

Witchcraft Among The Kodaku Tribe: Anthropological Study Of Traditional Beliefs And Change

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Abstract:

Traditions, culture and religious beliefs of tribal communities of India are very unique and interesting. Kodaku tribe is a major tribe of Chhattisgarh, in this tribe traditions like Witchcraft, sorcery, exorcism, and supernatural abilities have been an important part of social and mental life. Many times, diseases and unfortunate occurrences are caused by supernatural powers (such power which we cannot see with naked eyes). These beliefs are not only related to religious faith, but also reflect their traditional lifestyle, social structure and mentality and also play a role in maintaining the health, security and social order of the community. In the tribal community, witchcraft is considered to be a supernatural power, which can be used in both good and bad forms as per the need. The present research study has been done by collecting data from a total of 215 respondents and 20 Baiga/Gunia/Ojha (key respondents) of Kodaku tribal community of 7 villages of tribal dominated district Balrampur of Chhattisgarh. The study found that the prevalence of witchcraft was very high in the Kodaku tribe of Balrampur district in the past. Any unusual behavior in social, familial, or physical activity was considered to be witchcraft. Earlier, when someone fell ill, his initial treatment was done by Baiga/Gunia/Ojha, but in the present times, due to modernization and government schemes, the beliefs of witchcraft are gradually decreasing.

Key words: Kodaku tribe, witchcraft, beliefs, change, Balrampur, Chhattisgarh

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I. Introduction:

India is a land of diverse cultures, traditions and communities, where many tribes still keep their ancient lifestyle, religious beliefs and traditions alive. Among these tribes, the Kodaku tribe occupies an important place, which mainly resides in the northern regions of Chhattisgarh state especially in Balrampur, Korea and Surguja districts. Their lifestyle is based on forest, nature and community, and their religious beliefs are deeply connected to these elements (Vaishnav, 2017). An important aspect of the religious life of the tribal community is also the beliefs of witchcraft and tantra-mantra. They often consider diseases, natural disasters, family disputes or inauspicious events to be the effect of supernatural powers or evil spirits. In such situations, the help of traditional Vaidyas or Tantrik like Ojha, Guniya or Bajha is taken. Exorcism, witchcraft, sacrifice and other traditional methods are part of this process. Although many of these traditions are considered superstitious in today's scientific age, they still remain a part of tribal consciousness and cultural identity. Within the Indian tribal community, there exists a conflict between conservative ideologies associated with tradition and those aligned with modernity (Singh, 1985).

In recent years, there have been important changes in the beliefs regarding witchcraft among the Kodaku community. Education, access to health services, urbanization and government awareness programs have inspired them to look at their traditional beliefs from a new perspective. Many Kodaku are now also attracted to mainstream religions such as Hinduism or Christianity. Also, now the trend towards hospitals and doctors for the treatment of diseases has increased, due to which the relevance of traditions like exorcism is gradually decreasing. Thus, the religious life of the Kodaku tribe is a confluence in which the imprint of both tradition and modernity can be clearly seen. This subject is not only a medium to understand their religious and cultural status, but also shows how social changes affect traditional beliefs. Tribal society is given the status of a simple society because it presents itself to the world in its true form without any external pretense. The members of the tribal community have immense beliefs towards duality and myth. The tradition of witchcraft (Tona-Totka, Tantra-Mantra) has been seen as an ancient and strong cultural belief in tribal communities. These beliefs are usually related to attempts to understand and control natural phenomena, diseases, life circumstances and social difficulties. However, over time, these beliefs have also changed due to the increasing influence of modernity, education and scientific outlook (Mohanty, 2006).

II. Review Of Literature:

Elwin, V. (1955) conducted his study on the tribes of Bastar region of Chhattisgarh and found that the tribes there have a very deep belief in Tantra-Mantra, Ojha-Guniya and traditional medical practices. The main reason behind this was that modern health services were very limited or unavailable at the local level. In the tribal society of India, these traditional methods are not only considered as a means of treating diseases, but they have also become an integral part of religious, social and cultural life.

Sharma (2005) has specifically linked the activities of Tantra/Mantra such as cutting hair, twisting clothes, asking for vermilion, etc. in various tribal communities of Chhattisgarh to "body symbols" and "energy control". According to him, the Kodaku, Pando, Oraon tribes in Balrampur, Surajpur, Surguja districts use these methods to control the enemy, cure diseases and increase good fortune.

