

7. Witchcraft - A Curse in Disguise for Mankind: A Case Study of North Odisha

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The hilly tracts of Odisha are the abode of 62 tribes, which is the highest in number than the other states of India.¹ They have different, interesting and colourful socio-cultural life which is reflected in their day to day activities. Religion as the pivot of their life exercises great influence on their social ways and habits. Most of the tribes are animist in nature. They worship ancestral spirit for peace and prosperity. It is the root of every religion.² They believe that their life is controlled by the supernatural powers.³ According to them, religion means beliefs and behaviours related to the existence of supernatural beings and forces. The method of controlling the supernatural forces is called magic. Magic is different from other religious practices such as prayer and votive offerings in which the god are propitiated for seeking their blessings.⁴ It can be only used for both good and bad purposes. The magic which is used for bad or malefic purposes is called black magic. The black magic is displayed by the evil spirits like *Dahani*, *Chirguni*, *Pretasuni*, *Satbahini*, *Kalimuhin*, *Kalpurus*, *Gomuahana* and many other *Bhuts*.⁵ Among all these spirits *Dahini* or witches have the potent evil powers. The art of learning and using or applying their black magic is generally known as witchcraft.

The origin of witchcraft is shrouded in obscurity. Some anthropologists have traced back to its origin to the Neanderthal men living in the caves. They discovered a cave known as the cave of witch in Italy.⁶ The German archaeologist discovered related evidence in the caves of Lebanon and Switzerland. Anthropologist D. Bhattacharya also mentioned about the magical power among the pre-historic mankind.⁷ Shakespeare in his English drama *Othello* has described the witches. Tarashankar Bondopadhyay wrote a story on witchcraft titled *Daini* in *Bengali*. It showed how villagers began to believe that a particular woman was a witch and a child eater. Manik Bondopadhyay wrote another story entitled *Holudpora* on a *Shaman* or *Gunia* or spirit doctor and the process of exorcising an evil spirit who had possessed a woman.⁸ Yoshavanta Das a renowned poet of medieval period highlighted on the learning of *tantra* in his work on *Tikagovindchandra*. Girija Baliarsingh also depicted the evil practices in the folk culture in his monumental work *Tantravilasira Sadhusanga* in Odia. Being a scholar of science Shantanu Kumar Acharya has written a good number of stories on various spirits in his famous book *Karanjia Dairy*. He highlighted the people's experienced spiritual stories of Mayurbhanj in his diary.⁹

Training of the Witches:

The faith on witchcraft is widely prevalent in the tribal society of Mayurbhanj. The witches acquire their power through secret training at *Amabashya* night from others who already know it. There are specific networks among the witches with hierarchies of status and leadership fixed on the basis of experience. It is believed that the witches from different villages gather at a fixed place near a big tree or an open land at night. They perform many awe-inspiring rites and dance and sing till the last part of the night. Sometimes, they strip off their clothes and roam at night. Some of them wear broomsticks around their waist. According to the *Lodhas* of Besarpani, the witches eat human excreta at night. Any villagers who come across a witch will fall seriously ill and may even become insane or die.¹⁰

Conversion Mantras

The witches may be male or female. The men may be bewitched by other men or women, but women are generally bewitched only by members of their own sex. But some other tribal groups believe that only women can practice witchcraft. They can attack both men and women. There is no age limit to learn the mantras, charms and songs of the witches. The spirit doctors say that the conversion mantra of witchcraft is very short and simple and one can easily learn it. It consists of only *Adhei Kali* or two and a half stanza.¹¹ They are also taught the *Basikaran* mantra and *Marana* mantra. A husband of a witch cannot speak anything against her as she applied the *Basikaran* mantras.¹²

Completion of Training

The newly trained witches are very dangerous. There is a proverb in *Odia* that, *nua dahani chhua khai*, which means the freshly trained witches are child eater.¹³ After learning, the trainer issue order to the witches to utilize it to make harm to one of her relatives. If the disciple refuses to do so, she becomes insane and dies. If she becomes successful her training period becomes over and she is permitted to use it to make harm to others. They are also advised to act carefully as the seed may live on when they themselves die. In most cases, it was the mother who herself a witch, instructed her daughter the secret of black magic and taught her the powerful spells of witchcraft.¹⁴ Thus the practice of witchcraft is transmitted from generation to generation which is still alive in the tribal society of Odisha.

Role of Gunia

The witches use their occult power to the men or women to whom they dislike. Being affected by the spirit of a witch he/she may fall ill with a serious disease. In evening the suffering becomes unbearable. The doctor never finds out the cause of the disease. At that time the patient likes to stay in utter darkness

and do not want to show her face. She also becomes angry when the leaves of custard apple put on her bed. All these external symptoms of the patient compelled the family members to call for a *Gunia* or a spirit doctor. The *Gunia* prepared necessary arrangements and chant the mantras. He also gives smoke of *jhuna* and then leather used in their musical instrument to the patient which is intolerable for her. At that time the *Gunia* force her to say her name, name of the village, the cause of her coming and about her family.¹⁵ But sometimes the witches tell the name of others instead of giving her identity which creates a local problem in tribal society. By the order of the *Gunia* the patient run out and fall down on the ground and relaxed.

