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Research Article

IS WITCHCRAFT A SUPPRESSED DESIRE OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN SANTAL SOCIETY?: A STUDY IN SELECT SANTAL FOLKTALES

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ABSTRACT

The study intends to show how through the practice of witchcraft women in Santal society gain a power or strength, both physically and mentally, which very often act as a suppressed desire of women empowerment. At the very outset the term women empowerment has been discussed. Then the paper shows the actual status of women in Santal society. The fact becomes quite obvious that like a typical patriarchal mainstream society Santal society treats woman as an untrustworthy negligible being who cannot fulfil the real demands of life. Not only that, society has also imposed many rules and taboos on Santal women. But the practice of witchcraft helps women to exercise power in Santal society. An analysis of select Santal folktales will help us to understand how through the practice of witchcraft Santal women very often apply ultimate power in society. To a large extent it seems to be that they are seeking to establish women empowerment through their authority.

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INTRODUCTION

Women empowerment is a much talked about subject in the present scenario. Women empowerment ensures the equality of women with men in every aspect of society. It signifies the empowering of women to make them independent in their mind, thought and decisions. Above all, women empowerment helps women to rise up above all limitations and confinement of society. It makes women independent and at the same time confident to take their own decisions. The issues that come inevitably with the idea of women empowerment are: Women must live in society with dignity and self-respect. Women are free to make the decisions of their life. They have an equal right to participate in religious, social or public activities. Women must have an equal social status in society. Above all, women empowerment must create an environment that will secure social, economic, political and legal status of women in society.

Before entering into the discussion of gaining women empowerment as the suppressed desire of Santal women through the practice of witchcraft it is important to talk about the situation or status of women in Santal society. Like the mainstream patriarchal society Santal society too treats women as an untrustworthy and negligible being. She is necessary and at the same time the inferior member in society. Santal society thinks that women are irresponsible. They are unable to take

their decisions. Santal women are known for their foolishness. If it is a case of adultery it is the women who are punished only. P.O. Bodding has commented on that in an appropriate way:

The original and still often theoretically accepted idea about women among the Santal seems to be that she is a kind of irresponsible and untrustworthy being, a necessary and useful, but somewhat inferior member of human society. (221)

She cannot even pass her judgement regarding the social, religious or household aspects. Like other patriarchal society, before marriage she is the property of her father, after marriage she is the property of her husband and then as a widow she belongs to her son. A Santal woman is not allowed to participate in religious worship. She can invoke to *bongas*¹ but has to do it through her male owners. She is not allowed to know the name of the *bongas*. She can neither be present at the time of sacrifice nor can participate in the sacrificial act during festivals. The reason underlying is that Santal society thinks if the women come to know the name of the *bongas* they may come into contact with the evil forces that may cause turbulence in society. Bodding very rightly in this context has commented that:

The original and still often theoretically accepted idea about women among the Santals seems to be that she is a kind of irresponsible and untrustworthy being, a necessary and useful

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but somewhat inferior member of human society. Some proverbs show how women are often considered to be morally irresponsible... (221)

The fact is that like a typical male-dominated society Santal society does not want women to be equal with the male members. It wants to subjugate women and does not want women to spread authority in every section of society. Society even thinks that the sacredness of it may be polluted with the presence of women.

Santal society does not want women to give the same importance or power like a male member in society. It is presumed that if a man shares everything with the woman then she can attain the same status like a male member in society. It hints at the outlook of Santal men to subordinate women in society. In other words, we can say, this is a way of gender oppression. It is a conventional concept prevalent in Santal society that women are merely an immature and irresponsible being who cannot realize the demands of human life and behave like irrational.

The thing that causes disorder in Santal society is witchcraft. The belief in witchcraft is very common as well as strong among Santals. Bodding says that "There is no genuine Santal who does not believe in witches".(38) Even today when the science and technology have reached at the highest of its achievement the belief of the Santals in the practice of witchcraft or witch is very much genuine to them. Even the educated Santals are not ready to get rid of this belief-system. Nayan Jyoti Das has very appropriately commented on this issue in his article, *Santal Women: Under the Shadow of Long Silence*:

Belief and practice of witchcraft among the Santals is very strong even today among the Santals. As per their belief most dreaded magical effects and incurable diseases are believed to be resulting from the practices of witchcraft. The Santals have always been obsessed by the fear of witchcraft. They believe that practice of witchcraft may destabilize society, cause harm to the life of human being and can be the cause of death. ... So a suspicion is always present that witches may be at work when a sick person cannot recover. (211)

A Santal mind is always worried about the practice of witchcraft in society. Witchcraft is the most incommensurable matter that destroys the peaceful equilibrium in Santal society. If any untimely or immature death happens in society Santals think that the evil forces are working there. If the patient is not restored from disease or illness Santal society concludes that it must be the conspiracy of the witches. To re-establish peace in society Santal women are tortured in the worst possible way. Sometimes they are thrashed, driven out of the village or even beat till death.

Therefore, we may gather that Santal women have to go through a lot of sufferings and restrictions. A lot of taboos and limitations are imposed on them. They are not free to walk in every section of society. The society does not want women to spread authority in society.

The family structure in Santal society also reflects the attitude of patriarchal society. The main position in Santal society is held by a male member. The properties in the household are belonged only to a male member in Santal society. Though she

performs all the responsibilities in the family she has to go through a lot of exploitation and oppression.

