

Adrift

“When that wall is erected within us as a safe place to hide from the misery of others, we become imprisoned in delusion just as surely as those bound by suffering in the outside world.”

Tim Ward, *What the Buddha Never Taught*

A row of handprints, caked with mud, stretches across the front walls of the Hindu exorcism temple in Balaji in India’s western state of Rajasthan. I examine these quaint symbols more closely and discover that they smell awful, yet familiar. I hold my nose and realize these ain’t no mudpies – this is cowshit, holy shit, decor by excrement, good luck charms to the gods. The brown walls also bear paint-dribbled marks which resemble white swastikas: Sanskrit symbols for fortune and well-being. I am surprised by how humble and simple the temple looks, as nondescript as a community hall back home. I was expecting ghoulish decor, something ornate and oversized to taunt the devil with defiance.

I am visiting this village expressly to witness exorcisms, which are “sometimes of a very violent kind,” says my outdated Lonely Planet guide book. It adds: “[T]hose being exorcised don’t hesitate to discuss their experiences.” A later edition of this guide no longer mentions Balaji or the temple, and I wonder why. When I arrive with my British companion Stephen – a fun-loving ex-journalist whom I met three days ago – people openly gawk at us. A small boy runs to us, asking: “What are you doing here? Why are you here? No tourists come here.”

How do I explain my voyeuristic curiosity? Thousands of Indians come here from across the country to be cured of demonic possession. Many refuse hospital care, certain that some evil force is behind their fate. I imagine scenes akin to *The Exorcist* or an eerie episode from *The Twilight Zone*: a possessed victim flails with uncontrollable limbs, spews bile and cackles fiendishly. Shrieks. Hallucinations. Delusions. Hysterical laughter. Grisly contortions. I admit that this gives sightseeing a sick twist, transforming religious fervour into a spectator sport. Perhaps I seek the ultimate horror, propelled by the same atavistic need that causes drivers to gawk unashamedly at a gruesome car wreck. During five