

Becoming Dangaria: A Psycho-cultural Study of Female Traditional Healers of Kumoun

Meena K. Kharkwal

Abstract: The dangaria as the possessor of local gods and goddesses has an important role in Kumaoni culture. The present study aims to find out the process of becoming a dangaria. The area of the study is the central Himalayan town of Pithoragarh and surrounding villages. Case history was taken as the main technique of collecting data. The sample includes seven female dangaria selected on availability basis. Based on these case histories, it was found that one does not choose to become a dangaria but it is rather chosen by the spirit she represents. The selected person goes through an initiatory crisis like widowhood, judiciary problems or a defaming situation. However these signs in themselves are not evidence of becoming a dangaria. Only after consulting with different dangaria and/or having the spirit tells by herself to the person that she was chosen she can be declared a dangaria. After declaration she has to offer jagar to the spirit, where she gets the first social contact as a dangaria. The dangaria doesn't go through any training. She only has to follow some rules and restrictions. A psycho-cultural analysis of data has been discussed in the perspective of sublimating the psychosomatic symptoms and gaining social power. The concept is also discussed from the perspective of experiential approach, that is, how dangaria analyse the process of becoming dangaria.

Introduction

Possession is an ancient concept which we find almost all societies and cultures of the world (Coon, 1993). Possession is defined as domination by something as an evil spirit, a passion, or an idea. It is a psychological state in which an individual's normal personality is replaced by another (Merriam –Webster's Online Dictionary). Possession can be categorized as (1) non-trance possession belief where the individual or close observers believe that one is possesses usually by the devil or demons, (2) trance possession where an altered state of consciousness usually of a god or spirit, alternates

with the individual's normal identity, (3) and ritual trance possession where possession occurs within a ritual usually religious in nature (Bourguignon, 1976).

Getting possessed by spirits or local gods and goddesses is a very common phenomenon in Kumaon. This possession can make a person to change his/her identity completely thus he/she becomes victim of possession or this possession can help people to change his/her identity only when he/she needs and thus he/she becomes master of possession. The signs and symptoms of victim of possession and becoming master of possession are same. The difference is one remains patient and other gets free from symptoms and becomes possessor of supernatural which is called dangaria in local language and can heal the victim of possession.

Dangaria is possessor of local god /goddess/ or spirit (deptai) which incarnate in him or her to communicate and to be in contact with their worshippers. Deptai are considered the responsible of all the happenings, good or bad in the village and in all the families whether they live in the village or elsewhere. As these deptai are involved in everyday life they need to talk to their folks. At the same time people need to consult them for different problems of life. Deptai communicate through dangaria. Actually dangaria becomes depta in trance. Every depta has his/her dangaria. A depta may have many dangaria; and, conversely, a dangaria can be possessed by more than one depta.

Deptai are given their dues and thanks by villagers in some fixed years in a special ceremony which is called jagar, chauras or baisi . In this ceremony deptai "come" to earth on the body of dangarias and live there during the complete ceremony. When there is the village jagar, chauras or baisi ceremony it's only male dangarias who represent the deptai. However, when it comes to the question of possessing the deptai female dangarias outnumbered male dangarias. These female dangarias are not directly linked to the typical religious hierarchy of village however it's them who represent the deptai more than their counterpart male dangarias.

Present study is an attempt to explore the psycho-cultural and experiential context of becoming dangaria of female traditional or faith healers of central Indian Himalayan town Pithoragarh.

Pithoragarh

Situated in the North eastern part of India, Uttarakhand is a newly formed state. Garhwal and Kumaon are the two major culturally and linguistically different parts of the state. Kumaon consists of six districts. Pithoragarh is one of them. Located deep in the hills of the Himalayas, Pithoragarh is one of the more remote districts in Uttarakhand and has the distinction of having Nepal and China (Tibet) on two of its borders. It has its own dialect called Soriyali which is different from other Kumaoni dialects. Culturally also it is slightly different from its neighbouring towns Almora, Champawat and Bageswar and from neighbouring countries Tibet and Nepal.

Pithoragarh has a population density of 68 people per square km. According to 2011 Census the population of Pithoragarh is 483,439 among which 244,133 are female and 239,306 are male. 85.60 percent of its population resides in rural area while 14.40 in urban area. Literacy rate of Pithoragarh is 82.25 (Census 2011).

