

Murder of Witches among the Santals of Eastern India

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INTRODUCTION

In course of the work on tribal criminals the authors have come across a number of people who had committed murders of women who were suspected as witches. This appears to be something serious in the present day of modernisation in education, communication and health care system. The work was carried out among the tribals in eastern India, who had been convicted and was under imprisonment. The work was done through 1999 to 2002. A total number of 120-convicted tribals were found in this study. Out of these, 76 (63.3%) persons belonged to Santal community. Sixty-nine of them was convicted in charge of homicide. Among them 21 persons murdered women who were suspected of witchcraft. All these murders have taken place within 1997 and the convicts are under life imprisonment. Witch murder was not found among any other tribe in the present study in eastern India.

THE SANTALS

Under the constitution of India Santals are scheduled as tribals. Major concentration of Santals is found in the eastern plateau region of the present states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal. On the basis of physical features the Santal had been classified as palaeomediterranean and Australoid. Their language belongs to Mundari, a branch of Austro- Asiatic family. In numerical proportion the Santals are occupying third position among the Indian tribes. Primary economy is agriculture. Those who do not have land holding are working as agricultural labour. They also work as labourer for construction, quarry operations and in tea gardens. As a secondary occupation they go for hunting, gathering and fishing. These are mainly for their own consumption. A percent of Santals who are educated are in white collared job. Santal religion is considered within the umbrella of Hinduism, but they have their own sacred grove (*Jaharthan*) and gods and goddesses, distinct from Hindu deities. They have religious leaders, known as the *jan*

gurus, who help them with excorsion of ghosts and black magic. The menace of witchcraft is known to have existed among the Santals from a very early time. Earliest official report comes from 1792 (Archer, 1984).

METHODOLOGY

Standard anthropological methodology was followed for this work. They were mainly interview, narration and case study methods. Both structured and unstructured schedules were followed for interviews. Case study was made. Police files were consulted for farther information. Selection of the jails depended on the permission of the Inspector General of prisons. Permission was granted for visit to all the jails in eastern India. Collection of data from the tribal convicts needed proper skill of an anthropologist.

THE WITCHES

In the present study it was found that 21 men killed a total of 10 women. The focus being on the witch murder, these 21 individuals were given special emphasis. Information was gathered about the 10 women who were the victims and were considered as witches. All the victims were elderly, more than 50 years of age. Eight women were widows and the rest two were married. All the women were kin or neighbour to the respective murderers. The relationships may be described as brother's wife, father's brother's wife and mother's brother's wife. The victims lived in the same villages as the murderers. Some were neighbours to each other. The reason for suspicion of witchcraft was mainly untimely death of some individuals in the family of the murderers. At times in the same family there were subsequent deaths. The murderers believed that the victims had cast spell on the people who died. One person claimed to have gone mad due to the witchcraft. The spell is described as *eating*. They believe that the witches *eat* up the vitality of the people on whom they cast their spell. The family members of the dead and such other persons on whom mischief was done took part in the killing. It is done in a most cruel manner and in the broad daylight. Four women were beaten to death. The rest of the women had their heads chopped off with choppers. Six women were killed by one individual in each case. Gangs of men murdered the rest. Seven men murdered an old woman. The homicides were committed at the behest of the *janguru*, who could be considered as some one whose duty is to name the witch. *Janguru* according to Archer (1984) is the person who knows. He learns about the witches by revelation. It is his

divine duty to pronounce the name of the culprit, who had performed the witchcraft and had *eaten* an individual / individuals of the village. The villagers seek advise in times of trouble, misfortune, illness and death from the *Jan guru* regarding the matter of such maladies. *Jan* is a member of the Santal society. He is a cultivator, usually a fairly well off person. He has a *than* or alter for his divination. *Jan* also worships the Hindu goddess *Kali*. *Jan* gets paid for his oracle. The diagnosis of witches is an elaborate process. The *Jan* performs divination with leaves of trees for identifying the witches. People of one village go to a distant village to consult the *Jan*. Sometimes for confirmation more than one *Jan* is consulted. *Jan* also prescribes the type of punishment that may be doled out to the witch. The murders were committed in broad daylight at the time of *Bandhna* festival also known as *Sohrae* among the Santals (Hembrom, 1996: 67). These usually coincide with the time of worship of goddess *Kali* by the Hindus. The festivals in the tribal area overflow with rice beer.

THE MURDERERS OF THE WITCHES

In the present case 21 Santals were found to have committed witch murder. All of them were male and their age ranged between 31 and 50 years (90.47%). Only two persons were above 60 years in age. Majority of them was illiterate. For others the level of education was not enough for giving any proper enlightenment out of superstition, belief and conventional moral code. Seventeen convicts had day labour as their primary occupation. Rest four persons owned small tracts of land for cultivation. They mixed cultivation with day labour. Family size of the twenty-one Santals ranged between 4 to 10 members for each family. Average monthly family income was Rs. 600 (US \$ 10).

None of the convicts were repentant for the heinous deed. According to them they will be accepted in their villages as soon as they were released from the prison after completion of the terms. The persons convicted for crimes other than witchcraft murder were to undergo rigorous purificatory measures for acceptance back into the society. No such social purification will be necessary for those convicted for witch murder.

CONCLUSION

The Santals have a deep-rooted fear of witchcraft and magic (Archer, 1984: 482). In recent times police record shows increase in number of murders with the suspicion of witchcraft (Choudhuri, 1987). Both Archer and Choudhuri observed the Santals from the

viewpoint of administrators. The former as a deputy commissioner in British India, the other, as a Police officer in independent India in recent years. Archer had his close encounter with the Santals in Santal Parganas while Choudhuri in the northern part of Bengal. Archer has given detail on the menace of witchcraft among Santals. He explained about witchcraft and had described the method of diagnosis of the witches and the nature of punishment prescribed for the witches. Choudhuri has meticulously written about a large number of cases of witch murder among the tribe.

The witch murders that have been recorded in the present study hardly be connected to property dispute because neither those who were murdered, nor the murderers were owners of any sizable property. The small landholdings were with a few of the murderers and not with the persons murdered. Economic backwardness and illiteracy were the main reason for the belief in supernatural power for bringing down the miseries on to the people. Among the Santals the number of landless labourers are increasing everyday. The educated and well-placed Santals are keeping away from the villages. The social and economic miseries are attributed to the wrath of the tribal gods, the *bongas*. The anger of the *bongas* is perpetuated through the witches. The ideas permeated into the minds of the society. The institutions of witchcraft, the *Jan Guru* and the villagers taking up the cudgel against the witches, may be considered as mechanism for bringing out the tension and frustration caused out of the misery and malady which befalls the Santals.

The male dominated society found a scapegoat in women by creating the myth of a witch. The women in Santal society are not given political and economic prestige. In such a context, who but a woman will be proclaimed a witch. The woman with the help of the supernatural power may bring harm to the health and wealth of the community. The Santal is a close knit society. In most cases the persons diagnosed as witches are related to the persons to whom misfortune befalls, she may even be mother to the suspecting son. The afflicted person denounces the relationship with the anxiety of loss. The community supports such denouncing. The total absence of any repentance for murder of the victim, whom the *Janguru* diagnosed as a witch, speaks of social sanction behind such an act. There is no change in the attitude of the tribals in this respect, even at the present context

of globalisation and mass communication. Still the means of social control is being abused for personal ends. Intervention of the judiciary is there but it is the development workers and the social scientists who may help to bring an end to the misery and cruel death of hapless women in near future.

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