

Gagging and throttling by rice grains: An unusual case of asphyxia in the name of witchcraft

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Abstract

Witchcraft-related violence persists in Nepal, with accusations serving as cultural weapons against those deviating from norms, especially vulnerable individuals like the elderly, impoverished, widowed, or unmarried women. This case report aims to highlight the myths and consequences surrounding these beliefs. A 55-year-old woman, accused of witchcraft, was found dead under seven sacks of rice. Autopsy revealed death by asphyxia, caused by gagging from rice grains with throttling. This tragic incident underscores the urgent need to address and dismantle such harmful superstitions, ensuring the safety and dignity of all individuals within the community.

Key words: Asphyxia; Autopsy; Homicide; Myth; Nepal.

INTRODUCTION

Harmful traditional practices persist across many cultures, fuelling violence against women and marginalised groups, causing physical and psychological harm, limiting education and economic prospects, and even resulting in fatalities. Witchcraft accusation is a cultural weapon, often targeting vulnerable individuals like elderly, impoverished, widowed, or unmarried women.¹ In Nepal, approximately 90 women lose their lives annually due to witchcraft allegations, along

with numerous cases of extreme violence.² This case highlights the tragic consequences of such beliefs within Nepal's indigenous *Majhi* (fishermen) community which resulted in death of an innocent female due to asphyxia.

CASE REPORT

A body of a 55 years old female was found in a heap of rice. She was sprinkled with rice grain by the youths of her locality, who tried to purge her of her ancestors' spirits. According to the police report, the victim, who was previously accused of witchcraft, had been relentlessly hit by more than seven sacks of rice grains, each sack weighing approximately 20 kilograms, all over her body and mouth, in the name of freeing her from the ancestor's spirits. The crowd also allegedly banged and kicked her, and also compressed her body. An autopsy was performed three days later. On external examination, the body was smeared with rice grains all over her body and clothes. The face and upper half of the body were congested. The palms and nails were cyanosed. The greenish discolouration was evident over the lower abdomen. The nose, mouth, and ears were impacted with rice grains (Figure 1). Both the eyes were congested.

External Injuries: A horizontal, pressure abrasion, with irregular parchmentisation, measuring 12 cm x 3 cm, was present in the neck. It was located 8 cm above the sternal notch and 5 cm below the base of chin (Figure 2). There were four crescent scratch abrasions, each measuring 0.7 cm in length, present on the right side of the neck, with the outermost being 4 cm below the right mastoid

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(Figure 2). A 5 cm wide, circumferential, indentation mark, was present over lower part of right forearm, suggestive of forceful prolonged compression. Multiple scratch abrasions were also present over dorsum of both the hands (Figure 3).

On removing the internal organs en-masse, rice grains were noted, lodged in the oropharynx (Figure 4). Inner wall of trachea appeared congested with no rice grains. Blood mixed muco-serous froth was present in the bronchi. All internal organs on the cut-section were congested, and the stomach contained estimated 40-50 rice grains. Contusion around the right submandibular gland and right sternohyoid at the level of the thyroid gland were seen. Hyoid bone and thyroid cartilage were intact with contusion of surrounding soft tissues.

A contusion measuring 3 cm x 2 cm was present in subcutaneous tissue on left side of the neck below the angle of the mandible (Figure 5). The ninth and tenth intercostal muscles were contused on left side along the anterior axillary line (Figure 6). Both the lungs were found out to be congested.

The cause of death was established due to asphyxia as a combination of suffocation and gagging by rice grains along with throttling. Suffocation was concluded in this case, because the victim was smothered by rice grains present in her nose and mouth. There were blunt force injuries on the neck, which likely reduced the victim's ability to resist and were confirmed to be fatal, at the autopsy. Homicide was determined to be the manner of death.



Figure 1: Respiratory orifices including nose and mouth impacted with rice grain



Figure 2: External injuries of neck, pressure abrasion (arrow head), and crescentic abrasion (arrow)



Figure 3: Circumferential compression of right forearm



Figure 4: Rice grains lodged in oropharynx

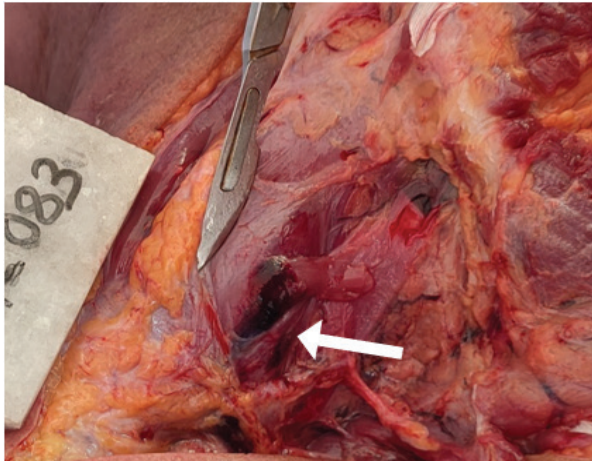


Figure 5: Contusion of the left sternohyoid muscle (white arrow)

DISCUSSION

Nepal is a landlocked country in South East Asia. The religion of majority of Nepali is Hinduism. The *Majhis* are an ethnic group of fishermen, mainly residing near the river banks of Nepal. In Hindu culture the first death anniversary is observed by the *Shraddha* ceremony that enables the deceased (*pitri*) to be admitted into the assembly of forefathers. Similarly, *Shorahshraddha* is a 16 days period dedicated to paying homage to the dead in Hindu calendar performed by the eldest son. *Shorahshraddh* is a significant occasion for the *Majhi* community who visits the river banks and worship and summon *Pitri*, the dead ancestors. The worshipper believes that the dead person's soul enters a living person's body and the person goes to a trance. The spirit is believed to have entered the body after the host starts experiencing convulsions. The spirit is supposed to leave the host body on next day after another ritual by the river bank, but in this instance the soul of the departed refused to leave the host body, indicating *Pitri* was unhappy and the villagers assumed it to have happened because of the act of witches, the victim in this case. Then, they proceeded to beat her indiscriminately with rice grains. Simultaneously, they also smothered and gagged her with the rice grains till her death.

