

Belief on Evil Eye Among the Jaffna Tamils: A Sociological Perspective

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Introduction

The belief on evil eye is very broad and popular among various communities in the world. This belief exists among people beyond the distinction of the literate and the illiterate. The evils originate from eyes are known as 'Kanneru' and evils associated with tongue (One's speech) are 'Naavuru' in the tradition of Tamils. The assumption behind this belief is that the eyes of certain people have the capability to cause malice. The generally recognized world notion is that the eye manifestations are more powerful than the manifestation of any other part of the human body.

This article is intended to study the belief on evileye among the Jaffna Hindus on a sociological perspective, based on the data elicited from field research conducted at Valikamam, Vadamaradchy, Thenmaradchy and Island areas. Some others burn the composition in the oven in their houses.

Evil Eye : Word and Meaning

Evil Eye is creating harm by an individual envying another individual or the property of another individual through praising world or looking at.

Evil Eye in the Western Tradition

A strong belief on evil eye could be observed among the western people.

There are clues which speak about the practice of erecting statues for the deity Nemesis, worshipping and invoking it for blessing among Greeks and Romans to defend themselves against the evils of evil eye³

Rituals were observed in Rome seeking to curb the destruction caused to crops by evil eye.

Scholars have illustrated the various beliefs on evil eye in countries like Morocco, Egypt and Russia. ⁵

It is appropriate to view the interpretation about evil eye, in this context, by Bacon, a western scholar.

"People have a belief on how evil functions. That is evil effects evil immediately on any object which it concerns with. This belief has prevailed in all the times in all the countries."

The above interpretation signifies the universal existence of this belief regarding evil eye.

People who cause evil eye

According to the data elicited from research, exorcists, sorcerers, those who are afflicted by malicious planets in their horoscope, envious people, people with abnormal physical shape, people suffering from diseases, divine people and women under going menstruation period are found to have the capability to cause evil eye. Those people who have this kind of capability against their will seem to be unaware of the evils of their eyes. Some people tend to assume that this capability is hereditary. This is notable that this assumption is found among the nations of England and East Africa, according to the view of scholars. ⁷

Research data ascertain that women outnumber men in effecting evil eye. The excessive craving of women is believed to be behind this tendency of women. ⁸

Protection from Evil eye

Protective measures against evil eye could be discussed under two titles.

1. Prevention before the infliction of evil eye.
2. Freeing oneself from the inflection after being inflicted.

There is popular tradition of hanging a human like image, made out of hay, rags, sticks and clay pot, called scarecrow, on houses, at gardens and in business centers

as a protection against evil eye.⁹ This image is called "Pulluru" by people of Tamil Nadu.¹⁰

There is a belief that babies are the most victims of evil eye and when parents take their children away from home, they wear a big black 'Poddu' (a round mark of paste) on their children's forehead. Hence the concentration of those who inflict evil eye could be drawn to the 'Poddu' and the affliction to the children is considerably reduced.¹¹

Another protective measure of people is to keep their progress and other developments in life, a secret. Responding indifferently to the queries of those who are supposed to inflict evil eye on others progress is some other form of protection.

Most of the people in the research area avoid having meals in front of those who are unfamiliar or those who are believed to have the capability to inflict evil eye. Most women do not like the others to watch them serving food to their husbands, for sake of preventing the effect of evil eye.¹²

Harm caused by Evil Eye

Evil Eye is believed to cause various forms of harm. The Tamil proverb "Kallerikku Thappinalum Kannerikku Thappa Mudiathu" (One can escape the stone thrown at but not the evil eye) is well known in the research area. Ill health particularly headache, hiccough, yawning, lack of appetite etc and death are thought to be some forms of harm. Setback in business and occupational ventures can also be mentioned here.¹³

Not only humans but other animate and inanimate objects like trees, fields, gardens, newly contracted buildings and vehicles could be affected by evil eye.

Anti Evil Eye Materials

The materials supposed to eliminate the effect of evil eye seem to have common properties in the research area. Reciting mantras, holy ash, camphor, saffron, thread, kumkum, hen, lemon, salt, conch shell, street soil, dry chilly, water, grain, bodily parts of animals, aromatic smoke, blood, musical note etc are worth mentioning.¹⁴

Elimination of the effect of Evil eye

Preventing the effect of evil eye and defusing the effect are the two means of eliminating the effect of evil eye. These means are protection before the harm and protection after harm respectively.

Alleviating the effect of evil eye includes the practices of 'Suththippoduthal', blessing the victim with a tray bearing sacred objects, applying holy ash to victim's body, wearing black 'poddu' on the victim's forehead, dyeing the victim's eyebrow sides, bending the fingers with a cracking sound, spitting, wearing special jewellery to the victim, wearing talisman to the victim, wearing the fur or tooth of animals like pig and bear to the victim.

