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## 2. Witchcraft in Santal Society of Mayurbhanj: An Assessment

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### **Abstract**

*This article explores the prevalence and significance of witchcraft beliefs and practices within the Santal society of Mayurbhanj, a district in the eastern Indian state of Odisha. The Santal community, an indigenous tribal group, has a rich cultural heritage that includes a complex system of beliefs surrounding witchcraft. This study aims to assess the various aspects of witchcraft in Santal society, including its historical roots, cultural context, and contemporary manifestations. Through a combination of ethnographic fieldwork, interviews with community members, and analysis of existing literature, this research sheds light on the role of witchcraft in shaping social dynamics, gender relations, and conflict resolution within the Santal community.*

*The article also examines the impact of modernization, education, and changing socio-economic conditions on the persistence and evolution of witchcraft beliefs. By providing an in-depth understanding of witchcraft in Santal society, this study contributes to the broader discourse on indigenous knowledge systems, cultural change, and the intersection of tradition and modernity in tribal communities. The findings highlight the need for a nuanced and contextual approach to understanding and addressing the complex social, cultural, and psychological factors that underlie the continued existence of witchcraft beliefs in contemporary Santal society.*

**Keywords:** *witchcraft, Santal society, Mayurbhanj, indigenous knowledge, cultural change, tribal communities*

### **Introduction**

Mayurbhanj, one of the largest districts of Odisha attracts the world towards its glorious, prosperous and deeprooted tribal culture. It is bounded by the Singhbhum district of Jharkhand and Midnapur district of West Bengal in the north, by the districts of Balasore and Keonjhar in the south, by Midnapur and Balasore in the east and by Keonjhar and Singhbhum in the west. Mayurbhanj, a

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marvelous spot in North Odisha which covers an area of 10418 square kilometers with the lofty Similipal forests, gorgeous and snowwhite waterfalls, winding rivers, huge summits and lush green valleys unfold a vast panorama of the nature's beauty. It lies at the northern border of the state of Odisha having the largest number of Santal population. The state of Odisha provides a fascinating background for the ethnological study of India. The district has 4 sub-divisions, 24 Tehsils having 26 Blocks and consists of 3979 villages grouped under 382 Gram Panchayats.

Mayurbhanj is geographically located between 22° 33' 45" and 21° 17' 0" north latitude and between 85° 42' 30" and 87° 17' 15" east longitude.<sup>1</sup> The central part of the district was covered by about 900 square miles of the Similipal Hills at a time. The highest mountain peak of Odisha is the Meghasan Hill which rises to a height of 1168 metre above the sea level situated in the southern part. Other important hills are Meghasan, Khairiburu, Gorumahisani, Ukam, Dwarsuni, Kanapat, Sarnda, Dhururuchampa, Chahala and Balidiha. These mountain ranges of the district are at present becoming more vulnerable to denudation and increased exhaustion.<sup>2</sup>

Mayurbhanj is one of the tribal dominated districts of Odisha. It has been the epitome of as many as 62 tribal communities within its area. Out of 62 tribes 53 are found in Mayurbhanj.<sup>3</sup> Out of its four sub – divisions Baripada Sadar and Kaptipada are the plain areas whereas Bamanghati and Panchpirh are the hilly tribal dominated regions of the district. Out of 26 Blocks the tribals are more concentrated in Udala, Khunta, Bijatala, Bisoi, Jamda and Baripada where the population varies from 70% to 80% of the total population of respective Blocks. The tribes constituted 56.6% of the total population of the district, though the population of Mayurbhanj is only 6% of Odisha's total population. According to the Census 2011, the total population of Mayurbhanj is 25,13,895 and the number of male is 12,53,633 and female population is 12,60,262. The Santals form the dominating tribe in Mayurbhanj with a population of 7,77,204.<sup>4</sup>

The Santals are one of the largest tribes of India belong to the *Proto – Austroloid* group who arrived in India soon after the Negritos. Because of the similarity with the Australian tribes this name is given.<sup>5</sup> The Santals are found in West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand, Assam, Tripura, Madhya Pradesh, Chhatisgarh and also in Nepal and Bangladesh.<sup>6</sup>

They are also known as one of the Pre – Dravidian tribes of the central belt of India.<sup>7</sup> According to L.O. Skrefsrud Santal is a corruption of the word *Saontar* because of their settlement in the Saont or [www.the researchers.asia](http://www.the researchers.asia)

