

## SUPERSTITION IN THE ORAON SOCIETY

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### ABSTRACT

*The Oraons believe in supernatural beings. They have superstitious practices in the form of the witchcraft, evil eye, evil spirit, exorcizing rituals by spirit doctors (Dhami), mantras, etc. They also believe in omens, wearing of amulets and auspicious or inauspicious days. Poor widowed women are sometimes tormented cruelly blaming them of witchcraft. Although the Oraon's views are changing against the superstitious practices, still a large number of Oraons look up to Dhamis or Ojhas for their physical healing. So an attempt has been made to describe the superstitions prevalent in the Oraon society of Nepal.*

**KEY WORDS:** Danda Katta, Dharmes, Nad, Nepal, Spirit doctor, Superstition, Witchcraft

### INTRODUCTION

Nepal is considered as an excellent repository of cultural heritage of diverse ethnic and cast groups. One among such groups is a numerically small group of people known as Oraon, living mainly in Morang and Sunsari districts of the eastern tarai of Nepal. They were previously known as the Jhangads, but now prefer to be known as Oraons as their counterparts in India and elsewhere. They consider the word 'Jhangad' to be a derogatory word designed for outsiders indicating labourers or servants (Roy, 1984:12). The recent census report shows population of Oraon in Nepal to be 37,424 (CBS 2012). Oraons resembles Dravidians (Roy, 1984; Dalton, 1972; Dehon, 1906; Risley, 1891 and Crookew, 1987). They are short or below medium in height, have dark-brown complexion and have sturdy stature. They speak Kurukh language, which belongs to Dravidian family (Bista, 1972: 157, Pokhrel, 2036: 178). They are considered to have migrated to Nepal from the Chotanagpur of India in search of agricultural land and gradually settled here during 18th century as labourers (Bhandari, Bhandari, 2061 B.S.: 9-11).

The Oraons have their traditional religious system clearly defined. The object of their worship is Dharmes. Their belief system has also determined the spirits they have to propitiate or venerate which includes village spirits, household spirits and the ancestral spirits. They all reside in their specific location. As all these spirits were once considered to be human beings, they have retained some human characteristics in their spirit status such as fondness for food and drink, feelings of greed and anger, etc.

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Therefore, their existence have created certain traditions as well as fear, so much so that if they are not suitable looked after, or in any ways angered by the behaviour of the tribes, displeasure is shown by harassing either the village community of a household or an individual with an epidemic, bad crops, cattle disease or death, sickness, etc.

It must also be noted that a few of these spirits who were also once men or women like ourselves, are believed to be particularly intent on causing harm because of the circumstances in which they died. This is however, the religious belief of the Oraons, and does not fall under the purview of superstition. An example of this is the 'Churail spirit' and the 'Mua spirit'. They are not evil in themselves, but because their shade were never brought to their house and they were buried outside the community hence their evilness. Belief in these spirits cannot be considered superstitions, as the fear they provoke is consistent with the traditional Oraon religion. The object of their worship, Dharmes, does not interfere very much, if at all, with the doings of the spirits who are also the same subject to him. Still these spirits when sacrificed to, are expected to intercede with god for the well-being of those who offer the sacrifices.

### METHODS

Information about the superstition was taken from both primary and secondary sources. Primary information was obtained from the field study conducted during 2012-2013. Interviews and discussions were held with the senior and knowledgeable Oraons including village headmans,

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Ojhas and senior citizens. The Oraon villages of Sunsari (Bhokraha, Satterjhoda, Tanmuna) and Morang (Sakhuwade, Jhora hat) districts of the Eastern Tarai of Nepal were selected as study area. The secondary information was taken from the published relevant literature of Nepal and India (Roy, 1984; Roy, 1985; Kujur, 1989; Bista, 1972; Oraon, 1985).

### SUPERSTITION

Superstitions are the beliefs and practices that run counter to the traditional beliefs of the Oraons. This includes beliefs and practices like witchcraft, poisonous praise and evil eye, magic spells and mantras, beliefs in auspicious or inauspicious days, etc.

### WITCHCRAFT

Witchcraft is an art learnt by women to gain knowledge and power of the visible and invisible world. Usually witchcraft training is given to women instead of men because women are considered more jealous than men. A witch has a power to harm and she can use that power for personal benefit at the enemy. It is believed that the training for being a witch is taken at night, especially new moon night (amavasya) in the month of Kartik before Sohara festival (Roy, 1985: 17-18). They bring a frog, a big brown grasshopper, an adze, a sickle and a small earthen vessel of oil and put those items around them. Witches wear brooms, light lamps and form a circle. They put their earthen lamp on the knee. These lamps should never fall or shake off. Mahadev is believed to be their Guru who is supposed to appear before them in the form of a tiger and sits down close to them. They have also a human guru who directs them and they take an oath never to reveal the secrets of witchcraft (Kujur, 1989: 214). An ordinary person tries never to watch their meetings and dancing because it is believed that if witches know about them, then they will kill him or her. It is said that witches can bring about diseases and calamities on individuals or families in various ways such as using evil eye, magic bundles, the shooting of the magic arrow, the extraction of liver of an intended victim by magic spell and assuming the shape of a black cat. Witchcraft is not considered a safe occupation and a witch may sometimes bring illness and death to her family. If the Ojha reveal the secret to the villagers, she will be fined and treated cruelly.

