

## Witchcraft Beliefs and Practices among Oraons

P. C. Joshi, Sonia Kaushal, Shashi Katewa and Oinam Hemlata Devi

Department of Anthropology, University of Delhi, Delhi 110 007, India

E-mail: p.c.joshi@du.ac.in

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**ABSTRACT** Belief in witchcraft has been widely associated with tribal societies in India, Latin America, and Africa (Marwick, 1870; Evans-Pritchard, 1937; Douglas, 1970). In central India, it has been frequently reported to be a social problem under which women, especially old and infirm, are accused and killed as witches. It is generally believed that lack of education and awareness is chiefly responsible for prevalence of witchcraft but, beliefs and practices associated with witchcraft are firmly integrated into the social and cultural life of people and mere awareness creation will never solve this problem.

The present paper is based on intensive study of an Oraon village in district of Jashpur in Chhattisgarh. In Oraon society, people believe that there are certain objects and persons who possess innate powers. Such persons or powers could be instigator of illness/ misfortune involving witchcraft. They have profound belief in witches who can cause harm to others. In Oraon society, these witches are condemned when found by *Baiga*. The present paper deals with the Oraons' concept of witchcraft and the role of *Baiga* in combating evils of witch. Effort is also made to identify some of the techniques used by *Baiga* to ward off ill effects of witch and finally, witchcraft is seen from functionalistic perspective.

In central India, witchcraft forms the inextricable part of, religious beliefs of the tribal societies. Many Indian anthropologists contributed towards this concept. For instance, S.C. Roy (1984) reported, witchcraft as a art is rare among the Birhors. Such wizards or witches as exist amongst them are believed to harm a person by throwing some rice in the direction of that person's house and inciting their familiar spirit to move in that direction and afflict the person with some disease or other troubles (Sinha and Banerjee, 2004). The methods of magic and witchcraft in Chottanagpur and its adjoining areas inhabited by Korwas, appear to be common among Kharias as well. Even among aboriginal tribes such as the Oraon, the Santal, the Ho, and the Korwa witchcraft belief is intrinsically embedded in their worldview. Witchcraft in these societies is considered as one of the main cause of sickness and death. The treatments of such diseases are made accordingly.

In all human societies people make distinction

between naturally caused illness and supernaturally caused illness. According to people's theories about the cause of disease they possess different medical systems for treatment. Naturalistic methods seek explanation of illness without invoking supernatural aid. The treatment of supernatural caused, illness lies in the realm of magico-religious healing.

Clements (1932) has pointed out that there are six main primitive theories of diseases and for each of them there is a correspondent therapeutic theory. The six disease theories are:

1. Natural causes
2. Imitative and contagious magic
3. Disease -object intrusion
4. Soul loss
5. Spirit- intrusion
6. Breach of taboo

The 'natural causes', categories of diseases are treated by natural means. The second, third and fourth combine category of witchcraft theories and sixth category involves other supernatural agencies.

In simple societies, often a number of deities, spirit and humans are associated with disease and the treatment of disease is made accordingly. According to Foster and Anderson (1978), all societies have disease theory system and medical system to treat illness. Foster and Anderson divided the world's medical system into naturalistic system and personalistic system.

A personalistic medical system is one in which disease is believed to be caused by active, purposeful intervention of a sensate agent who may be a supernatural agency (a deity or a god), a non-human being (such as ghost, ancestor or evil-spirit) or a human-being (a witch or a

sorcerer). Snow (1974) believes that traditional medical beliefs, reflects their worldview themes: the world is hostile and dangerous place, the individual is susceptible to attack from supernatural agencies and the individual depend on outside aid to combat such attacks. Such a worldview includes strong belief in witchcraft and a traditional medical system to prevent and cure a person of witchcraft and witchcraft induced illness.

### THE WITCH AND THE WITCHCRAFT

The word witch is derived from the old English *wicca*, meaning, 'a female magician or sorceress'. Although the terms wizard and warlock are available for male magicians, witch and witchcraft are generally applied to both sexes and their magical activities. Among many societies' accidents, sickness, death, and other untoward events have been thought to be caused by witches that had magical powers, which they used for evil purposes (Becon, 1955: 83).