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*Samanta bhumi* (modern Silda Pargana of Midnapore district in West Bengal). They are the largest aboriginal, ethnic, autoshtonomous and Kolarian tribe of India.<sup>8</sup> According to the statements of L.O. Skrefsrud, Thompson and Grierision the tribes like *Santal, Munda, Mahali, Bhumija, Ho, Birhor, Lodha, Kharia* of Mayurbhanj and the *Juanga* of Keonjhar have descended from an old tribe, Kherwar. The Munda and Dravidian languages are distinguished by Maxmuller in the beginning and

the Santali language has been placed under Munda language. The Santals are divided into a number of totemic clans, mostly named after animals, flowers, fruits and plants etc. The Santals are the largest tribe in India to retain an aboriginal language to the present day which belongs to Austric or Austro – Asiatic family. Santali is closely related to *Mundari, Ho, Korku, Savara and Gadava* etc. which is spoken by the smaller tribes.<sup>9</sup>

### **Practice of Witchcraft among the Santals**

The main aim of this paper is to highlight the blind belief and superstitions of the Santal community of Mayurbhanj which is a curse in tribal society. Their society exists amidst blind belief and superstitions. They believed many kinds of supernaturalism. In spite of their overall development in education, literature and culture, many social evils still exist in their society even in 21st Century. Prominent among them is the practice of *Dan* or witch-craft which works like a cancer from the core of the society. They have a firm faith in witch-craft. They can cause harm to their own relatives and siblings. People believed that, once a woman has become a witch, the village is at her mercy.<sup>10</sup> They think that she can do whatever she desires with the villagers.

The witches can apply various methods to induce sickness and cause death. The witches have evil eyes and evil mouths. Whenever the witches cast their look on living things, harm is sure to be followed.<sup>11</sup> It is believed that the witches can kill a person by the strictest observance of certain rites. She can only do so by powers derived from the *bongas*.<sup>12</sup> She must first take a bonga's permission before she starts her evil practice. She does not secure the approval of Manjhi Halam Bonga or Pargana Bonga but at least one bonga approved by Pargana Bonga must consent to the act.<sup>13</sup>

The witches have their separate group. They sing and dance on the night of new moon, full moon or *Sankranti* in a particular place under a big tree. Some time they strip off their clothes and roam at night. Some of them wear broomsticks around their waists. Any villager who comes across a witch will fall seriously ill and may even become insane or die.

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### Folk Tales behind the Practice of Witchcraft

In the remote past when the villagers and people were supposed to be honest and pure, the divine spirits used to come to the villages and make relationship with their favourite persons. They also used to marry with them. By their appearance they looked different from the ordinary human being. Being born and brought up in a Santal family the author has many experiences regarding her own society and culture.

According to the elderly persons of the Santal society, witch-craft is a hereditary practice. The mothers teach their daughters the art of practising witch-craft. Though this practice is not inborn but always acquired by training. Not only the daughters but also the obedient *Chela* or learners are taught.<sup>14</sup> Many absurd things are heard regarding the practice of the witch-craft. The training starts when a witch meets a lonely girl at a secluded place and starts singing a song by which that girl becomes hypnotized and learns the song. Some *Bongas* use to appear in her dream and she is asked to worship them.<sup>15</sup> She becomes frightened in her dream if she denies to do so. Thereafter the witch teaches her the song and the girl become her *chela*. Then she is taken to the *bongas* and taught the mantras of witch-craft in the position of *rumuh* or trance and learns the witch-craft perfectly.

People believed many peculiar things about the *Dans* that when a woman learns witch-craft for the first time she will have to eat up one of her most favourite family members. Otherwise she cannot learn the art when she dies by leaving her craft on any object like broomstick, winnowing fan or anything of her family. When a girl touches that object, the craft automatically shifted to her. People say that the *Dans* can fly the trees sitting on it, they can light a flame on their little finger, they can put life to a dead body from the grave and dance with it. When a *Dan* goes out of the house to practice her craft in the dark night she leaves a similar image of her own. That is called *Bhattoh*. Sometimes people have experienced and met the lions as their *Bhattoh* in the village streets. The *Dans* use to dance unitedly at midnight under the trees being naked in the outskirts of the village.

The main intention and practice of witch-craft is to apply harm to their enemies. Even when a quarrel takes place among the people, the witches make them sick by which some of them die. Whatever may be the reason, but people think that this happened due to the *Dans*. They also make frightened to the people at night by creating various frightful activities. Though this witch-craft has not been

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scientifically and authentically proven they believe that perhaps something is there and an evil spirit works in the society.

The *Ojha* or the witch doctors are closely related to this matter. The witches create harm and the *Ojhas* heal. When someone has become a prey to the witches, the *Ojha* tries to heal or do good to that person by his healing craft. Sometime the witch-craft supercedes the healing craft. The *Dans* come out victorious as some time they become very powerful. It is believed that almost in all villages the witches exist.

Globalization has a great effect on the Santal community in 21st Century. The darkness of ignorance is disappearing from the Santal society. Blind belief is also reducing gradually yet it has not been eradicated from the society which caused a number of criminal cases.

This evil practice can be uprooted by imparting proper education and creating awareness in the rural villages among the tribal community. The government and the non-government agencies should undertake special measures for eradication of witchcraft in making a healthy and prosperous tribal society.

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