

CULTURAL BELIEFS AND SPIRITUAL WELLBEING AMONG WOMEN EXPERIENCING RELIGIOUS TRANCE

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Abstract :

Background : Every culture has unique ways of beliefs and practices with regard to religion and spirituality. Many rituals like possession, religious trance that are prevalent in society are considered normal especially when performed in a close community or group. Spirit possession is a culturally sanctioned, heavily institutionalized and symbolically invested means of expression in action for various ego dystonic impulses and thoughts.¹

Aim : was to assess the cultural beliefs and spiritual wellbeing among women experiencing religious trance.

Methods : A descriptive correlative survey design was used. Thirty one women who had experienced religious trance on the day of 'Siri jaatre' (Annual festival held in the temple) at Sree Veerabhadra Swamy temple, Hiriadka were selected for the study using purposive sampling technique. The instruments used for the study were Demographic Proforma, Cultural Belief Scale and Spiritual Wellbeing Questionnaire. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used for analysis of the data.

Results : Majority women were illiterate (67.7%), coolie workers (61.3%) and married (93.5%). All the women (100%) had high cultural beliefs and high spiritual wellbeing. There was high correlation ($r=0.624$) between cultural beliefs and spiritual wellbeing.

Keywords : Religious trance, women, spiritual wellbeing, cultural belief.

Introduction :

Spirituality and spiritual wellbeing are part of the overall wellness and health of people. It is the consensus of opinion that spirit possession is a form of hysteria. It is also a group of phenomenon, and tends to involve several members of a particular group of people within a particular setting. Spirit possession has been known and described since biblical times, and occurred in most parts of the world, both in primitive and sophisticated societies. Spirit possession is a phenomenon that is culture bound i.e. it is intimately related to the beliefs, customs and attitudes of the particular culture group in which it is found.²

Getting possessed by Siri is considered as an offering (serve) to the spirit. By doing so, they believe that the member as well as her

family gets relief from their problems and receive blessings of the spirit.³

Frederick M Smith proposes that positive oracular or ecstatic possession is the most common form of spiritual expression in India, and that it has been linguistically distinguished from negative, disease-producing possession for thousands of years. In South Asia possession has always been broader and more diverse than in the West, where it has been almost entirely characterized as "demonic." At best, spirit possession has been regarded as a medically treatable psychological ailment and at worst, as a condition that requires exorcism or punishment. In South (and East) Asia, ecstatic or oracular possession has been widely practiced throughout history, occupying a position of respect in early and recent Hinduism and in certain forms of Buddhism.⁴

Almost everywhere in India, spirit possession is described

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as a means of social regulation and of conflict resolution through symbolic transformation. Among religious experiences, possession cults appear as interesting phenomena for the reasons that it uncovers many aspects of social processes. Jones reported that possession rituals in South Asia are merely practiced among the lower castes populations. Therefore, possession came to be seen as a means of transcending social hierarchies and oppression through symbolic transformation.⁵

Among the various religious phenomena, which characterize these transitions the possession by spirits needs special attention as it finds frequent reference in the indigenous psychiatry. In the state of possession some unique changes occur in the body and mind of the individual at least overtly.⁶

Participation in religious trance and healing ceremonies helps in reinforcing the belief system that is consonant with the subculture of the people.⁷

Aims :

The aim of the present study was to assess the cultural beliefs and spiritual wellbeing among women experiencing religious trance thereby understanding the influence of culture in their spiritual wellbeing.

Methods and materials :

The research design adopted for this study was descriptive correlative survey design. Thirty one women who had experienced religious trance on the day of 'Siri jaatre' at Sree Veerabhadra Swamy temple, Hiriadka were selected for the study using purposive sampling technique. Siri is worshipped in Tulu Nadu across caste and ethnic lines. There are numerous temples dedicated to her and her progeny called Adi Alade. These Temples are the venue for the Annual Festival held in her honour called Siri Jaatre and also the Daliyopaliyo - a mass possession cult of women associated with her. The 'Siri' Epic declares Siri's divinity and also of her progeny and she is worshipped as a Daiva (Demi goddess) across Tulu Nadu region of South West India in Temples.⁸

To conduct the research study, administrative permission

was taken from Dean, Manipal College of Nursing Manipal and Temple administrator. Informed consent was obtained from each subject and confidentiality was assured by the researcher before collecting the data. Data was collected on the day of 'Siri Jathre'.