Rai (2010), in his research on "Symbolic Tantric Practices in Tribal Communities", stated that tribal communities consider items such as cloth, hair, vermilion, ash as "energy carriers". He also found that these items are used in tribal communities to control the body, soul or good fortune of another person.

According to the report of the National Tribal Health Mission (2015), with the increasing access to health services, schools, and women's self-help groups in rural and remote tribal areas, the trend towards modern medical practices is gradually increasing. This change has been seen more clearly especially among the youth.

Sinha (2018) found in his study that women of the new generation have started believing very little in witchcraft and traditional medical system and now they have started giving more importance to the advice of health workers such as ANM, Mitani, Asha worker and Anganwadi worker. This trend points to significant positive changes in reproductive health, maternal and child care.

Objective Of The Research:

The objectives of the present study are as follows: -

1. To study the activities and beliefs of witchcraft in the Kodaku tribe.
2. To study the changes in the beliefs of witchcraft in the Kodaku tribe.

III. Research Methodology:

Research Design: The design of the present research study is descriptive and exploratory. For which both qualitative and quantitative data have been collected.

Sampling method and selection of respondents: For the present research paper, data has been collected from a total of 215 tribal families and 20 Baiga/Gunia/Ojha (key respondents) of 7 Kodaku dominated villages (villages in which at least 20 Kodaku tribal families reside) under Balrampur district and development block of Chhattisgarh through purposive sampling.

Data collection: In the presented research study, interview guide and interview schedule were used for collecting primary data. Published research papers, thesis, books, internet website etc. were used for collecting secondary data.

Research Area: The presented research is an anthropological study which has been conducted in the following 7 Kodaku dominated villages falling under Balrampur district and development block of Chhattisgarh state.

Table No. 1.1			
Village-wise distribution of respondents' place of origin			
S.N.	Native Place of Respondents	frequency	percentage
1.	Bhelwadih	36	16.7
2.	Jamdih	34	15.8
3.	Jabar	20	9.3
4.	Pachawal	22	10.2
5.	Maharajganj	29	13.5
6.	Makyathi	36	16.7
7.	Semarsot	38	17.7
	Total	215	100.0

Tools and techniques for collecting primary data: In the presented research, interview guide, semi-participant observation, focus group discussion have been used for collecting primary data.

General information about 'Kodaku' tribe: The mother tongue of the Kodaku tribe is believed to be 'Kodukh'. These tribes lived in the mountains and forests and made a living by hunting and collecting food from the forests. The origin of the word Kodaku is believed to be from "Kodwa" i.e. "land digging" tribe. They live in the hilly areas of Chhattisgarh state in Surguja and Balrampur (Chhattisgarh) and in the border areas of Uttar Pradesh and

Jharkhand. These tribes used to live in hilly areas earlier, gradually agriculture attracted them to live in plain areas and these tribes are living by agriculture and labour. Most of these tribes currently earn their livelihood by earning income from the products made from bamboo (Vaishnav, 2017).

IV. Results And Analysis:

Traditional Beliefs Related To Witchcraft In Kodaku Tribe

In the present research study, an attempt was made to know what are the traditional beliefs related to witchcraft in Kodaku tribe due to which they associate themselves with witchcraft. The following facts were found in the study-

Table No. 1.2							
Traditional beliefs related to witchcraft in the Kodaku tribe							
S.N.	Traditional beliefs related to witchcraft	Yes		No		Total	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Belief/Faith in natural forces	215	100	-	-	215	100
2.	Fear of negative forces	207	96.3	8	3.7	215	100
3.	Importance of shaman or tantric	196	91.2	19	8.8	215	100
4.	Organization of group rituals	211	98.1	4	1.9	215	100

It is evident from the above table that 100% of the respondents believe that there is faith/belief in natural powers related to witchcraft, under which in tribal society, natural powers like forests, mountains, rivers and fire are considered as forms of gods, to please whom various rituals are performed. 96.3% of the respondents feel fear of negative powers. They believe that diseases, untimely death or natural disasters are often caused by evil spirits, to appease which tantric measures are used. Out of the total respondents, 91.2% of the respondents have had the importance of exorcist or tantrik directly/indirectly in their lifetime. They believe that there is an exorcist or 'guniya' within the community, who treats and also gives advice through methods like tantras, mantras, and exorcism. 98.1% of the families organize collective rituals. On special occasions like festivals, marriages or deaths, witchcraft and tantric rituals are performed collectively. The study also found that in most of the Kodaku tribal families, if any member suddenly falls ill, is not getting success in any work, someone dies, a dead child is born, all these are the results of black magic and they consider it to be 'Paang Dena' (spell) by some witch/sorcerer.

