame?” There are uncountable Hindu resources for an Indian who wishes to prevent or treat these kinds of conditions. However, though symptoms sometimes lessen after the application of pujas, mantras and reverse-cursing, only through Jesus Christ can the power of Satan be completely broken.

This article deals briefly with how demonic involvement in a Hindu person’s life might be discerned by a Christian worker. Next, a twofold approach to Christian ministry dealing with spiritual harassment is explored: (1) to help demonically oppressed non-believers attain freedom through their fully informed decision to align themselves with Christ, and (2) to disciple new believers so they can maintain their freedom through continual alignment with Christ. This article will not deal extensively with Hindu demonology/theology/occult practices, nor will it explore Hindu methods for dealing with these types of problems.

Indications of Demonic Harassment/Possession

How does a Christian worker know that a person is demonized? I have found that when a Christian worker is specifically invited by a Hindu person to help them with harassment issues, the affected person or his or her family will openly say that they are harassed or cursed, especially

if the worker maintains an open, understanding attitude about such issues; that is, does not infer that such ideas are superstitious. I believe it is important to maintain openness in spiritual conversations, but to hold back on dealing with demons in people's lives until invited—either by the person, their family, or the Holy Spirit. This is because, while there is such a thing as unwanted possession, there is also desired possession, in the Hindu context. This might be due to the perceived source (Hindu god or demi-god vs. demon) or because the person is seeking power from a demonic source.

Some indications of demonic involvement in a Hindu person's life include illness that does not seem to have any natural cause or cure, depression, sudden onset of anxiety or sadness (either when in a certain place or in general), "gifts" or abilities acquired by a person from a non-biblical satanic source (such as future-telling), nightmares or visions, strange behavior, distractedness or sickness at critical ministry moments, and strange consistent strings of bad luck and relational problems for a person or family. This is not an extensive list, but these are some indicators of demonic involvement (Vanderkooi 1985:197 contains a helpful list of possible "symptoms" of demonization).

Finally and most importantly is to recognize that one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit given as a tool for the church is discernment of spirits. Anytime Christian workers are potentially dealing with demonization they can pray and ask God to reveal whether a person's problems are spiritual in nature and then trust him to give the spiritual gift of discernment when needed. In this way Christians can learn to notice people or problems that seem paranormal without feeling paranoid or fearful, then take the impressions to the Lord in prayer for confirmation.

Ministry Responses to Demonized People

What are some of the ministry responses that can be utilized in helping demonized people find freedom in Jesus Christ? One of the best ways to answer this question is to share case studies illustrating actual cases particularly how the difficult-to-define gift of discernment from the Holy Spirit can assist in setting people free in a Hindu context.

Case Study 1

One morning, as I was praying, I invited God to consider me his ambassador for the day. I had never prayed this before, but had recently read about asking God to send us on missions for him. When I finished praying, my husband said, "I think you should visit Puja today." Immediately,

I knew in my heart that he was right—that was God’s mission for me. The Holy Spirit first used my husband, and then my own feeling of peace, to show me the first step in his plan for me that day.

I rode my bicycle the 1.5 hours to Puja’s home. For about half the trip, I was reviewing an encounter we had had with a family whose son is possessed. I prayed over the situation and thought of what I might do differently next time. I rejoiced over our authority over evil spiritual powers in the name of Jesus. Then, I thought, “These are pretty heavy thoughts to think all morning . . . I should sing!” The rest of my ride down the mountain road was spent singing praises to Jesus.

When I arrived at Puja’s home, I found her in good spirits. We chatted, and I prayed for her, all the while wondering why God had sent me—she wasn’t particularly in need, nor particularly receptive. I gave her a Bible anyway, as the opportunity presented itself, and went upstairs to visit her in-laws.

As soon as I entered the room, I noticed a woman I hadn’t seen before, with a rather strange posture/expression. The family was sitting around her, and they seemed worried. It turns out, she was the once-missing wife of Puja’s brother-in-law. She had returned some weeks previous.

“I feel so strange when I take this medicine,” she said, rubbing her forehead. I asked what medicine she had taken—perfectly polite conversation in rural India! However, her father-in-law stared at me intensely for several moments. I wondered if it was somehow impolite to ask in this situation, and tried to backtrack. Finally, he said, “You don’t know anything about this kind of medicine . . . this is medicine for the mind. But if you know the cure for her problem, I want you to tell it to me!”