Identification of a Witch

It is very difficult to identify a common woman as a witch. Yet the spirit doctor has mentioned the following characteristic of a witch. Firstly a witch has a striking facial expression that set her apart from other people. Secondly, a witch does not take food served on the back of any leaf. Thirdly a witch never looks at the face of the person that she talks to. Fourthly a witch moves in the dead of the night and harms the villagers.¹⁶ Finally, the witches do not take any food on peepal leaf.¹⁷ It indicates its relation with tantric Buddhism.

Malefic Activities

The witches have an evil mouth and evil eyes. Whenever the witches cast their look on a living thing, harm is sure to follow. If a witch stares at a mulched cow or a fine calf, the milk may be stopped or the cow does not feed its calf and the calf will surely die shortly.¹⁸ Sometimes, the colour of the milk changed into a reddish colour. If the witch gazes at some particular vegetable or fruit, these will dry up soon. If anyone happens to meet them at night, they may fall seriously ill. The witches can see the heart of every person and she always tries to take it. If a witch askance the preparation of rice-powder for making cakes the cakes will not be boiled in oil.¹⁹

Its middle portion will remain as usual. The auspicious days of the witches are *Sankranti*, *Amabashya* and *Punnima*. *Baundi* or the day before *Makar* festival is their most favourite day. On that night they move from door to door and village to village. The people in Mayurbhanj anoint oil in their feet and chest by which the witches do not exert blood from the body. People believed that with the help of spell a witch could change herself into a cat, a rate or a worm and in that disguise enter the house of an enemy unseen and drunk his blood. The victim for loss of blood soon got sick and died after few days.²⁰

Lover of Babies

Witches are very harmful to the handsome little babies. If the evil glance falls on them, the babies cry day and night. The parents become hopeless. The doctor cannot find out their diseases. Under this situation, the *Gunia* or the spirit doctor can cure them by using his tantric power. The babies do not cry anymore.²¹ One of the *mantra* is given below-

Baltalai Kulhimula Solaso Dainer Mela
Chhana Kandichhe Uana Uana
Tui Bhai Muin Bahin Gun Sikhili Ekathi
Tuin Sikhlu Kandaite Muin Sikhli Bandaite
Kandile Kandbi Nainre Chhana
Chepa Sasthi Mainer Dahai Achhe
*Chhal Kandna-----Dhar Nindna.*²²

(The meaning of the *mantra* is that there is a Banyan tree at the end of the village where sixteen hundred witches come to meet one another. The *Gunnia* and the witches learn the black art in the same place i.e. the *Akhada*. They are brother and sister. The witches learn all the evil practices whereas the *Gunnias* learn it to serve the society. Both the witches and the *Gunnias* have good relation and they respond to each other. Lastly, the *Gunnia* pays homage to mother *Sasthi* who always blesses for the well being of the small children.)

Protection from witches

The tribes wear charms to avert the evil influence of the witches. Some tribes keep the leaves of custard apple when they take their child to other villages. After birth, the placenta of a child is buried inside the house to avoid evil eye.²³ The witches are jealousy to other women. So they wear black thread on their left leg. They also use a piece of *Valia* with a metal cover and tied by a black thread in their left arm. Apprehending the coming of a witch to the house three black lines are drawn at the entrance. Paddy or vegetable fields are protected with the skull of a cow hanging from a pole in the middle of the fields. Sometimes a scarecrow is placed in the field. The cow-shed is protected putting the branches of *Valia*. A rope made of the long black hair of women with a *Valia* is put on the neck of the mulch cow to avoid the evil glance of the witches. Due to the death of family members or near relatives and birth of a child the power of all those applications are lost.²⁴ In spite of these protection measures when the people possess the spirit of witches the *Gunias* are called for applying their *mantras* and other medicinal herbs or roots. The *mantras* are a spell in mixed Bengali as well as *Odia* language. Again there is the influence of Islamic

culture on the tantric art of Mayurbhanj. A *mantra* collected from late Guhram Mohanta of the village, Baunsada, p.s. Jharpokharia is cited below for convenience.

*Hanu Hanu Tui Hanu Thilu Kahi Allara Hukume Ailu Dhain,
Ailuta Bhala Kalu Khedre Babu Khed,
Ghara Ku Chhadi Parku Khed.
Bhut Khed Pret Khed Mali Khed Masani Khed,
Dahani Khed Pauni Khed Bhurkundi Khed Bauti Khed,
Jalmaid Khed Kalmad Khed Sat Bhaunira Raktabuja Dhula Khed,
Khedinei Chhedi Kha Sat Samundar Lankarpar,
Kahe Thilu Hnumanvir Rajaramer Dahai Achhe.
Khedinei Chhedi Kha Sat Samundar Lankarpar.*²⁵

Here the *Gunia* invoked Hanumanvir to cure the patient. He ordered god Hanuman to drive out the evil spirits that possess in the body of the patient. He also chants the name of Rama, the master of Hanuman and requests them to send the spirit out of the seven seas.