Witchcraft and Superstition:

Importance of *Ojha-Gunia* (Traditional Healers): *Ojha* (exorcist) has an important place in Kodaku society. People go to *Ojha* in case of bad omen, illness or any problem. People of Kodaku community believe that if any member of their family suddenly falls ill, then it is definitely due to the influence of negative energy and it will be cured only when we get that person exorcized by *Ojha-Gunia*. This is the reason why *Ojha-Gunia* is given special importance among the people of Kodaku community even today. Some families believe that they take their child to *Ojha-Gunia* once before going to the government hospital and they have found that their illness gets cured by this, they go to the government hospital only when it does not get cured.

Sorcery: In the Kodaku community, it is often seen/heard that a person has been possessed by an evil spirit or someone has done black magic on him due to which his nature becomes abnormal. On all these suspicions, exorcism is done by the exorcist. After exorcism, the nature of the affected person becomes normal, so it is believed that the exorcist has driven away the evil spirit from that person and the exorcist advises them to apply ash or tie an amulet so that the person will not be possessed by that ghost again.

Witchcraft Practices: Earlier it was believed that some women are witches and harm the society, but now this practice is gradually decreasing. There were beliefs that often those women whose husbands have died (widows) cannot see a family happy and cheerful, due to which they try to harm that family by invoking evil spirits. In the present study it was found that the belief in witch-hunting is gradually decreasing in the Kodaku community, but there are still some families who follow this practice.

Harm in the family due to black magic:

In the present research, an attempt has been made to find out how many families in the Kodaku tribe have suffered due to black magic:

Table No. 1.3			
Harm in the family due to black magic			
S.N.	Harm to the family due to black magic	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Yes	177	82.3
2.	No	38	17.7
	Total	215	100.0
Types of harm caused to the family due to black magic			
1.	Physical/Health/Mental Harm	80	45.2
2.	Economic Harm	44	24.8
3.	Life Harm	21	11.9
4.	All of the above three	32	18.1
	Total	177	100

From the above table regarding the loss in the family due to black magic, it is known that out of the total 215 Kodaku families, maximum 82.3 percent of the respondents believe that their family has suffered loss due to black magic, out of which maximum 24.2 percent said that their members have suffered physical/health/mental loss, 24.8 percent have suffered financial loss, in which they believe that due to black magic their crops have been ruined/earnings from the shop have reduced/wages are not being received or are not being paid on time, 11.9 percent families also reported loss of life. Out of the total families studied, 18.1 percent families are such that have faced all three types of loss.

The Groups That Are Most Affected by Witchcraft: The study of the tribal community showed that black magic has a major effect on the children and women within the family. The belief behind this is that they are relatively weak physically, mentally and emotionally, due to which the effect of evil power affects them quickly.

Ability to practice witchcraft: Ability to practice witchcraft is found in both men and women. It depends whether they have learnt it or not. The tribal community under study uses the term *Tonha/Tonahi/Daayan* for those who practice witchcraft.

The Nature Of Practicing Witchcraft

The tradition of witchcraft in the Kodaku tribe of Chhattisgarh is deeply connected with socio-cultural beliefs. The practices of witchcraft/*Totka*, *Tantra-Mantra* and *Ojha-Gunia* are still alive in this tribe. Some special processes are common in these practices, such as:

Hair Cutting /Manipulation:

- Taking hair by exorcist or witch: In the Kodaku tribe, hair has special importance in the process of black magic. The hair is silently cut by the exorcist/*tantrik*/ witch from the head or body of the person on whom the influence is to be exerted.
- Use as a means of communication: In the tribal community under study, it is believed that hair represents the "spiritual or energetic identity" of a person. That is why; by considering hair as a physical symbol, contact is established with the person on whom the influence is to be exerted.
- Chanting and Rotating Ritual: The process of rotating the hair obtained by the exorcist/*tantrik*/witch is done in the hands while reciting mantras. During this, "Sankalp" is filled in the hair by chanting special tantric mantras.
- Use in doll or symbol: The resolved hair is put in a doll made of flour or clay. Sometimes it is also tied in betel nut, lemon or any cloth. If an effigy is made, it is buried, burned or immersed in water. It is believed that this can cause fear, illness, fever or other mental distress to the person.
- Belief and social impact: This practice also has social impact. If someone is suspected of witchcraft, it can lead to fear, alienation and social tension in the community.