The family described the woman’s erratic behavior. I had the “feeling” or “impression” that she was possessed—she once stayed up for 40 hours straight, just wandering around the village. Even her current posture seemed to say she was not her normal self. I told the family that I didn’t have a cure, but I know One who does. We all bowed our heads and I asked the God of Heaven to give me wisdom, discernment, and protection.

After praying, we did a brief Bible study on the Gerasene demoniac. I talked to the young woman and somewhat awkwardly ordered the demon I assumed was there to stay quiet unless I said it could speak. Then I asked it to tell what it was.

After talking for a while about other possibilities, the woman explained that she had a spirit that could tell the future. Apparently, that very morning she had told her husband, “Alexa is coming.” When asked which Alexa, she responded, “The Singing Alexa.” This confirmed a demonic “prophetic gift” involvement to me, although I didn’t confirm what she said, because I didn’t want to give any kudos to a demon.

I prayed again for wisdom and then we talked some more. The family wanted to know a diagnosis. I hesitated, but finally said I thought she was possessed. The family all nodded—a Hindu priest had told them the same thing the day before. It was then that I noticed the woman was wearing red threads on her wrists. The family confirmed this was a “treatment,” although I would only learn later it was not intended to be a cure but a kind of binding agent to keep the evil spirit from spreading.

I asked the family if they were willing to remove the bands and ask only Jesus to cure the problem. They said they would attempt this in one month’s time—but before the month was out, the woman had taken her young son and disappeared again.

This case study is just one example of the way that psychological and physiological signs of oppression and the discernment of the Holy Spirit work together in helping workers diagnose spiritual issues.

Ministry Response to Oppressed Non-Believers

Trust Before Truth

Whether bathing in the Ganges to cleanse sin or trying various doctors to cure disease, cause and effect are not as important in solving distressing personal problems as locating the cure in a veritable “haystack” of possibilities. This perhaps stems from the inability of a person to truly know what causes misfortune—karma, dharma, occult power, personal choice—all these can work together to “cause” problems, and the correct manipulation of circumstances and powers will, hopefully, bring the sought-after solution (see also Fuller 2004:74, 75). The reason why a solution occurred is either unknowable or irrelevant. Most “cures” consist of special knowledge held by doctors or spiritual practitioners. Because truth is not immediately relevant in the Hindu’s search for spiritual freedom, trust building must be the Christian worker’s first step in ministry.

Trust-building is also important because the high cost of following Jesus and the Hindu value of tolerance towards other views often makes truth particularly offensive. The high-caste people we work with have not only their reputations but often their livelihood at stake in renouncing idolatry. I believe that some understanding of the truth about idols and fallen angels makes the issue of allegiance clear—and loyalty to the true God would be enough to cause some sincere Hindus to follow Jesus. But the truth about the Hindu pantheon is not only insulting, it can cause the messenger to seem uninformed and intolerant, which can further shut the door of opportunity for witness. Therefore, workers must pray for trust to be built between them and the oppressed. They must actively build that

trust through spending time with people, and must be sensitive to the spirit's prompting on the right time for sharing truth.

Proclamation of Truth

As alluded to, a Hindu who hears of the power of Christ or that Christians can cast out Satan will initially see Jesus' participation as one of a series of spiritual medications that may or may not work. In our personal experience with interests and in conversations with local pastors, the initial request for healing from Christ or by a Christians is seen as one of many options, which are often being sought concurrently. A person with this kind of mindset will not immediately realize the necessity or even the reasoning behind asking *only Jesus* for help—a critical point, since our jealous and holy God of truth does not want people to misunderstand the source of his power and healing (Isa 42:8). But a person in a Hindu community will not usually be willing to consider the necessity of submitting to biblical truth or the exclusive claims of allegiance to Christ as a prerequisite to finding freedom from demonization.

Case Study 2

Chayana's adult son is mentally unwell. As a young child, he was intelligent, funny, and caring. But at some point he changed, becoming both violent and mentally childlike. Although Chayana says she thinks he suffered a brain injury when hit by his third grade teacher, she really believes he was cursed by a jealous relative who could have no children.

Chayana often spoke with us about her son, wondering aloud what she must have done in a past life to deserve such punishment from God. We listened with compassion, but it wasn't until we met her son Rajiv that we had any idea that we could or should help her.

One evening, as we visited with Chayana and her younger son, Rajiv walked into the room. He was very childlike, obviously wanting to please his rather embarrassed mother. Heavy psychoactive drugs had left him drooling, to top off his other strange behavior. A feeling of intense, heavy compassion settled on my heart. It would not leave me, even when we went home. My husband, Christian, and I prayed: Could it be that God wanted to heal Rajiv? We prayed for confirmation.

