

Being possessed: Religious Scrupulosity, Socio-cultural Factors and Psychological Construct

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Background: Possession by a form of goddess or deity is a scrupulous religious phenomenon that has been documented in various parts of India which indeed has a cultural underpinning. This is known for many years in this part of India and described in various older manuscripts and even modern writings. In fact, the phenomenon of being possessed has been considered as a prestigious occurrence (or occurrences) as it is perceived as a message from divinity or Holy Spirit. Notwithstanding there are other types of possession by Unholy Spirits (ghosts) which can be demeaning and derogatory.

These type of contradictory representation of self has been considered as dissociative disorder (Trance Disorder) in DSM IV in that disturbance in the state of consciousness, identity or memory that are indigenous to particular culture happens. Stereotype behaviours are common and possession trance involves replacement of customary sense personal identity by a new identity.

Method: Holy possession (trance) usually occurs in women of different age groups (some referred as episodes of dissociation followed by amnesia, Chardrashekar, 1989) during the festival of worshipping the deity. Usually possessed women perform strangely and execute in some grandiose manner. They implement the supernatural power or idol of god in their own selves and perceives as they are god themselves for a period of few hours to one or two days. Investigation in the psychological as well as socio-cultural background is imperative to understand the intricacies of this unique cultural manifestation.

In this study, total 48 women were identified being possessed at least twice and a complete demographic and psychological investigations have been done. The group has been divided into two groups depending on age and marital status. The tests used were Thematic Apperception Test, Locus of

Control, Perceived Social Support, Trait & State Anxiety, Beck Depression Inventory, Social Belief System and Duke Mental Health.

Results: The two groups were significantly different ($p=0.05$) in state anxiety. Married and older group had higher state anxiety. Both groups were significantly ($p=0.05$) indicated by external locus of control. The married group had higher scores of external LOC. The unmarried group was found to have significantly higher ($p=0.05$) perceived social support than other group. Both groups demonstrated low to moderate depressive features but no significant difference was indicated between groups. The Mental health status was generally similar between the two groups signifying inferior quality of mental health status.

Discussion: The unique phenomenon of being possessed indicates profound yearn for of certain unfulfilled wishes or needs as indicated by this study. Beside there are indications of variation in psychological construct between age groups and marital status. The study indicates that married women of lower socioeconomic status of India had lower perceived social support and higher anxiety. They were also more dependent on external factors to shape their destiny. Naturally they were more vulnerable and suffer from intense anxiety, somatization and depressive features. The possession is their wish fulfillment and being able to take control over things even for some moment. This study refers to more psychosocial origin of this phenomenon in contrast to interpersonal and chronic nature of dissociative identity disorder. The subjects of possession could recuperate their lost self-esteem and need for love or affection in that way as they gain some social importance being possessed by Holy Spirit.

References:

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