UNMASKING THE SUPERNATURAL: AN IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF AFFLICTING AGENTS IN MEHANDIPUR, RAJASTHAN

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***Abstract*:** This study is undertaken to explore the prevalent beliefs about afflicting agents and the types of problems (*sankat*) experienced by the afflicted (*sankatwale*) people in Mehandipur Balaji Temple in Rajasthan. The present study is a qualitative ethnographic account of mental illness that is perceived and expressed as *sankat* by the afflicted people or *sankatwale* who visited Mehandipur Balaji Temple for healing. In-depth observation, interviews and illness narratives were employed to collect data from the respondents in the temple complex.

Keywords: mental illness, affliction, healing, afflicting agent, spirits

Introduction

A person's mental health is a critical component of their overall well-being. Physical and mental well-being are two sides of the same coin. Good mental health includes being able to carry out everyday tasks with ease, such as working successfully at home, at school, in the office, etc., keeping up good relationships, and being able to adjust to change and overcome life obstacles. Kumar et. al. (2012) stated that the most important element of excellent health is a sound mind. The significance of mental health has received more attention recently than it has in the past. The importance of an individual's mental health has been discussed in several studies and reports that emphasise the state of mental health among different population groups worldwide. According to WHO (2014) many mental illnesses go misdiagnosed and untreated.

The belief that malevolent or destructive supernatural entities, such as erratic spirits or ghosts, are to be blamed for various problems like illness, both physical and mental, as well as family strife, loss of profits in business ventures and inability to find employment or a suitable spouse is common to many societies. Srivastava (2002) mentioned that people interpret unusual, sudden or unworthy behaviour in others or when a person acts unusually as signs of mental illness. The family starts to take mental illness seriously only when the incidents grow more regular and severe. He explained his idea of the supernatural theory, which holds that evil supernatural beings are the source of mental illness and those people who accept this view will seek out spiritual healing. According to Kleinman (1988), people believe in supernatural causes for health and illness and the great majority of such people seek advice from traditional healers regarding matters about their physical and mental well-being. Kate et. al. (2012) mentioned that patients with schizophrenia frequently hold superstitious beliefs, and many of them blame their beliefs for the symptoms of their mental illnesses. On a similar note, Rajan et. al. (2016) stated that several cultures commonly believe that phenomena including being possessed by spirits, doing bad deeds or being cursed by ancestral spirits, receiving curses from enemies, offending ancestors and being cursed are causes of mental illness. Also, most cultures have a traditional or faith healer who uses various healing modalities in accordance with cultural beliefs to treat mental illness. Basu (2009) talked about how Muslim shrines are, in fact, the main places that Indians with mental illnesses go. She discussed that people who behave strangely or inappropriately, like abusing their loved ones or speaking harshly, exhibit clear signs of occult madness. Similar to those in the hospital, persons affected are reported to roam aimlessly, get easily agitated or withdrawn, or attempt suicide. Any of these behaviours may be attributed to ghosts or magic. Subudhi (2014) explained that every culture has a unique explanation for mental illness that is based on a particular set of values and customs. These factors that determine mental health have been influenced by time, situation and place in addition to culture. Many studies conducted in India also show that many patients attribute spiritual causes to their illnesses (Skultans, 1991; Thara, Islam & Padmavati, 1998; Dwyer, 1998,

1999; Flueckiger, 2003; Sebastia, 2007). More than two-thirds of those who suffer from mental illness and their loved ones hold a strong conviction in the supernatural origins of their condition, which leads them to seek out traditional healers before Western-inspired psychiatric help (Biswal, Subudhi & Acharya, 2017).