Methodology

The sample includes 7 female Dangarias chosen from availability basis. District Pithoragarh is administratively divided into five tehsils, namely Munsiyari, Dharchula, Didihat, Gangolihat, and Pithoragarh. All these tehsils have different dialects and different cultural nuances. For the present study the cultural and linguistically specific area of Pithoragarh which is called “Sor” has been chosen which includes Pithoragarh headquarter and surrounding villages under the same municipality.

Tools

Open ended interviews were taken as main tool for data collection which was based on following question:

Since when you are dangaria?

Have you had episodes of trance before becoming dangaria?

How do you became dangaria ?

From whom you have got the training?

How does it help you and community to be a dangaria?

What do you think why god/goddess has chosen you to be his/her dangaria?

Table 1

Age	Active since	Pre-dangaria trance	Psycho-social Crisis	Psycho-physical symptoms	Spirit	Practicing status (gantua)
48	8 years	17 years back at home	Defame Widowhood	Depressed, apathy, craziness	Local goddess	Well known For family
25	1 yrs	While consulting a healer for family problems	Family and financial problems	Itching with red spots all over the body	Spirit of mother in law	
28	6 yrs	15 yrs back when she got married . While visiting temple	Abandoned by in laws	Body ache crying spells, apathy	Family god	Well known
25	8 months	During offering puja to a devi temple		Toothache, mouth blisters Severe headache	Local goddess	For family
35	10 yrs	15 yrs back. Often getting trance in and after coming back from forest.		Matted hair Wandering around, shouting, crying	Local goddess	Doesn't practice
45	6 yrs	During jagar ceremony for clan god.	Difficulty in co-existence with higher caste people	Matted hair, digestion and skin problems if eating out	Clan god	Well known
55	20	25 yrs back. Often after coming back from forest.	Poverty and financial problems	Epileptic symptoms, wandering around, shouting	Local gods and goddesses	Known in the village

Data collection

Each dangaria was visited two times. First meeting was to establish rapport and asking them if / when they could be available for taking case histories. In second meeting they were asked to provide demographic details and then case history were taken.

Analysis of data and results

Demographic details and the main life events of each dangaria are tabulated and the case history of each dangaria is presented in nutshell.

The above results show that age doesn't seem a very important factor for becoming a dangaria. In present study the age range of becoming dangaria was found from 24 to 41 and first experience of trance was from 13 to 39.

The table show all of them had physical and/or psychological symptoms or signs and trance but not all of them went through psycho social crisis.

Dangaria 1 suffered for 17 years from depression, apathy and "crazy" behaviour with frequent trance. She remained undiagnosed or misdiagnosed for years. Meanwhile her husband committed suicide and she was accused of her husband's suicide and her mother in law's death. She was still having the trance and due to psycho-social pressure her symptoms got worsened. She continued going to different traditional healers for her symptoms and for justice.

Dangaria 3 who was married at 13 and started having trance and depression like symptoms: crying spells, fever and body ache. She was tortured by her mother in law who finally made her husband to get married to another woman and she was asked to go back to her parents. She was still untreated for her trance and other symptoms and continued going to different traditional healers.

Dangaria 5 and 7 with the long history of violent trance and kind of psychotic symptoms remained undiagnosed and untreated for long time. Dangaria 5 told that every time when she was misdiagnosed as possessed by malevolent spirits her trace was becoming more violent.

These 4 women got the status of dangaria after going through many treatment sessions and changing many dangarias. However

other dangarias in the study either declared by themselves in trance or got immediate diagnostic.

Dangaria 2 whose family was going through financial problems got first trance while consulting other dangaria for their problems. And one fine day at home she has another trance where she declared by herself (or the spirit in her declared) that she was the dangaria of her late mother in law's spirit.

Dangaria 6 got her first trance while attending a family jagar which later diagnosed as she was chosen by the dehta who still didn't have his dangaria in the family. It is important to note here that this dangaria belongs to the lowest caste of Hindu system and she was living in the neighbourhood of higher caste rich people.

Dangaria 4 at age of 25 became the dangaria of the same goddess whom her late mother in law served as dangaria. After getting diagnosed as dangaria all of them offered special jagar or puja and sacrificed goat to the god or goddess whom they are dangaria and only after they were accepted as dangaria by community.