It's notable that "Suttipoduthal" and blessing with camphor incense are the major practices in the research area. Several people retain the practice of wearing big black 'Pooddu' on the forehead of babies when they are taken away from home and brought back home. The ash on the cooking vessels is used for this purpose. ¹⁵

It is assumed that newly married couple are next to children as the victims of evil eye. Hence when newly married couple go out of home together, they are made to under go some traditional practice supposed to eliminate the effects of evil eye.

Suththipoduthal has to be considered a kind of conventional practice. ¹⁶

The material composition used in 'suthipoduthal' includes three dry chillies, three salt pieces, Neem leaves, street soil (The soil trodden by the one supposed to have inflicted evil eye is specially considered), leaf piece of either palmyrah or coconut composition being carried by the right hand is rubbed against the victim's body from head to foot. Mantras are also recited by some while doing so. Lastly spitting drops of the victim are received on this composition and the whole thing is left burnt on the street yard. Some throw the composition into ponds.

The extent burning is corresponded to the extent of the evil eye. If the dry chillies are not thoroughly burnt and salt pieces do not burst, the effect of evil eye is believed to be considerable. This ceremony comes to an end with marking a "Poddu" on the forehead of the victim. using the dissolved dry chilly powder.

Mostly women involve in the "suttipoduthal" ceremony. Women having fulfilled

the sanctities of life and elderly ones who are honored in the society are regarded eligible to involve in the ceremony.

Saliva is assigned prominence in the ceremony to mitigate the effects supposed to be caused by tongue. The ceremony is referred to as "Thuppikkaliththal" (Mitigating by spitting off) by the residents of the research area. This is performed by articulating "Thoo Thoo" thrice while spitting out saliva. ¹⁷

The mitigation ceremonies could be viewed as a part of magico Religious Folk Medicine. Such ceremonial practices seem to come under the branch of contagious magic. ¹⁸

The effects of evil eye are believed to pass on to the mitigation articles like street soil, dry chilies, salt, saliva etc. during the ceremony. The assumption behind the whole ceremony is that the entire evils will be destroyed as the mitigation articles are burnt.

Conclusion

The belief on evil eye widely survives among people beyond the distinction of the literate and the illiterate, in the research area.

The involvement of women inflicting evil eye and in mitigating it is immense. Men in less number also are observed to participate in the ceremonies. Men's participation is encouraged only when qualified women are not found available on such occasion. In the mitigation practices, "Suthipoduthal" or Thudaiththupoduthal" is the one practiced most.

The remedies against evil eye could be regarded as part of traditional counselling.

Foot Notes

1. Encyclopedia of Religion and ethics; Charl'es Scribner's Sons; Newyork; 1995; VOL.V; PP 608 – 609.
2. Alan Dundes; Interpreting Folklore; Bloomington; Indiana University press; 1980; P.93.
3. Frederick Thomas Elworthy. The Evil Eye and Account of the Ancient and widespread superstition; London; 1995; P.14
4. Encyclopedia Britanica; Macropaedia; Encyclopaedia Britanica Inc; Helen Hemingway Benton Publisher; Chicago, U.S.A; 1973 – 1974 , P.916

5. Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics; Vol – 8; P.609.
6. Ibid; P.608.
7. Ibid; P.16.
8. Source of Data.
Mrs.M.Annammah; Female; Age 76;
Nainativu South; Nainativu.
Mr.K.Sinathmby; Male; age; 70;
Vellampkkaddy; Kodikamam.
Mrs.V.Thangaratnam; Female; age; 60,
Veeraoathurar Kovilady; Uduppiddy.
Mr.N.Sathiyaventhana; Male; Age: 26
Paddinasabai Veethy; Manipay.
9. This tradition is widely found in the research area.
10. Encyclopaedia; Tamil Valarchchik Kalagam; Madras; 1961; Vol 8; P.466.
11. Sources of data.
Mr.S.Kuganesan; Male; Age; 37;
Delft east; Deift.
12. Source of Data.
Mrs.N.Meenadchi; Female; Age; 60
Kanagampuliyadi Jonction; Sarasalai.
13. Source of Data.
Mrs.N.Rajitha; Female; Age;30;
Mahathma Veethy; Nellyyadi.
14. The same articles are used in the mitigation ceremonies among the people of Tamil Nadu, India.
15. Source of Data.
Mr.S.Thavaseelan; Male; Age 58;
Kokuvil West; Kokuvil
16. Sivalingarajah.S., Cultutal heritage in Jaffna, Kumaran Book House; Colombo; 2003; PP 67 – 73
17. Source of Data.
Mrs.V.Krishnapillai; Female; age.70;
Manalthrai Lane, Kandarmadam.
18. Sivasubramaniam.A; Mantras and Rituals; Peoples Publications; Madras; 1999.
P.33.