Mehandipur Balaji temple in Rajasthan, India is a well-known temple located in Dausa district; a town on NH-11 between Jaipur and Agra, towards Mahwa and Agra which is approximately 40 kilometres from the district headquarters. Due to its reputation as a popular site for exorcism, this Hindu shrine is well-known throughout north India, especially in the states of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi. Mehandipur Balaji temple is the home of *Bajrang Bali*, the juvenile incarnation of *Hanuman*, the monkey god. This temple is well-known both locally and nationally as a centre for the treatment of mentally ill people known and referred to as *sankatwale* in the temple complex. The term *sankatwale* (plural) is an umbrella term which refers to all the people who are suffering from 'problems' including physical, emotional and psychological, and have come to the temple in seek of a cure for their 'problems' that are referred to as *sankat*. *Sankatwala* (singular) is the term used to refer to an afflicted male, similarly *sankatwali* (singular) is used to refer to an afflicted female. The founding deities, who are believed to be personally present here include *Shri Balaji Maharaj*, *Shri Bhairava Baba* and *Shri Pretraj Sarkar*. In the location where the temple now stands, these deities are the ones who have made themselves known.

Shri Balaji Maharaj is the main deity in the temple and is considered the judge for all the proceedings that take place in his *darbar* or court. *Shri Bhairava Baba* known as *kotwal kaptan*, is in command of an enormous army of spirits, the majority of which are reformed spirits known as *doot*, who are sent to find the location of a spirit causing suffering to the *sankatwala* or *sankatwali* when the complainant (*sankatwale*) files a complaint at the court of *Shri Balaji Maharaj*. *Shri Pretraj Sarkar* is the lord of spirits and the third main deity who is mythically believed as the most powerful spirit and is thought to be a member of the highest *rakshasha yoni* (demon birth). Though the least potent among the three founding deities, he is of utmost importance for the exorcism as *doot* obeys only his commands when interrogation takes place and spirits are summoned in the *darbar* of *Shri Balaji Maharaj*. *Shri Pretraj Sarkar* is assisted by two other minor but important gods namely *Bhangivade Wale Baba* who is believed to be the ghost of a Muslim saint with special expertise in driving out *jinn* or Muslim spirits and *Diwan Sarkar* who is believed to be a saintly spirit of a wily but now repentant soul who deals with impure spirits and purges them before a productive questioning in the *darbar* can happen. Mehandipur Balaji temple is visited by people from nearby states including Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, etc. because of its reputation as a shrine that has miraculous powers to provide guaranteed healing.

Research Methodology

This study is based on the primary data collected through fieldwork conducted in Mehandipur Balaji temple in April 2017-August 2018. Observation, interviews and illness narratives were used for data collection. In-depth interviews of 40 *sankatwale* including 23 females and 17 males, 30 caregivers including 3 males and 27 females and 9 healers or *bhagat* were conducted to gain information about the causation of the *sankat* experienced by the *sankatwale*, their illness and the motivational factors behind choosing Mehandipur Balaji for help-seeking. The interviews were conducted in the main hall of the temple known as *Pretraj Sarkar Hall* and *dharamshala* or lodges where such *sankatwale* reside. Separate interview schedules were used as a guideline while conducting in-depth interviews with the *sankatwale*, caregivers and healers. Adhering to an ethnographic methodology, this study places particular emphasis on illness narratives of *sankatwale* seeking treatment for their *sankat* by visiting the temple and an extremely important similar site named *Samadhi Sthal* (the place dedicated to *Ganesh Puri Ji*, who is believed to be the first *mahant* or priest and the person who told everyone about the presence of divine powers of *Hanuman* and affiliated deities, popularized the temple and miracles of *Balaji Maharaj*) in Mehandipur. The goal of illness narratives in this study was to elucidate an emic understanding of the patient's experience of being ill due to any supernatural cause. The respondents who participated in the present research were selected through non-probabilistic purposive sampling.