None of them had any training or any internship in practicing dangaria. As goes a proverb from this area "garana garana gantua" one becomes gantua by counting rice regularly. Gantua is the professional name for dangaria. In trance they count rice to diagnose or to predict. All the gantua are dangaria but not all the dangaria are gantua.

All of them mentioned following strict rules and regulations of worship, taking care of impurity by birth, death and menstruation and not eating outside of their home. While fetching water from the public tap they ask others to keep distance and people respect it. When they are invited if they refuse to eat people offer them fruits.

All of them mentioned that they never thought of becoming a dangaria. They were chosen by the special dehta or dehta to be their dangaria.

Interpretation

On the basis of above results we can say that 'dangariahood' grew in the psyche of these females traditional healers which was at first considered abnormal behaviour or disease by others.

Researches show that two third of married women of Kumaon go through the possession and relative psychological and physical symptoms (Fanger, 1992) Most of them go for traditional healing and get cured from the symptoms and never get trance again. Some who are not cured change the dangaria or go for medical advice (Kharkwal, 2007). Some are diagnosed as dangaria and continue having trance when/if they wish or need. It's not necessary that these female dangaria use their trance and become gantua. Many of them say they could but they don't want. They can remain dangaria just the possessor of depta even without practicing it or even without having trance.

These dangarias are supposed to have extraordinary powers and wisdom. If consulted, they can give advice even without going into trance. They are considered as god or part of god.

After analysing the case histories it is clear that these female dangaria were able to live with their symptoms not in crude way but transformed or sublimated way. Till they were not accepted they remained uncomfortable in them which mistook them as victim of possession. The day they were declared as dangaria the psycho – physical symptoms went away and the trance became a powerful tool in their hands which was before uncontrollable and unpredictable. The regression actually worked as the progression in the service of ego (Noppe, 1996). They waited long for religious, social and cultural acceptance. They didn't get regressed thus became the victim of possession rather they reacted to circumstances and to their needs more progressive way and finally became dangaria.

Having the status of dangaria gives them access to use their skills which apparently they always had even before becoming a dangaria. Being simply a woman, a daughter in law or a simple wife even if they are able to solve the problems their voices are unheard but the voice of dangaria is always respected. For example dangaria 2 became the possessor the spirit of her late mother in law; dangaria 6 a poor lower caste woman became dangaria of the most powerful deity of the area. Having this status empowers them. Now they have access to information and resources for taking proper decision. They

are able and allowed to change others' perceptions by democratic way or by logic. They treat themselves as part of god, their self image is more positive.

Experientially becoming dangaria is a long process of suffering which actually a test for them. One who is not able to carry depta in her or who doesn't take care of purity after becoming dangaria becomes crazy with this experience. It's a responsibility as well as an honour. But it's not them who decided to be a dangaria. They were chosen by depta because they have the purest heart and they are able to sacrifice pleasure of life to let the depta remain in their body.

For them dangaria is a social, cultural and celestial necessity. They say depta are the most important part of Kumaoni culture and dangarias keep this culture alive. Depta need to come on earth to check the well being of their folks and to provide celestial justice. Society needs them as representative of depta so people can ask for justice or help. They call themselves "home for god" or "horse of god" (Loch and Kharkwal 2000) in which devta can stay or ride. As devtai live in their body when they come on the earth they leave their power behind which give them same power as depta.

Dangaria is a multidimensional reality. Psychologically it is need of psyche. Religiously or culturally it is a structure, which is an important pillar of the society. Dangaria is a live belief and a structure, which not even, provides help to the people in crisis but also gives the society a form, which circles around depta.

Conclusion

Becoming dangaria is an unconscious process of self enhancement. The female dangarias of the central Himalayan region who go through the same symptoms or illness as the victims of possession are able to save themselves from getting regressed and becoming sick. It is more a sublimating process which helps them to keep their ego identity intact thus have a more positive self image and empowerment.

Present work was a first attempt to explore this process and needs more in depth study of personality organizations of dangarias and the victim of possession as well as the process of traditional healing.

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Author: Meena K. Kharkwal is a Psychologist residing in France. Her mailing address is: 1 Rue George Sand, 54860, Haucourt Moulaine, France.