Several weeks later, a supporter of our teammates wrote to the Singhs to tell them they were praying for Rajiv. They had read a short article about him, and were so convicted he would be healed that they had been praying many times a day for that very outcome.

We called a fast, gave Chayana a Hindi New Testament to read to build

her faith, and let our supporters know of our intentions: we would ask God to set Rajiv free!

After three days of fasting and prayer, our home was palpably peaceful. Chayana's family entered on a Friday evening, just after we had welcomed the Sabbath. The children were tucked away in their beds, presumably with angels of light to guard them as we had requested!

Christian read one of the stories of Jesus casting out a demon, although Chayana said that was definitely NOT her son's problem. We then laid hands on Rajiv and prayed in the name of Jesus for his healing. At that moment, both Christian and I felt our hands and arms tingle as though they had fallen asleep.

However, there was no change in Rajiv. We spent more time in prayer, singing, and reading, but nothing changed. *Perhaps God will heal him in the night*, we reasoned. Still feeling peaceful, we ended our "deliverance" session and had dinner!

God did not heal Rajiv in the night. However, as we prayed and talked together, Christian and I realized that something was different about Chayana that night: on her forehead she had the *tilak*, a sign that she had been to the temple on the way to our home!

Realizing that God would not share his glory with another god or religious system, we had an open conversation with Chayana and her younger son about asking only Jesus for healing—about being willing to follow Jesus and only Jesus if her son were healed. Christian explained, clearly and simply, the message of the Great War over our souls written about in the Bible.

The family were not offended—but they could not accept the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ. "My poor son," said Chayana. "It's just too high a price to pay for his healing. What would our neighbors say about us if we did not have the *devta* (village god) stop at our home during festivals?"

I believe Chayana and her younger son are currently weighing the cost. We continue to pray that they will give Christ the chance to give them freedom.

Sharing Truth

After trust-building, the actual sharing of truth must be one of the first aspects of ministry to those affected by curses. Neil Anderson and Dave Park sees any direct encounter with demons as essentially a truth encounter, rather than a power encounter:

It isn't power per se that sets the captive free; it's truth (John 8:32). The power of the Christian is in the truth; the power of Satan is in the lie.

... Satan fears detection more than anything else. Whenever the light of truth comes on, he and his demons, like cockroaches, head for the shadows. (2001:118)

The only offensive weapon in the list of the armor of God is his word (Eph 6:17 for God's word is truth (John 17:17). The Greek for "word" in this passage is *rhema*, meaning the "spoken word" of God. The truth, however slowly, carefully, and sensitively it needs to be proclaimed, must be proclaimed. At first, this may involve only explaining that the person must remove any objects (talismans) previously applied by another spiritual practitioner. It should certainly involve the invitation to seek healing only from Jesus, and possibly an explanation to the family of the need to be willing to allow the oppressed person to follow Jesus exclusively after healing takes place. People must know that they can gain freedom in Jesus Christ, but also that he will not share the space of their hearts nor their devotion with any other god. They should be allowed to count the potential cost of following Jesus before making a decision. If a person is not at least willing to give up the strongman that is afflicting them, the evil spirits cannot be bound and expelled (personal conversations with Pastor Malik from the Sainj Adventist Church). If initial, small attempts to share truth are rejected, the person is not ready for the freedom that Jesus can give. The solution is to keep praying and wait.

At some point in the process of seeking and receiving healing, people must be taught, using the biblical stories, where curses, and *sheitan* (Satan), and even the *devota* (village demi-gods) and *bhagvan* (traditional gods and goddesses of Hinduism) come from. Without understanding this, there will be no real reason to avoid the worship of other gods.

Asking in Faith

Once a person has learned enough about Jesus and his power to set them free, the person should be invited to decide if they are willing to follow Jesus. If a person is willing, verbal prayer in the name of Jesus will destroy any curse or other form of demonic harassment (Vanderkooi 1985:197). Fasting and prayer (Matt 17:21) are helpful before the event. There also may need to be more than one prayer/ministry session. Any lie a person believes entwines itself in the person's hearts. It takes time to destroy all the roots of such lies. However, we have observed that even as the roots are being destroyed, those who are on this path are able to experience the peace of God through prayer even before all demonic involvement in their life is completely destroyed.