Results and Discussion

Mental illness is perceived, experienced and explained as a 'problem' and is known as *sankat* (danger) by those who are afflicted, their families, caregivers and healers. In Mehandipur Balaji, 'problems' are referred to as *sankat*, regardless of whether they are caused by physical discomfort, mental distress or even something believed as supernatural. The symptoms exhibited by the visitors and *sankatwale* or explained by the caregivers may resemble symptomatology that is classified medically, but in the perception of the healers, *sankatwale* and caregivers, those symptoms are just one or the other type of *sankat* that is associated with the affliction caused by supernatural entities. These supernatural entities are understood and described as '*sankat ka kaaran*' or afflicting agents that cause various discomfort and illness to the *sankatwale*. Each afflicting agent possesses different characteristics, origins, and intentions and creates a different set of adversities to the individual they afflict.

Afflicting agents can be categorized as forces that are believed to injure, suffer or bring bad luck to individuals or groups of people or even inhuman creatures like livestock, agriculture and houses. These afflicting agents are commonly thought to possess supernatural qualities and are believed to be responsible for bringing adverse situations. Within the temple complex, there was a general consensus that supernatural spirits retained the moral principles they learned while they were alive, and these principles shape a large part of their behaviour as afflicting agents. The commonly reported afflicting agents based on the explanation provided by *sankatwale*, caregivers and healers are described as follows:

1. Pret

This category is a subset of the erratic spirits that roam free but have their territory. *Sankatwale* afflicted by *pret* exhibit symptoms of unexplained illnesses and often experience headache, nausea, bodily aches, numbness and other somatic symptoms. It is believed that a *pret* gets attached to people unintentionally at crossroads, to people passing by cremation sites with sweets in their hands, to people standing beneath peepal trees late at night, to people urinating or defecating close to peepal trees, or to people who are targeted intentionally mediated by a sorcerer. A *pret* is very minute in size almost similar to a point and keeps moving inside the body causing pain. The affliction caused by *pret* can be easily detected and treated by *bhagat* in Mehandipur Balaji. *Pret* is considered less ruthless as compared to other afflicting agents. There is a possibility that many *pret* can reside in a human body at a time causing discomfort according to their will and strength. *Pret* is similar to a parasite in a human body that keeps growing, consuming all the strength and energy from that being. It is believed that pret can inhabit many body parts; they frequently take over the head, knee, chest, shoulders and stomach. As a result, such *sankatwale* often complain about having pain in various body parts. In cases of females, *pret* encroach and resides in the belly, abdomen, on the *bachchedani* or opening of the uterus, which results in infertility. When a person has one or more *pret* residing in their body, they may have symptoms such as nausea, headaches, body aches, stomach aches, numbness, boils, cysts, memory loss, diabetes, or even cancer. The majority of the *sankatwale* were suspected of a *sankat* caused primarily by a *pret* or group of *pret* and in some cases *pret* in addition to other afflicting agents. The gender of a *pret* can be male or female.

It was suspected that 22 *sankatwali* and 14 *sankatwala* had experienced a *sankat* brought on by a single *pret*, many *pret*, or a *pret* in addition to another affecting agent. The majority of the *sankatwale* were found to be afflicted by one or many *pret*.

2. Pitra

These afflicting agents are the furious and sad ancestral spirits, primarily from the father's bloodline. The reason behind their unhappiness is the disregard and disrespect they received from their descendants after their demise. The initial protective instinct of *pitra* can give way to benevolence. Their affliction is intended as retribution for the negligence by their descendants, contamination, or binding (*bandhan*) caused by a sorcerer that restricts their protective instincts, and forces them to further harm their descendants. Such spirits are thought to be pure since they share equal status as family deities. They are very reluctant to harm or injure their descendants irreversibly and just build up affliction by causing temporary harm that is not

life-threatening. In addition to unexplained body aches, unhappiness, depression and mood swings, contaminated *pitra* or *pitra* that are weakened through *bandhan* (barriers done by a sorcerer to use them against their descendants purposely), can cause spells of misfortune, negativity in the family or a decrease in the social life of the *sankatwala* or *sankatwali* or the entire family.