Witchcraft is the supernatural action of witches, a term commonly used to describe people, and usually women, supposed to have dealings with the evil spirits. Witches are commonly said to use their power to attack the fertility of humans, their domestic animals, or crops, to fly through night, to engage in cannibalism and incestuous acts, to assume animal form or have animal companions, and to be often quite unconscious of their night time activities during daylight. Witchcraft fantasies are most commonly associated with agrarian societies, whose conflict cannot be resolved by distance, and accusation of practicing witchcraft are more prevalent than the small number of people who claim to practice it (Barfield, 1977).

Evans-Pritchard, when studying the Azande of the Sudan, defined witchcraft, as an ability to perpetuate evil that derives from an intrinsic quality of the evil doer that is not deliberately acquired. It is purely a psychic act. Landy (1977) opines that witchcraft is the possession of an inherited power, used only for evil ends. For Marwick (1870) witches' derives power from his/her mystical inheritance. Marwick goes on as to motive, witches are considered to be slaves of aberration and addiction, and, thus, conceived, as weird, sometimes tragic figures.

Witchcraft can be seen as belief in supernatural power that is inborn in some people

that enables them to work evil. Witches can harm simply by thinking evil thought or by evil sight. Witches are viewed negatively. They are universally considered as anti-social to human society. The witches are seen as weird person who embodies all feared and negative aspect of a culture.

Kluckhohn (1944) was the first one to note socially leveling effects of witchcraft fears on the Navaho group of Native Americans. In Navaho society those who made themselves different from other members of the society by accumulating wealth were believed to be using witchcraft to gain their ends and were liable to be prosecuted and even kill.

Witchcraft is also related to the evil eye, the belief that malign power may be projected through direct gaze. The power is involuntary, stimulated by negative emotions, especially envy, and can cause misfortune, sickness, and even death. Such beliefs are widespread but most notably institutionalized in areas around the Mediterranean fringe.

Witchcraft is rooted in traditional customary ideas whereby societies' categories and order universe around them. As such, they not only are intertwined with every aspect of societies, thought, and language but also provide coherent and systematic means to influence the world in which man lives. For the anthropologists such belief systems provide essential material for the understanding of the metaphysics of traditional and non-western societies. They may also lead to a better understanding of the structural aspects of customary thoughts (Sinha and Banerjee, 2004).

The present paper is based on the intensive study conducted amongst the Oraon tribe of Jashpur Nagar, Chattisgarh. The present paper also includes data collected from various secondary sources of information.

### WITCHCRAFT BELIEFS AND PRACTICES AMONG ORAON

The belief in witchcraft is widely prevalent in Oraon society. There is a strong belief in potent powers of a witch and thought to be productive of greatest misfortunes and disease. They are considered as a great threat to whole society and looked upon with fear and suspicion. They are believed to cause harm to animals, property, agricultural land, gains and individuals. They can

cause severe harm to the whole community. Among Oraons witches are locally known as *bisahi*. Both men and women can become *bisahi* although references to female *bisahis* are more frequent. Most of the female witches are reported to be old women or childless women.

Witches are said to have inborn powers in Oraon society but unlike other tribal societies, this trait is not considered hereditary. Witches go through secret trainings to acquire more powers and to control the spiritual world. To acquire more powers, witches propitiate their main deity and other evil spirits. They also perform elaborate rites at cremation ground during dark nights to attain more powers. These rites consist of chanting of mantras, charms, songs and invocations to please *Masan-dev*. Once the witch has mastered these things she has to kill her own child or any member of the family. After the completion of the training, witches perform magical mantra of witchery on a tree and if that tree dies within few days, it indicates that the person has mastered the art of witchcraft. Witches secretly indulge in these activities at dark nights. They put grass effigies in their place, so that family members may not become aware of witches' departure. *Diwali's kartik* (according to Hindu calendar) night, according to Oraons, is very important for witches as on this night they perform all evil work and acquire new powers through propitiation. All witches gather at cremation ground and undress completely, tie brooms around their waist. They dance for the whole night and worship *Masan dev*.

Witches are related with dead, death, disease and misfortune. Few animals and object are also associated with witchcraft like cat, jackal, broom, etc. Witches can take on the form of animals. They wield considerable powers and are feared by Oraons. Everyone in society knows about such persons who are witches. Yet they never talk about him or her in open. It is reported that witches are very friendly and social. They always invite others to their house but people generally maintain a distance from them and avoid any troublesome situations with them. They also generally avoid accepting gifts from such persons during ceremonial functions, as they fear that the gift could be charmed one. Following S.C. Roy (1984), the process from which witches can cause disease and death can be categorized into:

#### 1. Direct method

#### 2. Indirect method

##### **Direct Method**

Oraons believe that witches can often cause harm through direct method. They use ash of cremation ground, chicken bone, lizard, cat's faeces, chanted rice, *udad* pulse, mustard seeds, grains bundled in a cloth. Witches secretly and very cautiously mix these things with victims' food and after eating such food victim gradually wastes away. Witches also have knowledge of poisonous herbs, which they use to kill their victims. Oraon people believe that if a witch looks at the granary or carries away grain from granary then granary is soon exhausted and agricultural fields cease to yield good harvest.