Condition of the Witches in Society

The witches are hated and feared in the tribal society. When the villagers know them and their evil activities, they are seriously assaulted and excommunicated from society. Her land would be confiscated by the village panchayat.²⁶ In the early days, women witches were poisoned to death. In the district of Mayurbhanj, some of the identified witches were taken to the super *Gunias* of the village Sapdhara in the district of Midnapur in West-Bengal. The super *Gunia* by his powerful magic spell kick out the spirit those possess the witches.²⁷

The people always try to avoid the witches. No one even her/his own relatives like them. The concept of witchcraft is in vogue in tribal society even today. These days, a witch cannot be banished from her village. She is fined or severely beaten. The killing of witches is a day to day affair in the tribal society.²⁸ Presently the government launched the awareness programme to eradicate the superstitious belief on witchcraft. But the tribes are not in a position to accept it. According to them the *Dikus* and the witches is the greatest enemy of their society.²⁹ Some tribes accepted Christianity to save themselves from the attack of witches. They believe that the witches do not touch the man of other religion. If the Muslim *Gunia* applies his magic spell the spirit of the witches runs away immediately.³⁰ So it is a difficult task to convince them. It will take more time to be changed.

One can believe or not there is something mystery behind it. The historian, anthropologist and social scientist should make thorough and scientific research to bring out a real picture on witchcraft and to undertake special plan and project for its eradication. The practice of witchcraft not only degrade the position of women in the society but also responsible for creating a socio-religious problem which caused a number of criminal cases. Therefore we all try to find out the root and to take steps to eradicate the irrational practice of witchcraft which will be a great tribute to the tribal society of Odisha.

Notes and References

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2. Shamrao I. Koreti, *Socio-cultural History of the Gonds*, New Delhi, 2013, p.163.
3. Vide N.K.Behura& K.K.Mishra,s article, *Religious rites and Festivals of the Tribes of Orissa*,(ed) B.C.Roy in Tribes of Orissa, New Delhi,1984,pp.39-40.
4. Ashis Kumar Das, *Munda Shaman, Living with Continuity and Change in an Age old Tradition*, New Delhi, 2012, p.1.
5. P.K.Bhowmick, *The Lodhas of West-Bengal*, Culcuta, 1963, pp.160-177.
6. Ashis Kumar Das, *op cit*, pp.02-18.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Shantanu Kumar Acharya, *KaranjiaDiary (odia)*, Cuttack, 1984, PP.25-126.
10. Ashis Kumar Das, *op cit*, pp.140-150.
11. The author had consulted the *Gunias* like Late Krushna Chandra Mohanta and his son Pradeep Kumar Mohanta of village, Bhuasuni under Bangriposi Block of Mayurbhanj district and collected some hidden facts of witchcraft.
12. Ashis Kumar Das, *op cit*, pp.150-152.
13. This is a common proverb used by the village folk of Mayurbhanj.
14. Shamrao I. Koreti, *op cit*, pp.160-166.
15. The author consulted a village school retired teacher, Sonersing Hansdah of village Rayan who personally have seen the role of the *Gunias* in exorcising the witches.
16. Ashis Kumar Das, *op cit*, p.149.
17. The author visited Analaduba of Ward No-10 under Rairang Pur Notified Area Council on 25-06-2017 and collected the fact from an old widow named Urmila Mohanta.

18. P.K.Bhowmick, *op cit*, p.178.
19. This fact is collected from Smt. Nandita Mohanta, a housewife of Bijayramchandrapur, Ward No-22, Baripada, Mayurbhanj.
20. Shamrao I. Koreti, *op cit*, p.204.
21. J.N.S.D.Sachan, *Changing Socio-economic and Cultural Profile of the Lodhas of Mayurbhanj: Since Independence*, (unpublished D.Litt Thesis), North Orissa University, Baripada, 2014, P.74.
22. This mantra is collected from Late Guhiram Mohanta and his son Amarendra Mohanta of Village Baunsada, P.S. Jharpokharia. Mayurbhanj.
23. P.K.Bhowmick, *op cit*, p.149.
24. The author had consulted the *Gunias* like Late Krushna Chandra Mohanta and his son Pradeep Kumar Mohanta of village, Bhuasuni under Bangriposi Block of Mayurbhanj district and collected some hidden facts of witchcraft.
25. This mantra is collected from Late Guhiram Mohanta and his son Amarendra Mohanta of Village Baunsada, P.S. Jharpokharia. Mayurbhanj.
26. Ashis Kumar Das, *op cit*, p.147.
27. The author made an interview with Pati Charan Mohanta of Bhanjpur and his brother Bankeswar Mohanta of Bhugudakata under Baripada Municipality and collected the data about the powerful secret art of super Gunia.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Smt. Nandita Mohanta reported that the patients possessed with evil spirits are often taken to the Muslim Gunias of Baghra Road and Chitrada Chhak which are inside the Baripada town for their treatment. The patient is also taken to the nearest Mosques where the Muslm Guru excoriated them.