According to the *bhagat*, it was confirmed that 4 sankatwali and 3 sankatwala were harmed by *pitra*, including cases of *pitra* who had been bound by a *bandhan* or barrier by a sorcerer primarily to lessen the defences and ultimately to gain control over them or manipulate them against their descendants.

3. Jinn

This kind of afflicting agent is thought to be the strongest and comes from the Muslim spirit. They are believed to exist in two varieties good and bad and to be largely composed of fire and occasionally water. The *jinn* is thought to be a male gender. When a good *jinn* becomes attached to someone due to their good activities, it is advantageous for that person because any other weak afflicting agents that may have been residing inside the body of the *sankatwala* or *sankatwali* will naturally depart their body. However, a wicked *jinn* is meant to hurt a female if it attaches itself to that female out of love or attraction for her or if it is sent to the female on purpose by a sorcerer. Often females are advised not to pass by crematory or burial grounds after applying perfume, taking a bath with a fragrant soap and shampoo or leaving the freshly washed hair untied, during the menstrual cycle as fragrance attracts the *jinn*. A *jinn* can also harm a male if it attaches itself to him or is sent to the male by a sorcerer. *Jinn* are Muslim spirits but they don't care about the faith of the person they injure; they are thought to be just as dangerous to Hindus as they are to Muslims. The *sankatwale* and *bhagats* or healers in Mehandipur Balaji have the opinion that these agents of misery are highly immoral, will harm their hosts to the greatest extent possible and enjoy seeing them suffer. Self-harm, memory loss, poor personal cleanliness, lack of interest in religious activities, extreme anger management problems, destructive conduct, improper deeds, declining health, red eyes, etc. are some of the symptoms displayed by the *sankatwale* who were suspected to be the victims of *jinn*.

Overall, 5 *sankatwala* and 3 *sankatwali*, were receiving healing for their *sankat*, which is thought to be brought on by one or more *jinn*.

4. Chudail

The Hindi term '*chudail*' refers to the spirit of a woman who passed away either before delivery or within a short time after marriage. This afflicting agent is always a female and often wanders on deserted roads or found near water bodies. These spirits are those of women who died too soon and could not enjoy their marital life, which is why they have strong sexual cravings. In order to satisfy their unfulfilled sexual desires, they typically prey on attractive males, both married and single. Males who get afflicted by a *chudail* often experience marital discords with their existing wife or lover, disagreements and frequent quarrels between husband-wife and sexual dissatisfaction in their married life. Out of all the male *sankatwale*, 4 of them were believed to be afflicted by a *chudail* and showed symptoms of marital strife, declining health, frequent headaches, sexual preference for both men and women and an urge to engage in inappropriate behaviour like eve teasing.

In total, 4 *sankatwala* were said to have been the victims of a *chudail* who had come to seek a cure from *Shri Balaji Maharaj*. The symptoms displayed by these *sankatwala* included marital strife, declining health, regular headaches, preferring both men and women and the impulse to engage in inappropriate behaviour such as eve-teasing.

5. Masan

It is a Hindi term meaning 'graveyard'. However, as the respondents have clarified, *masan* is the spirit of an unborn baby or a young child or infant that died violently or unnaturally. Hindu last rites prohibit ritualistic cremation of aborted, stillborn, newborns, and children under the age of nine. Instead, these individuals are either buried or flown in rivers. These kinds of afflicting agents are employed by sorcerers to either kill their target, inflict irreversible injury, or defend themselves against other powerful forces and other afflicting agents. *Masan* is thought to be the most harmful and challenging to treat of all the afflicted agents. A *masan* when sent by a sorcerer to afflict somebody could potentially destroy that person, foster *grihkalesh* or discord among the family and cause the *sankatwala* or *sankatwali* to suffer unending problems by making them ill. A person who wishes to hurt their enemy's offspring or future generations may often ask a sorcerer to deploy this type of afflicted agent. An unborn child is destroyed in the womb when an expectant mother gets afflicted by a *masan* or she may have several unsuccessful pregnancies. Saving the foetus becomes exceedingly challenging if an unskilled healer handles such a case. *Masan* have a childlike quality, therefore are incredibly naughty, angry, aggressive, stubborn, destructive and nearly uncontrollable, mostly due to the agonising death they experienced and the boundless energy they possessed as a child. The *sankatwale* who were suspected to be afflicted by *masan* exhibited symptoms like severe stomach aches, headaches, body pains, failed pregnancies, multiple miscarriages, suicidal behaviours and an extremely violent and aggressive nature. *Sankatwale*, caregivers and healers all have a unanimous belief that *Shri Balaji Maharaj* has the power to even control a *masan* and heal *sankatwale*.