I have listed the steps needed to minister to an oppressed person. Space

constraints do not allow us to emphasize enough that these situations must be handled with all the tact, finesse, intercession of the Holy Spirit, backup prayer and outright Christian love for the oppressed as possible. It is a sensitive issue and many Indians think of themselves as a sensitive people. But Christians can be bold in their invitation to freedom because the power and love of Christ is on their side. The next section looks at how Indian Christians can maintain their freedom in Christ.

Ministry Response to Christians Affected by Harassment

Satan also seeks to gain access, whether rightful or not, to Christians in order to make them ineffective, to turn them back to Hinduism, or to annoy and hurt them. However, a person staying close to Jesus' side is protected by his power. It is important to help new believers feed and clothe themselves spiritually through prayer and Bible study, but missionaries and church workers should also teach them how freedom from demonic harassment can be maintained and regained by staying *bhakt*, or devoted, to Christ.

Maintaining Freedom

New believers must be taught to confess and renounce known sin. Just after the story of Balaam's inability to curse Israel is the heartbreaking tale of Israel cursing herself (Num 25; Rev 2:14). Balaam led Israel into the sins of idolatry and adultery, which removed them out from the protective power of Jehovah and rendered them accursed. Therefore, it is not enough to help people find freedom from evil spirits, but they must be taught to lean on Christ for daily victory against cultural practices that the Bible calls sin.

Idolatry

Many former Hindus face a lot of pressure to continue to show devotion to family or village gods in order to please the extended family. Family members traditionally honor the family god/idol by performing *pranam*, or *Namaste*, meaning "I salute the god within you." Families watch to see if converted members will still perform this oblation. This action is seen by some in the missiological community as being harmless if the heart remains unbowed. Missionaries from another denomination explained to us that their standard practice is to encourage new Yesu Bhaktas (Jesus devotees) to continue *pranam* to idols and eating of *prasad* (food offered to idols) in the home, in order to honor their father and mother, while

staying true to God through internal thoughts and intentions. We do not know at this point how widespread this opinion is. However, in reading the Hindi New Testament (OVV) concerning Christ's temptations in the wilderness, all Satan would have required of Christ was a simple *pranam* in order to give him the entire world. Christ resisted this temptation as our model and our propitiation. For us to not encourage a similar response seems to go against biblical principles.

Food Offered to Idols

Eating *prasad* in order to avoid offending others is also a temptation for converts. *Prasad* includes food offered to idols, and eating it brings the special power and grace of the represented deity to anyone who eats it (Fuller 2004:74, 75.). The apostle Paul gives clear instructions on this subject: If we know something is *prasad*, we are not to partake. Gentiles are not required to follow all the letter of the law, but eating food offered to idols is one of only three prohibitions given to gentile converts in Acts 15:29. At the Sainj Adventist Church numerous people have found freedom from demonic possession or harassment, only to suffer worse harassment after choosing to eat *prasad*. This reminds us of the story Jesus told of the demon who brought his friends to inhabit his old, empty home in Matt 12:45: "And the last state of that man was worse than the first."

While stressing the importance of not opening doors to Satan, it is also important to careful not to give even the slightest impression that demons are more powerful than Jesus. We must constantly strive to model emotional freedom in Christ, and should not be overly focused on the demonic in ministry. Joshua Raj points out that many Indian Christians' fear of malevolent Hindu gods is replaced by fear of demons because some Christian denominations constantly teach and stress topics on spiritual warfare (2008:128). Our teaching should be balanced and our focus should be on Jesus.

Regaining Freedom

Fasting and prayer provide spiritual space to gain wisdom for spiritual conflict. Prayer walks are helpful, so my husband or I, or both of us, take some time to "cleans" our home spiritually. If it seems the atmosphere in our home is growing dark, our family comes together to repent of sin, to realign ourselves with Christ, and to seek his presence in us and in our home. After an initial prayer in this manner, we walk around the house and pray at each bedroom for the person who stays in that room. We pray for community members when in our living room and kitchen. We pray

that everything we do in each room would only bring God glory, and if we are convicted of sin, we repent. We may sing or quote Scripture as seems appropriate. By singing and praying throughout our home—using the “sword of God,” the spoken word of God—we have seen attacks halted. A new believer lived with us for several months and witnessed our actions and God’s response when we faced spiritual attack. She also began to use to good effect these simple yet powerful tools: prayer, confession, faith, and singing (for more information see Ferris 1990b).