##### **Indirect Method**

By using supernatural powers a witch can kill anybody within a specified period. A witch can harm the victim by the mere uttering of victim's name and invocation of spell over name, is enough to cause illness or misfortune. By sprinkling graveyard dirt at victim's courtyard or under his feet a witch can make the person sluggish and ill.

As elsewhere, witches are believed to have the power of evil eye in Oraon society. It is reported that small children, beautiful unmarried girls or newly-weds are more liable to be the victim of evil eye of witches. When a witch casts evil eye on a child, he falls sick and keeps on crying constantly without any reason. If evil eye is cast on a pregnant woman, it may cause difficult labor pain, miscarriage, etc. even animals are also susceptible to witchcraft. When a witch cast evil eye on a cow, it stops to yield milk. They also believe that witches shoot invisible arrows, which hurt and paralyse the victim. They call it *baan marana*.

In Oraon society, people think that most of the time witches harm others out of jealousy and hatred. If someone is doing well in his or her life or looking beautiful are more susceptible to evil eye of a witch. Many times witchcraft accusations are associated with property dispute. Oraon women are more cautious about rice flour they prepare on festive occasions. If rice flour happens to attract the evil eye of a witch, the prepared rice will be either not properly baked or emit a foul smell. Similarly, evil eye directed against food or drink is believed to poison it.

Sometimes witches transform themselves into

cat and enter the victim's house at night while he is sleeping, lick the saliva from victim's mouth. After sometime victim falls ill and very often illness proves fatal.

### COUNTER WITCHCRAFT

The Oraon people distinguish between good magic and bad magic. The magic intended to produce evil is known as bad magic and when the same magic is used for good purpose is known as good magic. A person who makes use of magic for the benefit of the society and who is socially recognized is known as *baiga*, *dewair*, or *ojha*. Oraon believe that *baiga* possess special powers and can counteract the anti-social activities of a witch. His magic is regarded as useful as long as he does not make use of it to harm others. He uses his magical powers to avert the evil caused by witch or any other malevolent power. The power of *baiga* is neither hereditary nor inborn, but is acquired through training publicly. *Baiga* from one village is not confined to his own village but may go anywhere he is summoned. The influence of Hinduism on *baiga* institution is very much evident by the fact that many of the mantras are taken from Hindu religion. Even *baigas* worship many Hindu deities. As *baiga's* post is not hereditary, so anybody from society can become *baiga*.

To become disciple, the person has to perform some initiation rites. He offers fowl, *kalash* (earthen-ware), and rice-beer to *mahadev* (Shiva of Hindu mythology) and worships him. During training period, the disciples gather either at their *guruji's* (teacher) house or at any lonely place where they are taught various mantras, charms and art of exorcism. They also learn about certain medicines. The training includes various songs, dances and methods of spirit- possession. To be initiated as *baiga*, one has to go rigorous training under a recognized *baiga*.

Like other tribes, Oraons believe that few diseases and misfortunes are result of evil agencies, but it does not mean that they completely ignore the natural cause of diseases. Rather, the treatment of disease purely depends upon the perception of the disease. When a person falls sick and his family members think that disease is caused by any supernatural agency, they call *baiga*. First, he asks very general questions like for how long the patient has been ill, etc. He diagnoses the illness by feeling pulse of the patient. After this, he asks patient or his family members to bring *arwa*-rice (dehusked rice).

He puts the rice on a *saal* leaf marked with *sindoor* (vermillion) and *haldi* (turmeric). He reads the rice on *saal* leaf with chanting of mantras to know whether a *bishahi* or any other malevolent agency causes the illness. Once it is identified, sacrifices are made accordingly.

The *baiga* has reported different methods depending upon the cause of illness.

In case of evil eye of a *bishaha*, *baiga* in a *khappar* (roof-tile) containing burning coal adds "*dhoop-dhoan*". He revolves the *khappar* around the patient's body with one hand and with other; he throws spelled *arwa* rice on the victim for the three times. During this process, he recites many mantras. As a result of inherent magical power of mantras evil drives away.