Only 1 *sankatwali*, according to her bhagat, was confirmed about the presence of a *masan* that was the cause of her inability to succeed as a mother. She went through many miscarriages before her neighbour advised her to go to the Mehandipur Balaji temple to get rid of her *sankat*.

6. Hijra

This Hindi word '*hijra*' means eunuch. This kind of afflicting agent is the spirit of a eunuch, who is typically clever, humorous, amusing, mischievous and sexually queer. *Hijra* when used by a sorcerer, their sole purpose is to cause sexual dysfunction in the *sankatwala* or *sankatwali*. Such *sankatwale* often exhibit symptoms like clapping, behaviour like a eunuch, likingness towards the same gender as theirs and immoral desires like smoking and consumption of alcohol. The impulse to do improper things, inappropriate or socially undesirable behaviour, body aches, and continuous feeling of weight on the chest by males are some of the other symptoms that a *sankatwala* who is afflicted by a *hijra* may feel.

Among all the *sankatwale*, only 1 *sankatwala* had confirmation by the *bhagats* that a *hijra* was the primary cause of his sankat.

7. Marghati

The Hindi translation of the term is 'who belongs to cremation or burial grounds'. These kinds of afflicting agents are spirits that either reside in cemeteries or cremation sites or become trapped there. When mediated by a sorcerer, the goal of this afflicting agent is to cause sickness, which can range from minor discomforts like lightheadedness to serious, inexplicable diseases. *Sankatwale* who gets afflicted by a *marghati* exhibits symptoms like acts that are socially inappropriate like tearing clothes, abusing, irrelevant talks, etc. Only one *sankatwali* was suspected of being afflicted by a *marghati* who was believed to be the primary reason for her socially inappropriate behaviour and her *sankat*.

Only 1 *sankatwali* was said to have developed *sankat* due to *marghati*.

8. Aghori

The word '*aghori*' in Hindi means polluted. This type of afflicting agent is the spirit of those with low social status or those deemed contaminated by their birth or behaviour. These spirits are usually destructive, manipulative and occasionally even masochistic. Similar to other afflicting agents, these can also be used by a sorcerer to cause affliction that leaves a *sankatwala* or *sankatwali* gravely crippled.

Only 1 *sankatwala* was confirmed to have a *sankat* because of an *aghori*. However, before travelling to Mehandipur Balaji, a local healer had suspected that the reason behind his sufferings was angry *pitra*.

Conclusion

Mehandipur Balaji temple is flooded with *sankatwale* and their caregivers daily who come from far and near in seek of healing. It is a common belief among people visiting to the temple that all their troubles or *sankat* will be healed when they surrender them in the court of *Shri Balaji Maharaj*. They believed that the miraculous powers of *Shri Balaji Maharaj* will eliminate all sorts of afflicting agents no matter if the healing would be time-consuming. All the *bhagat* or the healers in Mehandipur also popularize that people who come for help from *Balaji Maharaj* never returned empty-handed if their belief in *Balaji* was strong and their feelings were true. Many *sankatwale* claimed that they had healed from their *sankat* completely, some *sankatwale* believe that their *sankat* is improving and they will keep visiting Mehandipur Balaji whenever they get an opportunity out of gratitude and unshaken faith in *Shri Balaji Maharaj* as well as their overall well-being.

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