The practice of witchcraft in Santal society gives power to women. Santal people get frightened if they encounter with any woman with abnormal behaviour. They get scared. They either hide themselves so that the witches cannot get sight of them or rush hurriedly towards home so that they can save themselves from the clutches of the witches. Therefore, it can be said that women while behaving like a witch gather strength or power. The practice of witchcraft offers women to exercise power or to achieve authority in Santal society. A study of select Santal folktales will focus light on the fact of how Santal women gain empowerment through the practice of witchcraft in society. Society has thrust upon Santal women a lot of restrictions or taboos. They are treated as 'other' in society. But if we highlight the Santal folktales that deal with the narration of witchcraft and its impact on Santal society it becomes quite obvious that man gets frightened if they encounter with witches by any chance. Santal women exercise huge power through this practice. Here are the instances of these frightening pictures in select Santal folktales.

In the second part of the Santal folktale from *Folklore of the Santal Parganas* by C.H. Bompas, *Witch Stories*, we are acquainted with a scary picture of the author himself who started running hastily being afraid of the witches at night. Once when the author was returning home alone at night after the payment of rent to village Headman² suddenly he noticed a bright light shown from the cowshed of a house. When he looked around he noticed a crowd of women ('witches') standing there. Seeing them he started running as fast as he can. He felt that he has touched the last hour of his life. Here is a frightening picture of the run of the author from the text: (281)

I ran away by the garden at the back of the house until I reached a high road; then I stopped and looked round and saw that the witches were coming after me; and looking towards the hamlet where my house was I saw that witches were coming with a bright light from that direction also. When I found myself thus hemmed in I felt that my last hour had come but I ran on till I came to some jungle.

When he looked back he found out that two gangs have joined hands and were running after him. He got more scared as he knew that there lived few *bongas* who might tell about him to the witches. He started running breathlessly until he reached towards his uncle's house. Here is the description of this picture:

Looking back from there I saw that the two bands had joined together and were coming after me. I did not feel safe there for I knew that there were *bongas* in the jungle who might tell the witches where I was. So I ran on to the *tola* where an uncle and aunt of mine lived. As I ran down the street I saw two witches at the back of one of the houses. They were sitting down; one was in a state of possession (*rūm*) and the other was opposite her holding a lamp. So I left the street and made my way through the fields till I came to my uncle's house. (282)

At the end of this folktale the author tells us that he was so much terrified of the witches after the incident of that night that he never came out of home at night. He says that he was lucky that the witches did not see him. If they saw him he could not have lived. Since then he did not stay at that village for a long

time. He was too much afraid to live there. Only one woman of those witches was still alive. The day she will be no more he can return home whenever he would like. The description is as follows:

Since that night I have been very frightened of witches and do not like to go out at night. It was lucky that the witches did not recognise me; otherwise I should not have lived. Ever since I have never stayed at home for long together; I go there for two or three months at a time and then go away and work elsewhere. I am too frightened to stay in my own village. Now all the old women who taught witchcraft are dead except one: when she goes I shall not be frightened any more. (282)

From the above folktale it becomes clear that the women who cannot even pass their judgement over any matter related to society or household activities suddenly acquire a lot of authority. People very often the male members of the society become afraid of them. The women can then apply a lot of supremacy. To curb the power of women the male dominated society punishes them severely. In maximum cases Santal society makes women deprived of their property, drives them out from village or even kills them calling them 'witch'.

In another Santal folktale, *Witch stories*, with the same name of the earlier one, we find that a young man named Jerba in a village, Mohulpuri used to return home at night after completing his work. One day when he was coming late at night suddenly he encountered 'a crowd of witches'. Just when he saw them he became numb. He lost his senses and could not remember anything. Though he was able to flee away from the clutch of the witches he was in a state of terror. The most important thing that very often makes the Santals afraid or frightened is an encounter with a witch. The incident will often lead him to death. In this story also we find that a young man himself says that he will not recover ever and he narrates how the witches chased him. Here is a description of the incident:

Just as he caught sight of them they seized hold of him and flung him down and did something which he could not remember-for he lost his senses when they threw him down. When he came to himself he managed to struggle free and run off. The witches pursued but failed to overtake him and he reached his home in a state of terror. The witches however had not finished with him for two or three days after they caused him to fall from a tree and break his arm. Ojhas were called in but their medicines did him no good. The arm mortified and maggots formed and in a few days Jerba himself told them that he would not recover; he told them how the witches chased him and that he had recognised them as women of his own village and shortly afterwards he became speechless and died. (283)

The above discussion leads us to conclude that though the women in Santal society are necessary still they are exploited and oppressed by the male dominated society like any other patriarchal society. Under such circumstance the practice of witchcraft gives Santal women power. The discussion of above two folktales clearly hints at the fact that witchcraft empowers women to rule in society. May be it is the secret desire of women to be equal with men in society that directs them to sustain this practice. It may also be that through the practice of witchcraft Santal women attempt to take revenge of the suffering and exploitation meted out to them. We may reinforce this assumption with the following words of Bodding in *Traditions and Institutions of the Santals*:

The word of a man does not go any more; the women have become the absolute rulers in this age. If you say just a little to her, she will at once throw it into your mouth; fearing this you keep quiet, what can you do else. (160)

Notes

¹*Bongas*: In a Santal family when a parson dies the spirit of that dead person is called *bonga*. Usually *bongas* take a lot of interest in the activities of the living people. Therefore, they need to be appeased with sacrifices. Santals believe in *bongas* as immensely as in their Supreme Being or *Marang Buru*.

²*Headman*: the village Headman in Santal society is usually called *Manjhi*. He enjoys the highest position of the self-governing administrative system or the Village Council of the Santals. In a Santal village nothing can happen without the consent of the village Headman.

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