Cutting the Cloth:

- Obtaining the cloth of the target person: This process begins by stealthily or deceitfully cutting or obtaining the whole cloth of the person (such as shirt, towel, saree, blouse etc.). This is the same cloth which the person has worn recently. According to the belief of the Kodaku tribe, the "energy" or "influence" of the person gets absorbed in that cloth.
- Tantric method of cutting the cloth: The exorcist/gunia cuts the cloth/garment with chanting of mantras. This work is usually done in solitude, on a special date (such as Amavasya or Poornima). The cloth can also be cut in a special shape such as a triangle or a human figure, so that it becomes a symbolic "effigy".
- Belief of causing negative impact: The cloth is cut and filled with soil, lemon, pot and buried, burnt or thrown in the river. It is believed that this can cause physical pain, mental distress or family unrest to the person. This process is done for the purpose of revenge, enmity or jealousy.

Using Vermilion (Sindoor):

- In the Kodaku tribe, sindoor is considered a symbol of a woman's strength, good fortune and life energy. It is considered very sacred for married women. When a woman or her family has to be bound, put into inauspicious events or to create discord in her house, then this process is used by the exorcist/sorcerer.
- Use of sindoor in black magic: The exorcist/sorcerer (*Ojha/Gunia*) obtains sindoor from a woman by stealthily or by deceit. The obtained sindoor is put in a pot, lemon or clay doll for black magic and then it is used with chanting of mantras.
- Control through sindoor: It is believed that if the sanctified sindoor is filled in a special object and buried near the house, then the woman or the family starts getting affected by the tantra/mantra. As a result, infertility/dead birth in the woman, illness, marital discord or even mental imbalance has been observed.
- Folk remedies for protection: When a woman suspects that her vermilion has been or is being misused, she can protect herself or her family by using ash, amulet, neem branch or by worshipping the goddess.

Form Of The Process Of Neutralizing The Effect Of Black Magic

1. Sprinkling Water:

- **Use of Consecrated Water:** In the Kodaku tribe, water is consecrated with special mantras by the shaman or guniya. This water is usually taken from a river, well or any sacred place and is prepared using tantric methods.
- **Identification of Disease or Evil Power:** This process is used when a person is suspected of being possessed by an evil spirit/evil power/ghost, black magic or an unknown disease.
- **Method of Sprinkling:** The shaman sprinkles this consecrated water around the affected house or on the body of the sick person. This sprinkling is done to remove/remove the evil powers, purify the environment and neutralize the effect of black magic. In some cases, consecrated water is also given to the person to drink, so that the "black magic" inside him can come out.
- **Chanting During Ritual:** The *ojha* recites mantras continuously while sprinkling water. These mantras are in the *ojha's* local/folk dialect, which are passed down through oral tradition from generation to generation.
- **Symbolic Effect:** If the affected person shivers, vomits or faints after sprinkling, it is considered as "the spell is gone". This convinces the community that the *ojha* has successfully removed the evil spirit.

Change In Beliefs Related To Witchcraft

The following reasons were found for the decrease/change in beliefs related to witchcraft among the respondents of the study-

1. Education and scientific outlook: Due to the spread of education in tribal areas and the efforts of social organizations, superstitions have decreased and scientific outlook is developing among the people. Now people have started resorting to hospitals for the treatment of diseases.
2. Government efforts: Programs run to increase awareness, such as health camps and 'Superstition Eradication Campaign', have made people aware of the real facts. Due to the awareness campaign being run by the government, a gradual change is being seen in the beliefs related to witchcraft.
3. Media and digital technology: Tribal communities are connecting with the outside world through mobile, television, media and internet, due to which the belief in practices like witchcraft has decreased.
4. Change in the thinking of the youth: Today's new generation has started considering these traditional beliefs as superstitions and giving more priority to education, employment and technological advancement. Due to which the beliefs related to witchcraft are decreasing day by day.
5. Impact of health services: Earlier, where illness was linked to witchcraft, in the present times, people of Kodaku community are turning towards hospitals and doctors, due to which there is now flexibility in beliefs related to witchcraft.
6. Legal awareness: Now legal action is taken against witchcraft and superstition, which people have started understanding due to education and awareness and due to joining the mainstream, such incidents have reduced.

V. Conclusion:

The belief and practice of witchcraft still persists as a cultural reality among the Kodaku tribe under study, which affects their personal/family life, illness and social relations. However, due to increased awareness, education, modernization, health services, government schemes and legislation, all these beliefs are gradually changing. But this change appears to be relatively slow.

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