

Witch Allegation in Nepal: A Case Study in Tamang Community of Kavrepalanchok District

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Abstract

Even in the 21st century, discrimination in Nepal due to witch allegations is seen as a social evil. The continued people's movement has changed the political system but has not been able to change the attitude, faith, behavior, and social distortions of the Nepali people. As a result, people are involved in heinous and inhumane activities such as witch accusations. This study aims to explore this inhuman activity seen in the Tamang community which is one of the marginalized and disadvantaged groups in the Kavrepalanchok district in Nepal. The study of this phenomenon of witch accusations from the social point of view and perspective is another supportive objective of this study and to draw the attention of all key stakeholders to the significant scale, severity, and complexity faced by Tamang women. Qualitative research with empirical & social perspectives based on both primary and secondary data has been used. Generally, the poor, miserable, helpless, ugly-faced, single women, widows, Dalits, Janajati, untouchables, etc. are mostly suspected of being witch allegations without any justice and proof in our context. Once, they are accused, it is difficult for the victims to stay in society for the rest of their life. However, recent laws have identified it as a social evil and strictly banned discrimination and accused the people on the ground of the witch allegations but in practice, the incident is still increasing. Thus, witches are the byproduct of the beliefs of witchcraft and the practices of witch allegations. This study helped to draw the attention of the policymakers, planners, local-level governments, and the elite group of the society to review policies and practices to overcome the society combating such inhuman activities.

Keywords: Tamang, kavrepalanchok, witch allegation, belief

Introduction

In this 21st century, the world has changed rapidly in progressive ways, but Nepalese women are facing a serious social problem of witch allegations. Due to the inhuman act, many accusations of witch and witch-hunting activities are subjected to violence or torture following accusation and persecution. Every sensible Nepali citizen is concerned about such issues all over the country. It's the practice of

punishing women in the name of the witch is on rising in our society day by day. The post activities have created serious physical and mental injury, and in some cases, they resulted in the death of the victim. However, most of these incidents are not reported because women and their families fear reprisals. Poverty, systemic gender inequality, and weak state laws provide a context in which this behavior occurs. Allegations of a witch will, however, not be fully eradicated without improvements in education and legal safeguards.

Tamang is one of the fifth largest ethnic groups in Nepal and constitutes 5.90 percent of the total. Among the different ethnic groups residing in the Kavrepalanchok District, Tamang has occupied 33.5% of the total population (Census, 2011). They have their language, lifestyle, and religious belief and are rich in indigenous knowledge and cosmology. Their religion is traditionally Bon Lamaism; a fusion of Shamanism and Buddhism that emphasizes its religious grounds more on spirits and deities rather than philosophy. Hence the religion is sometimes regarded as shamanism (Bista, 2008). *Bombo* who is also called *Jhakri* acquires the magical power from the god and goddess of the jungle and protects the Tamang people from distress, illness, and any form of evil power. Thus, *Bombo* is considered a primary treatment place for Tamang (Tamang, 2004)

Treatment from *Bombo* is cheap, locally available, and regular service, that's why they seek *bombo*. '*Cinta*' is the most common feature of the traditional tantric healing in Tamang. This is more so in the witch cases. Innocent people are blamed to be witches and they are treated badly by the whole society. Most women are baselessly suspected as witches. For other types of attacks, the *bombo* may organize animal sacrifice to appease the divine and demonic forces and restore the health of the patient (Holmberg, 1989).

Tamang believes that witch-caused diseases could be cured by conventional medicine. They believe that illness, financial troubles, and a range of other misfortunes are associated with witches who are supposed to bewitch people during the night. The people feel suffocated during the night which is supposed to be the attack of the witches. Sometimes people show some blue patches on their skin and consider these patches as witch bites. These patches are believed to be the blood-sucking sites of witches. Therefore, witches are also blamed for blood-sucking.

Witch allegation is mostly based on reasons like making people or animals sick, casting a spell on food or drinks, and making children sick. These allegations are followed by beating the victim and forcing the person to consume human excrement and sometimes the victim is beaten to death. Along with this, soot is smeared on the face of the alleged witch, is paraded naked, forceful shaving hair and burned with hot appliances, pierced, pressed and sitting in private organs, forced to wear a garland of shoes, etc. also done with the victim. Thus, innocent women and even men have unknowingly lost their lives or been stigmatized in society day by day, due to witch allegations. Witch accusation is an often overlooked but major social problem, in many societies across the country (Adinkrah and Adhikari, 2014).