Curses can and should be renounced verbally by those following Christ. A missionary who says a Christian “can’t be cursed” and leaves it at that is leaving the new Christian open to the temptation to go to another practitioner to solve the problem. Instead, the power of God should be invoked to break the curse and in prayer the blessing, protection, and power of God should be requested for the new believer. If there are physical objects associated with the curse, such as idols or talismans, they should be destroyed. Always invite Jesus to take hold of the person or space. This can be done in a simple, joyful ceremony or in personal devotions. The verbal aligning of self with Christ will send Satan’s hosts running (Jas 4:7). Demonic powers may seek to find doorways into the life through sin or curses, but demons are easily stopped by the same power which raised Jesus from the dead and now works within believers (Eph 1:1-23; see also Ferris 1990a). God’s people must know, model, and teach about this power to the baby Christians who are just beginning their walk with God.

Objections

I realize that the idea of telling a Hindu his or her god is a demon is very offensive. In this particular instance, we are assuming the missionary is dealing with people who are asking for help. A Hindu who tells you he or someone he cares for is being spiritually oppressed or cursed and asks for help will by necessity have a degree of trust in you, as well as a certain degree of desperation to be willing to ask. The statement that truth should be a part of this kind of ministry is not to negate the importance of “speaking the truth in love.”

Conclusion

Case Study 3

I will conclude with one additional story from our ministry in India: The powerful testimony of one of the most powerless persons in an Indian home, the daughter-in-law.

Radika is a new believer who has stayed in our home for several months during her journey to know Jesus. As a new *bahu* (daughter-in-law), she knew her family would require her to participate in many rituals and festivals which would not please her Heavenly Father. She also knew that because her Hindu family does not see any essential difference between her Christianity and their religious beliefs, she would be watched to make sure she would still act as a member of the family and community. Failure could mean rejection and abandonment—at best only emotional abandonment, at worst, physical abandonment.

While in our home, Radika was convicted that she should not take *prasad*, meaning food offered to idols, nor accept any Hindu good luck charms or talismans. She also felt it would be inappropriate to keep pictures of Hindu gods in her bedroom. She was determined to honor her Heavenly Father, but worried she would be rejected by her in-laws if she made too much of a scene over these things. So, she prayed.

Radika has, through the help of the Holy Spirit, found a creative way to handle each of these “tests of her faith” she has had to face. Removing the idols from her room was a cinch—she just put other things on the walls, and breathed a sigh of relief when her father-in-law approved of her decorations. Although she has explained her need to refrain from certain activities to her family, and although they are accepting of her faith, they still expect her to partake in other activities to show she is a part of the family. When offered *prasad* in the home, Radika ties the food in a corner of her scarf to feed the dogs later. Once, when she knew she would be forced to go to the temple, she fasted on that day so she could, like Naaman of old, accompany her family into the temple without displeasing her Heavenly Father. She has quietly destroyed any items supposed to bless her with fertility, and hopes to show her actions more openly once her Heavenly Father blesses her and her husband with a child.

Finally, one evening, Radika faced a truly difficult trial. She was partaking in a festival called *karva vrat*, a time when women fast for the good health and longevity of their husbands. Radika chose to participate, and to pray to Jesus for her husband’s prosperity in a special way on that day. However, at the end of the festival, the moon god is worshipped, while all the family members look on.

I can tell you that Radika’s lips were often moving in prayer to God that day. When it came time to pour out a drink offering to the moon god, Radika turned aside from the moon and poured the water to the ground in front of the dark night sky, audibly committing the offering to the one true God.

Although Radika faces many trials and difficulties because of her steadfast love of Christ, He has provided creative ways for her to honor

her family while honoring her God as well. Before choosing to follow Jesus, Radika sometimes felt the power of the evil one coming over her in the night, to strangle her. Now, though her mind is at times perplexed with temporal problems, she is free from demonic harassment. The name of Jesus has set her free.

Missionaries and ministers among Hindus will, as they gain the trust of the people, witness demonic harassment and possession in their communities. By leaning on the discernment gift of the Holy Spirit they will learn to discern when particular problems are of demonic origin. The work of God's ambassadors in these situations is twofold. They must lead demonically oppressed non-believers to attain freedom through their fully informed decision to align themselves with Christ, and they must disciple new believers to maintain their freedom through continual alignment with Christ.

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Alexa Sharma has been a missionary to a Hindu nation with Adventist Frontier Missions since 2010, along with her husband Christian, and their two children. The Sharma family serve undercover in an area hostile to mission work. They have found in friendship evangelism the chance to understand the deepest heart issues of high caste Hindu people and to believe wholeheartedly in God's perfect strategy to reach the so-called unreachable.