### EVIL EYE (NAJAR GUJAR) AND POISONOUS PRAISE (BI BHAKH)

The concept of Evil Eye is closely related to the belief of divine power given to some men for something

good, but misused for evil. Whenever such person looks at any healthy person with ill will, they cause sickness, failure or accident. Thus the work of evil eye ends in tragedy. The power of evil eye is believed to be particularly more effective on the persons who are disliked. It is a common belief among Oraons that there are some people who know the art of purposely casting a spell by looking askance while reciting a mantra. Such an intentional spell is called 'ban marna' (throwing an arrow). It is effective when used against men or animals. But it can be ineffective if the intended victim knows the opposite mantra.

Similar to the 'evil eye' is poisonous praise (evil mouth). However its effect is unintentional. It is believed that even if the appreciation or good wishes of close relatives is quit genuine, still the child praised with evil mouth becomes sick, the fine young man gets no marriage partner, the beautiful long hairs of a girl fall down and the pregnant woman miscarries.

### THE SPIRITS

Spirits are called 'Nad' by Oraons. Nad is interpreted as a 'Bhut' by other tribe or caste. In Oraon parlance, 'Nad' is a mysterious, shady realm being that operates at the extra sensory level, in the supernatural realm of reality. According to their belief, there are two kinds of spirits. Some are good and some evil. The spirits are offered animal sacrifices of various colours like grey, black, red and mottled. Colour of the sacrifices signifies difference among the spirits. All spirits are not of the same order, neither are they equally important in Oraon life. The ancestral spirit is called Pachbalar, propitiated in order to receive help and prosperity in the family. In the Oraon society, only those who have died a natural death, after a successful family life, deserves to be counted among the Pachbalar. The spirit of a person dying of an accident or by hanging is designated as 'Mua'. They are believed to be harmless spirits and heard moaning in dark rainy nights. Mua are of different kinds some of which are 'Jaral' or 'Poral' Mua.

### SPIRIT DOCTORS (DHAMI OR OJHA)

The Ojha, with his deity, is a Hindu. He claims to have received his powers from the Hindu deities: Mahadev and Parvati or sometimes from Devi Mai as a reward for his meditation and abstemiousness. He uses the sadri language. He has an open shrine in his house. In the shrines are, a stone in which Mahadev dwells, Tulsi plant (*Ocimum sanctum*), a trident and a bamboo with a small red flag. At this place he offers his regular sacrifices (milk, ghee, flower, incense, sindur, etc.) to Mahadev. The Ojha never makes any

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other sacrifices nor goes along to drive out a spirit. He awaits his client at home.

Before the divining operation begins, he enters his small temple and puts sindur on his Mahadev stone. Then on his own forehead, ear lobes and shoulders thus identifying with his deity. He then blows a trumpet, strikes a gong, burns incense and violently shakes his head, so that 'Mahadev' wakes up in due time. He speaks in a peculiar language. In this trance he claims to see the witch in his surroundings, hears the name of the Bhut (Nad), and thus comes to know the sacrifices it wants. When he returns to his audience he gives an unmistakable description of the witch. The sacrifice, which the Ojha orders for the Bhut, should be of a living animal. The Ojha never takes up the work of offering sacrifice but instead, charges a large fee for his performance but the Oraon do not mind it, because they are certain that he can defeat those malevolent witches.

### **SUPERSTITIONS ON THE OCCASION OF ORAON LIFE CYCLE**

All traditional means of safety are used before a child is born, and after its birth. The labour pain of a pregnant woman is believed to be due to some evil spirit or evil eye. To relieve the pain, they uncover all the pots in the house in a symbolic gesture. It is believed that the smell of the bloody discharge at the time of birth of a child attracts evil spirits, particularly the Churail, for which, bare thorns or iron made instruments are used as preventive means, and kept near the bed. A handful of mustard seeds are also tied to her cloth. Witches are also believed to appear during this period in the shape of a black cat. It is believed that the extractions of liver of a woman by a witch cause death. Therefore oil is rubbed over the abdomen of the pregnant woman till purification day.

When the baby constantly cries, refuses to drink milk, or vomits it out and cannot sleep, the mother takes some mustard seeds, salt and a mango leaf and touches the baby's head with them. She then passes these items thrice over the head of the baby, each time describing a circle. She then puts them in a broken pot, which she puts on a fire. The fire, being a powerful manifestation of their god, is supposed to burn the evil eye. Next morning, the ash is thrown at the village boundary. To protect from the evil eye, an Oraon mother put black marks on the brow of her baby. Black threads are also worn on the neck, arm and waist to get rid of evil eye.