Background information was collected by using a Demographic Proforma, constructed by the investigators, which consisted of 9 items. The Cultural belief scale is a structured tool consisted of 10 items and four point Likert scale. The options were strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree which were given a score of four, three, two and one respectively. The total score was 40, which was arbitrarily divided as low and high cultural belief as 10-19, and 20-40 respectively. The spiritual wellbeing questionnaire consisted of 16 items and it is also a four point Likert scale. The options were always, sometimes, rarely and never. The total score was 64 which were arbitrarily divided as low, moderate and high spiritual wellbeing. Seven experts validated the content of the tools. Language validity was established by translating the tools to Kannada by a professional and language expert. The re-translation to English was carried out and there were no correction. Reliability of the tool was established by computing Cronbach's alpha and reliability co-efficient obtained was cultural belief- 0.721 and Spiritual wellbeing- 0.764 respectively. Descriptive and inferential statistics (frequency & percentage, and Sphereman's correlation) were used for analysis of data.

Results :

The study findings shows that most (32.3%) of the subjects belonged to the age group of 40-49 years, majority (93.5%) of the subjects were married, (67.7%) were illiterate. (61.3%) of them were coolie workers. Majority of the subjects (51.6%) of them belonged to nuclear family, monthly income of the family was less than 2,000 rupees among majority of the subjects (58.1%), (48.4%) of them had a family history of trance and the duration was more than 15 years (51%). Majority of the subjects (74.2%) were also experiencing trance for more than 15 years (presented in table 1).

The present study revealed that all the subjects (100%) had high cultural belief and (100%) high spiritual wellbeing (presented in table 2&3).

The study also revealed that (shown in table 4) there is a high correlation between cultural beliefs and spiritual wellbeing ($r=0.624$).

Discussion :

Present study findings shows that most of the women (32.3%) were in the age group of 40-49 years, Majority were illiterate (67.7%), coolie workers (61.3%) and married (93.5%). Most of the subjects (48.4%) had family history of religious trance and majority of them were experiencing this for more than 15 years (74.2%).

In a study conducted by Rao G on Siri possession (2002) reported that (28%) of the women who experienced possession were in the age group of 41-50 years, (40%) of them had no education, (72%) of the women were married, (56%) had family history of possession and duration varied from 5-40 years.³

Study findings also revealed that all the women experiencing religious trance had high spiritual wellbeing (100%). A comparative study by Seema et al.(2009) on measures of mental health and exploration of cognitions contradict these findings. They found that the scores of the possession group (14 ± 5.37) were significantly lower than the comparison group (15.17 ± 4.86) on general well-being ($t = 0.88$; $df = 58$; $p < 0.5$), suggesting poorer general well-being of the participants experiencing spirit possession.⁶

High correlation between cultural belief and spiritual wellbeing ($r=0.624$) was found in this study. A study conducted by Sreekumar R. (2008) on The Pattern of Association of Religious Factors with Subjective Well-Being found that there is a significant positive correlations between religious beliefs, religious practices, and spirituality with subjective wellbeing ($r=0.498$).⁹

Conclusion :

The influence of spirits or other supernatural beings as an explanation for emotional, social or interpersonal crisis is

not uncommon in our culture. It is interesting to analyze its connection with underlying factors that precipitate this behavior which may throw light into this phenomenon. Culture and religion play major role in the way people think and behave. The beliefs ingrained in the culture leads to the practice of religious trance which ensures great amount of satisfaction and spiritual wellbeing among these women.

Table 1: Frequency and percentage distribution of sample characteristics n=31

Sample characteristics	f	%
Age in years		
30-39	06	19.4
40-49	10	32.3
50-59	08	25.8
60-69	06	19.01
70 and above	01	3.0
Marital Status		
Married	29	93.5
Widowed	02	6.5
Educational Status		
Illiterate	21	67.7
Primary education	10	32.3
Occupation		
Housewife	10	32.3
Coolie workers	19	61.3
Nonprofessional workers	2	6.5
Type of family		
Nuclear	16	51.6
Joint	15	48.5
Monthly Income (in Rs.)		
Less than 2,000	18	58.1
2,001-4,000	08	25.8
4001-6000	02	6.5
Above 6,000	03	9.7
History of trance in family		
Yes	15	48.4
No	16	51.6
Duration of trance among family members		
Less than 5 years	11	35.48
5-9 years	03	9.6
10-15 years	01	3.2
Above 15 years	16	51
Duration of self- trance		
Less than 5 years	03	9.7
5-9 years	04	12.9
10-15 years	01	3.2
Above 15 years	23	74.2

Table 2: Description of Cultural belief

Category	Range of scores	f	%
Low cultural belief	10-19	0	0
High cultural belief	20-40	31	100

Table 3: Description of Spiritual wellbein

n=31

Category	Range of scores	f	%
Low spiritual wellbeing	16-32	0	0
Moderate spiritual wellbeing	33-48	0	0
High spiritual wellbeing	49-64	31	100

Table 4 - Correlation between cultural belief and spiritual wellbeing

n=31

Variables	Median	±SD	'r' value
Cultural belief	64	2.61	0.624
Spiritual wellbeing			

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