Objectives

This research aimed to study inhuman activity seen in the Tamang community which is one of the marginalized and disadvantaged groups in the Kavrepalanchok district in Nepal. The study of this phenomenon of witch accusations from the social point of view and perspective is another supportive objective of this study and to draw the attention of all key stakeholders to the significant scale, severity, and complexity faced by Tamang women.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was adopted, and that helped in a subjective assessment of attitudes, opinions, and behavior related to witch allegations in the Tamang community and able to acquire thick information on the research topic in a natural setting. This study focuses on the practices of witch allegations in Kavrepalanchok District – one of the districts where such practices are reported highest in Nepal (Nepal Police, WCSCSD annual report, 2068/69 to 2077/78 BS). As the incidence of witch accusations was higher in the Tamangs than in other castes in the district, this study made the Tamangs the focal point of the study. All cases that happened within the above-mentioned period were studied. A few cases from Terai were also studied to triangulate the finding in Kavrepalanchok District with them.

The common qualitative research tools such as interviews and observation were used to acquire primary and secondary data and information and for data processing and analysis, systematic ways of analyzing qualitative data i.e. data reduction, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions were made. Though ‘witch’ is considered to be sensitive as it deals with the potential fear of stigmatization, the anonymity and privacy of those who participate in the research process were respected and kept confidential for the protection of individual rights.

Durkheim’s theory of social facts (1984), Berger & Luckmann’s social construction theory (1966), and Thomas & Thomas’s theory of social reality (1928) are used to explain the witch allegation in a good manner. Unlike these scholars, Pritchard’s (1937) statement on witchcraft allegations is also used where he argued that witch allegations cannot be understood without the social context and its social function. As witch allegation is also related to gender violence, Lorber’s social construction feminist theory (1994) is also looked at. The main point feminists have stressed about gender inequality is that it is not an individual matter, but is deeply ingrained in the structure of societies.

Results and Discussion

Allegation of each other being a witch has been in vogue for a long time in Tamang of Kavrepalanchok District. It is observed that allegation is entirely practiced within the close social relationship that they know each other for a long ago. The accuser can’t accuse a distant and unknown person of being a witch because they have nothing to do with it. Thus, each relationship is associated with some meaningful

action that is appropriate to the relationship. It is common matter of the existence of minor misunderstandings in social relationships because they have different types of transactions going on in their everyday life. When petty quarrels escalate, jealousy exists; they accuse each other of the witch. Thus, accusations are usually preceded by conflict or the emergence of strains in interpersonal relationships where they accuse someone of some selfish interest. Thus, the allegation of witches became part of the fabric of everyday village life in the Tamang community.

The Tamangs believe that Bombo acquires magical power from the god and goddess of the jungle (ban-jhakri) and protects the community from disease, illness, and any form of evil power and misfortunes. That's why; Bombo holds a position of great authority and respect in Tamang communities and is often viewed as the protector of the community. While Bombo cannot cure the sick person, then he blames others in the village whom the accuser trust and suspects accordingly. Bombo mostly blames the sick person's social relationships or known ones. None of the cases was found where the distant or unknown person is being accused of the witch.

Social networks and power relationships in the Tamangs consider them superior, powerful, and strong in society and encourage accusing the weak person of being a witch in the village. This implies the ability to impose one's will on others, which can manifest in many different forms, and witch accusations are one of them. Social networks and power have several potentials through which witch accusations may have a direct adverse effect on interpersonal trust, cooperation, and social relations more generally. Gathering at a local hotel in the morning, having tea with friends, smoking cigarettes, chewing tobacco, drinking alcohol, frequent meetings, and hanging out with the villagers also strengthens the social network and the power of the people in Tamang. And a person who could not perform these characteristics will be treated as powerless in society and exploited and accused.

Another observation of the study is that men play an important role in the Tamang family. They perform the duty of not only the husband, and father but also a mental leader. The study revealed that women from such families were accused of a witch when the men are weak, naive, and not aggressive. Women of such families are commonly suspected when men are not able to fulfill their expected gender roles. They are behavioral constructs that are powerful regulators of human socio-cultural affairs. Incidents of witch allegations thus happen in Tamang due to the men's inability to fulfill the gender roles that society expects. Women are often accused of being witches in a family where men are not at home for work and come home for a long time. This lowers the social value of the women in society and is more likely to be accused of witch.

The study revealed that the accuser mostly suspects the poor, miserable, helpless, ugly-faced, single woman, etc. as being a witch. Once a woman is accused of being a witch, it is difficult for her to stay in the village for the rest of her life. That

is why some of the accused women have left their place of origin and the women, who are living in the same place do not want to be there. Witches are still very much female in the public imagination and labeling women a witch and many are unaware that men were ever accused of the wizard.