Marriage within the same clan is prohibited. Such marriages are believed to bring calamity to the family. The

omens are considered very important before marriage and are noted when the boy's party goes to visit the house of the girl to see her for the first time. It is believed that on the journey to the would be bride's home, the sight of vessel filled with water, a burning lamp, or a corpse carried to the grave are good omens and the sight of a jackal crossing the path of the party from left to right, the sight of an empty vessel being carried, the sight of cow dung being carried to the manure pit or to the field and the sound of king crows are bad omens. Within the territory of the village of the groom and that of the bride, all omens are significant. On the stretch, in between the two boundaries, only the bigger omens, sent by Dharmes are considered significant. If such a major omen is met anywhere along the journey, the marriage negotiations are broken off.

During Isung Sindri (applying vermilion), the bride faces to the east, which is the symbol of the invisible world. During this ceremony, one or more men stand outside the screen and fling their sword into the air to protect new couples from the influence of evil eyes or evil spirits.

When bride and bridegroom leave the bride's house, they are offered an iron bar or a sword for the protection against the influence of black magic. She is carried across a river for protection against water spirit. After entering the bridegroom's house the couple cannot go out until 'Danda Katta' ceremony is performed by the priest or a head of the family. When a bride goes to her parent's house for the first time, she takes back with her, rice-beer and fried bread, which are distributed to every Oraon house in the village, for it is believed that unless this present is sent, the girl will remain barren or even if she bears children, they will be unhealthy.

After death it is said that on Harbora day (funeral day), the spirits of the dead ancestors come to the graveyard and eat delightedly, the food offered to them. It is also believed that death is caused by some spirit or witchcraft if any footprint is seen in the Ekha Mankhna rituals.

### **OBJECTS USED AS PRECAUTION AGAINST THE EVIL EYE**

Oraons use various objects as precaution against the influences of the evil eye such as mango. Sal and banana leaves are considered as deterrents to evil spirits. Iron and copper made instruments are used for protection against the evil eye, as iron smelling was believed to be the cause of the downfall of the Asurs, the enemies of Dharmes. When salt is put into the fire it makes cracking sounds and burns with

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flames. The Oraons compare this with the influence of evil eye breaking up into pieces and disappearing.

The Oraons worship god, the fire manifesting his power. The contents of a supposedly witch, are put into a fire to be burnt and destroyed. Charcoal is considered to have a protective quality. Among cultivated plants, chilli is considered deterrent to evil spirits. When put in a fire, the air of the room containing burning chilli makes breathing difficult, and the Oraons believe that, such atmosphere drives away evil spirits. Mustard seed is very small and slippery and because of these qualities, they are believed to nullify the influence of the evil spirit and evil eye.

To divert the evil eye and evil mouth, the Oraons also adopt certain minor magical expedients. For example, marking the forehead of a child with soot, putting on certain charms and amulets and setting up in the field of maize, vegetables and other crops an inverted earthen vessel with its upturned bottom painted white and black colours or setting up the skull of a dog in their kitchen garden.

### TABOO

Taboo is another sacred belief which is a rather a negative custom of any belief. It has become superstition for the people. Majumdar takes the religious side of taboo as safeguarding of ritual operations to protect religious persons and places of worship and to prevent irreligion from spreading (Majumdar, 1961: 357). The Oraon women observe the taboo of touching a plough. There is also a taboo of not calling out each other's name, and no touching of body parts between a man and his wife's elder sister and between a man and younger brother's wife. This taboo is also observed in between a woman and her younger sister's husband and between a woman and her husband's elder brother. They eat every fish and flesh of birds and animals except monkeys. The flesh of the monkey is a taboo for the whole tribe.

The Oraons also observe the taboo against calling the names of some reptiles and animals in the night. Instead of calling these animals by their actual names, they use symbolic names. For e.g. a snake is called a 'rope'. Similarly, when anybody has to call the name of a tiger, they refer it as the Digha Khola (long tail), which also symbolizes the long tail of the tiger. It is believed that the proper names of certain reptiles and animals must always be avoided at night to ward off the evil magic of these malevolent animals.

### CONCLUSION

The Oraons believe in supernatural power. They have a great faith in spirits (Nads). There are also reports of witchcraft, evil eye and evil mouth within the Oraon community. They believe that some people know the art of casting a spell, by reciting a mantra for the purpose of causing harm. They have great belief in Dhami or Ojha who, they believe, can exorcize the witch or evil spirits. They seek omens before marriage when the boy's party visits the house of the girl to see her for the first time. If omens are met anywhere in the journey, the marriage negotiations are broken off. However, with the modernization and education, the attitudes of Oraons are changing towards superstitions. The recitation of mantras by Dhami or Ojha is now falling into disuse. People are losing faith in their efficacy and power. The witches are now relieved of their role in causing sickness and pain. Although the Oraons have begun to realize that their Dhami or Ojhas are not powerful enough to prevent physical sickness, and that illness are not always caused by Bhuts and evil eyes, still a large number of Oraons look up to Dhami for the physical healing.

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