Churail – High Theory Podcast (rough transcript)

Hello, my name is Abhishek Avtans. I teach Indic / south Asian languages and linguistics at Leiden university in the Netherlands.

In Hindi/Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali and Marathi cuṛail cuṛel or cuḍel is the ghost of a woman who dies while pregnant, or in childbirth.

It is also imagined as an evil feminine spirit which sits in the shape of a bird on the roof of a house where a woman is pregnant.

The word churail is composed of cūṛā (topknot) + suffix ail. The idea is- चुड़ैल cuṛail has a long topknot through which they can be controlled. Remember the bizarre episodes of hair braid chopping in various places in India.

There's also a belief that cuṛail has her feet set backward, and her breasts hang so low that they can be turned over the shoulders. Cuṛails are believed to be experts in witchcraft and are harmful for small children and pregnant women.

Interestingly Hindi cūṛā (topknot), Punjabi cūḍā (knot of hair); Bengali cul (hair of head) etc. are related to Sanskrit cūḍā {as in cūḍākaraṇa (ceremony of tonsure)} which is ultimately related to a Dravidian source.

There is a Pakistani web series named Churails (2020), which was banned briefly in Pakistan. Interestingly In a locality known as Baharia town in Islamabad (Pakistan), a roundabout with a statue of liberty is rather popularly called Chaudail chowk.