The phrase "suffocation" refers to death from a lack of oxygen, while the term "smothering" relates to external blockage of external airways.³ Gagging is another form of asphyxia in which the victim's mouth is taped shut or covered by external mechanical means.⁴ Strangulation injuries are a heterogeneous set of traumatic pathology that occurs as a result of mechanical force applied externally to the neck and surrounding structures.⁵ When

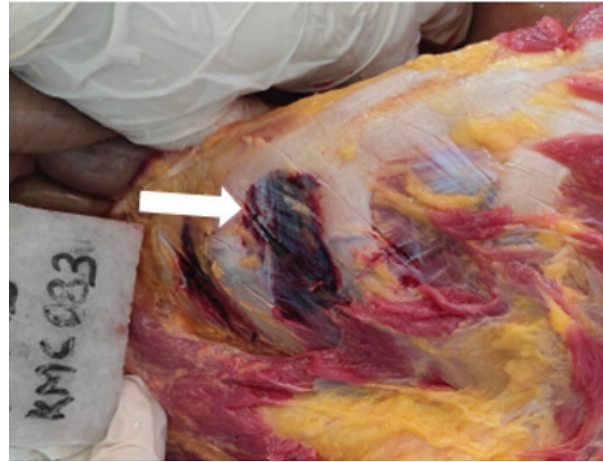


Figure 6: Contusion of left ninth and tenth intercostal muscles along anterior axillary line

the constriction of neck is produced by pressure of the fingers and palms upon the throat, it is called throttling. Throughout this report we refer to suffocation as an umbrella term for asphyxia by smothering and gagging.

Unusual substances have been used at different instances of time in different parts of the world to suffocate and kill someone. A similar case was reported in 2012 by Saint-Martin et al. where toilet paper was used to commit the homicide of an elderly female. The body of a 91-year-old woman suffering from Alzheimer's disease was found in the bedroom of her nursing home, a roll of toilet paper near the body and toilet paper protruding from the mouth. At autopsy, pellets of toilet paper were impacted in the buccal cavity and the laryngopharynx above the epiglottis. The cause of death was established as smothering on toilet paper, whereas the manner of death was ruled as homicidal. Non-lethal blunt head injuries were considered to be a contributive factor.⁶

Jang et al. 2013, reported an unusual case of homicide of a 21-year-old man, who was smothered with a hot steam towel by his mother and a pastor in the name of exorcism. According to the testimony of the perpetrators, they thought he was possessed by a demon, so they attempted an exorcism. They did not give him any food or fluids for three days, restrained him and covered his full face with a hot steam towel and they pressed his face down and smothered him. On post-mortem examination, the face of the deceased showed extensive scalding with drying. The buccal region showed severe thermal damage with mucosal injuries. A few abrasions were seen on the forehead. Both eyes showed multifocal scleral haemorrhages. Several minor injuries including

abrasions and superficial contusions were present on the anterior neck, occipital region, thorax, abdomen, and both extremities, probably due to struggle. Internal examination revealed no specific findings except for mucosal oedema of the pharynx.⁷

Vendura and Geserick (1997), reported a case of a five-year-old girl, who was killed by her mother when she tried to pull the devil out of the girl's mouth using her hands. In that way, the enlarged tonsils were pushed back and caused together with the woman's fingers a temporary closure of the hypopharynx and at least the suffocation of the child.⁸

Cohle in 1986, reported a case where the foster mother of a five-year-old white male, poured pepper into his throat as punishment for lying. He immediately became dyspneic, then apneic, and was pronounced dead about one hour later. At autopsy, the main stem and several smaller bronchi were occluded with pepper. Mechanisms of asphyxia by pepper include mechanical obstruction of the tracheobronchial tree and mucosal oedema caused by the irritant effect of volatile oils in pepper. This rare circumstance represents the second reported a fatal case of pepper aspiration and the third reported case overall.⁹

Defined based on act of witches by Pitchard (1973), "A Witch performs no rite, utters no spell, and possesses no medicines. An act of witchcraft is a psychic act. Witches do not know they are being witches until and unless they are accused of being witches".¹⁰ In Nepal, elderly

women and widows are often singled out and accused of witchcraft and abused in exorcism ceremonies as in the present case. *Akshyatah* is a holy rice grain that is used to worship Gods and get rid of evil. In this case, the deceased had been relentlessly hit by the same *Akshyatah*, but in huge quantity, which led to her death. The mucus-impacted rice grains in the oropharynx caused the deceased to gag. The injuries on the external and internal areas of the neck of the deceased also suggest act of throttling. The involvement of a group of people, attempting to administer punishment in the name of a mythical belief, also associates this case with the act of lynching by the local *majhis*.

CONCLUSION

This case is believed to be the first reported case in Nepal, where a person has been smothered and gagged by rice grains along with throttling. It is a form of gender-based violence where the deceased has been baselessly accused of witchcraft and killed in the name of the local ritual.

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