Gartoulla (1998) also supports Bombo and argues about how witches may harm people. He says that; witches produce a small figure representing the victim and pronounce magic spells, or they actively mix bewitched substances into a victim's food. They keep such substances - human hair, finger and toenails, animal claws, or bone fragments - in small bundles. Witches are believed to harm or cause illness through the evil eye. A witch is also believed to be able to induce certain gods (e.g. devils) or other supernatural powers (masaan, bhut) to harm a victim or to send dangerous animals like snakes or tigers to kill him or her. Witches can shoot bewitched spiritual arrows that cause illness or witches come to their victims at night and drink their blood so the victim gets weaker and weaker. As Gartaula said, there are many similarities with allegations in Tamang.

Glover (1972) says that witchcraft accusations are one of the traditional violence due to traditional beliefs still in practice in almost all parts of Nepal. It has been accepted by the people for generations and is passed down from generation to generation even today. It is not only due to a lack of awareness of the people who lay charges against innocent women but in some cases, so-called educated persons who are specially working for society's welfare are the main perpetrators. This study also supports this statement that belief in witches is passed from generation to generation in Tamang and even the educated person believes in the existence of witches too.

Poudel (2011) states that belief in ghosts, spirits, and witchcraft is widespread, particularly in rural areas. Spiteful witches, hungry ghosts, and angry spirits are thought to inflict illness and misfortune. And shamans mediate between the human and supernatural realms to discover the cause of illness and recommend treatment. This is exactly observed in Tamang where they have a shaman (Bombo) whose role is to cure sick people and misfortunes. But, these shamans are not always able to cure the sick person and when this happens they blame others. That's why, where there is a shaman, there must be the witch and this relationship could not be separable. As Poudel (2011) said, Dalits and untouchables are often accused of witchcraft, but this study found that witchcraft was practiced only within the same caste. And even the accusation is made between the same sexes.

Similarly, Dahal (2013) said that widows are more likely to be victims of witch allegations and witch-hunts than women who are married or single. This study disagrees with this statement to some extent because this study discovered that accused women are married and living with their husbands and other family members. (Nadel, 1952; Mayer, 1995; Gluckman, 1956; Mitchell, 1956; Turner, 1957) argued that witchcraft is only effective in a limited geographical space and can only operate in

the neighborhood and/or among relatives and as a result, accusations generally targets individuals with whom one had frequent social relations. Witchcraft studies, therefore, became inextricably linked to studies of kinship. This statement is strongly supportive of this study where the entire case happened within close social relationships.

As Adinkrah (2004) said, the huge majority of persons accused of witch in Nepal are females and are elderly, and only rarely are males accused of wizards. Although there is a lot of truth in his statement, this study has found that many of the women accused of being witches are adults.

Hofer (1973) argued that the etiology of the disorders treated by the Tamang shamans is attributed to supernatural agents and this is done in a ritual context. Primary to Tamang animism and concepts of illness are gods, spirits, witches, and ancestors, who generally live in the atmosphere and on the earth. The study strongly sorts to this statement as it observed that the Tamang shaman is one of the societal leaders with particular roles and responsibilities in the society and whose major work in the society is to cure all manners of health problems and misfortunes. Shaman is always a villager's first resource in times of illness. And even the doctor is consulted; the shaman must remove all spirit-caused obstacles to cure before a cure can take place.

Unlike the previous scholars, social anthropologist, Pritchard (1937) argued that the witch accusation cannot be understood without the social context and its social function. According to his study on Azande, their faith in witchcraft and oracles was quite logical and consistent once some fundamental tenets were accepted. This is exactly found in the Tamang shaman, who takes rice and Acheta on a plate and moves it from one place to another, and at the end; he says that the sick person's planetary condition has deteriorated or that the sick person has harmed by someone. Thus, Pritchard's argument here is supported in this sense.

Conclusion and Implication

Belief in witches and accusations is considered to be a common phenomenon and a never-ending process in the Tamang community. Illnesses, financial troubles, and a range of other misfortunes are associated with witch accusations. Mostly women, innocent, poor, illiterate, ugly, and adults are baselessly suspected as witches and treated inhumanly. Social factors such as; the shaman as a witch doctor play a major role in the accusation of the witch. When he fails to cure the sick person then blames others within the sick person's close social relationship. As this shaman is one of the societal leaders in the Tamang community, they trust on shaman's statement. Similarly, social networks and power, and gender roles expected by society also played a vital role in the accusation of witches. Although Tamang's religion also spoke about the witch power and other supernatural powers, this practice of accusation was seen yesterday, is today, and cannot be ruled out tomorrow. Therefore, witches are the byproduct of the beliefs of witchcraft and the practices of witch allegations in the Tamang community.

This research findings would be a one of the milestone for the researcher, scholars, policy makers, Government of Nepal, NGO's and INGO's working in the field of witch accusation as one of the violence against women present in Nepal.

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