It is reported that if disease is serious, offering and sacrifices of sweets, rice beer, fowl, goat or pig are made at home or near by river stream. *Baiga* also performs exorcism to ward off evil spirits or evil eye. In this method, *Baiga* offers sacrifice of lemon and coconut to the deity. Then, he rotates *chukba-pankh* (peacock feather) around the body with chanting of mantras. He also buries enchanted herbs, ash and iron nail at the entrance of the victim's house to ward off evil spirits send by *bishahi*.

Besides these methods, elaborate rituals are performed by *baiga*. When an illness is serious or evil spirits send by *bishahi* are very adamant and do not leave the patient's body easily. In such cases spirits or *bishahi* demand sacrifices. There are several methods used by *baiga* to find out the cause of disease and to cure patient, or counteracting the witchcraft. These methods are not only performed in the case of disease but also in other types of misfortunes. So, *baiga* is the person who, with his benevolent powers cures the individuals but also protects as a whole and fights against the evil spirits and mischief done by *bishahi*.

Apart from consulting *baiga*, Oraons have developed different methods to protect themselves from evil powers either by mimetic magic or by taking help of benevolent powers (S.C.Roy, 1984).

### Mimetic Magic

Once in a year, Oraons perform a ceremony in which evil spirits send by *bishahi* or any other evil agency that causes cattle disease or human disease are driven away. In this ceremony, *baiga* of the village put *haldi* marks on a *supa* (winnowing fan) containing fowl. Then, *supa* is

handed over to any young boy of the village. This boy runs ahead with *supa* containing fowl and rest of the male members' runs behind him with sticks in their hand. When the boy reaches the boundary of the village, the *supa* and fowl are left there and the party returns to their village.

Another instance of mimetic magic is *danda-katta* ceremony, as reported by Roy (1984). It is one of the important agricultural ceremonies. In this ceremony, the end of *bhelwa* twig is splitted and an egg of a fowl is broken into two. Oraons believe that, by doing this, the evil eye of a bishaha on agricultural land or crops is cast away.

In another instance of mimetic magic, when a child falls ill and illness is believed to be caused by evil eye of a witch, the Oraon mother takes up few mustard seeds and three peppers in right hand. Then, revolves it around the head of the ill child. In a *khappar* containing burning coals, mustard seeds and pepper are put. This marks the departure of the evil spirit. Oraon calls this rite as *neochanna*.

#### Help of Benevolent Powers

Oraon people avoid evil powers through help of benevolent powers. They use magical amulets made of iron hardened through exposure during a solar eclipse and the cinders of logs of wood used in burning a corpse. To avert evil eye on crops, twigs of *tendu-patta* are planted in the fields on the morning of karma festival.

#### FUNCTION OF WITCHCRAFT IN ORAON SOCIETY

Most of the informants we met talked about only belief in witchcraft but nobody has seen actual practice of witchcraft. Oraon people think that witches cause some of the disease and misfortunes. But they generally do make covert accusations to avoid tension between members, as it affects the solidarity of the group. In case, if witchcraft is confirmed by *baiga*, the matter does not remain restricted merely to the victim's family members but becomes a public affair. The help of whole community is sought since witch is seen as a menace to whole society. So, whenever a person suffers from a disease, all blame is put on a witch. Witchcraft accusations are mostly made on widows and are also related with property disputes. Oraon, being a patrilineal society accuse widows as witch to take away property. Witchcraft accusations are also associated with

jealousy and envy. When a person acquires more wealth and prestige in society, he is more susceptible to witchcraft. For instance, Ramdev Bhagat, an advocate told that his father died few years back. He reported that his father suffered from severe illness and for treatment they visited many hospitals. But, he was not cured and finally died of long illness. In between, they also consulted *baiga*, who told them that one of their female relative has mixed something in his father's food because she was jealous of their wealth. So, this instance indicates that jealousy and envy express the strained relationship between accuser and accused. All the members of the society have profound faith in witchcraft and very much embedded in their worldview. Besides this, belief in witchcraft gives answers to those questions of life that are unexplainable like serious illness, sudden death, accidents, misfortunes etc. By accusing anyone as witch, people actually try to find out a scapegoat to put all blame for perplexing situation if life. It is also a means to release tension and anxiety. Hence, the main function of witchcraft is to, provide explanation for people's suffering.

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