

Shamanistic Beliefs and Practices: Emerging Trends towards a New Horizon



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Abstract

The importance of traditional values under the practices in shamanism is on the verge of vanishing. When the world is endeavoring to look at the indigenous knowledge system to be applied for the all-round development of the people, the scope for discovering the shamanistic practices is really revamped. Shamanistic knowledge system, though primarily based on magico-religious practices, has its multidimensional application for the wellbeing of the people in a traditional society. The study was undertaken in the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha. Both emic and etic approaches have been taken into consideration for analysis and presentation of the data. A total number of 20 shamans were interviewed with the help of semi-structured interview schedule. The basic aim to the study is to address the structure and function of shamanism and its impact on health culture of the Santal society. It further tries to analyze the various changing dimensions in the traditional Santal shamanism. Findings of the study reveal that traditional Santal shamanistic beliefs and practices are undergoing change due to the impact of modernization, modern education and growing easy access of modern health services. The role of shamans have reduced in terms of curing of disease and increased in other socio-economic life of the Santals. In due course of time, there has been mushrooming growth of different new sub-categories of shamans in the studied area which has direct impact on the Sarna religion.

Keywords: Shamanism, Kamru Guru, Medicine Man, Traditional Practices, Modernization.

Introduction

Shamanism is the art and science by which one purposely shifts perspective. There are different means by which perspective-shift is achieved (meditative/contemplative techniques, use of entheogens, abstinences, fasting, sleep deprivation, other austerities, and/or utilizing an illness or fever), but the initial impulse is auto-induced rather than imposed upon the individual by others. Shamanism refers primarily to the techniques employed for achieving changes in consciousness – especially ecstatic consciousness – and secondarily to the body of religious thought and practice in which the personage of the shaman plays a central role. One of the most interesting features of shamanism is that it spans across continents and is deeply embedded into the culture of many different traditions. Interestingly, most of the practices and beliefs are very similar despite the distance (Eliade, 1964). “When anthropologists began studying shamanism, they discovered that shamans in cultures separated by thousands of miles and without knowledge of each other developed healing and ceremonial approaches that were almost identical” (Roberts, 2008). Buyandelgeriyn (2007) noted that, shamans used rituals to lighten the burden of the many uncertainties that the people faced in contemporary society and established ethnic identity by using the past to explain the present. Blaming the decline of traditional beliefs for the loss of national culture, they claimed that the way to preserve and strengthen ethnic identity was to revive shamanism (Bulgakova, 2008). In both of these examples we can see a close relationship between the construction of ethnic identity and the revival of shamanism, or, within a particular political and economic context, shamanism being taken as a counter power vis-à-vis state power or the central order, returning from the periphery to the center of power when these powers disintegrate (Humphrey 1994: 194).

The study of shamanistic wisdom is losing its momentum because of modernization day by day. Though the realm of shamanic practices was of great importance in anthropological enquiries, with the change of time, and perception of people, such specialists are no more valued in the socio-

economic contexts. With the decreasing importance of traditional values, such traditional practices under shamanism are on the verge of vanishing. When the world is endeavoring to look at the indigenous knowledge system to be applied for the all-round development of the people, the scope for discovering the shamanistic practices is really revamped. Shamanistic knowledge system, though primarily based on magico-religious practices, it has multidimensional application for the wellbeing of the people in a traditional society. The study of shamanism as such, is a very old practice for the sake of ethnographic study, but to study it with a development prospective may be highly prized in view of its updated application for the modern society.

Review of Literature

The entire range of Himalayan Region consists of folk healers who possess notable facts of herbs. This wisdom on the medicinal herbs was passed on by the folk healers from one generation to another. It is they who developed the health care practices through rigorous tests. Their expertise on the field was calculated by the number of years they have spent dealing with this. The knowledge of the folk healers were not only religious in nature but had a deep rooted rationality. People belonging to the Himalayan community received this knowledge by the taking note of the proverbs, folklores, legends, customs and myths (Gupta, 2014).

At the ideational level it is a holistic approach to balance life forces within the person and harmonize his or her relation with family, society, vocation, ecology, and supernatural. These are the psycho-spiritual aspects of the disease which are of prime interest and the healing practices aim to invoke the cultural symbolism to heal the person. There is often an aura of mysticism around many of these healing practices, reinforced by legends, fables and folklores (Dalal, 2016)

Medical anthropologists and health psychologists have only recently paid attention to this aspect. We need to identify the core assumptions and principles which underlie the universality of these indigenous healing systems. Search of such universals is important to decipher what healing is and how does it work. At the core of these healing practices are the basic assumptions of unity, interconnectivity and harmony of the mind, the body and the soul (Ross, 2014)

Area of Study and Research Design

The present study has adopted descriptive research design and qualitative data have been collected to respond the objectives. The study was undertaken in the Mayurbhanj district of Odisha. The district of Mayurbhanj is one of the tribal dominated districts in Odisha. Except the states of West Bengal, Jharkhand and Bihar, Santal population in Odisha is mainly found in Mayurbhanj district. Since one of the researchers belongs to the Santal community, both emic and etic approaches have been taken into consideration for analysis and presentation of the data.

For primary data collection the methods like observation (participant and non-participant),

interview and case study methods were used. The key informants of the study were shamans (*ojha*) of the different Santal villages of the Mayurbhanj district. Altogether 20 shamans were interviewed with the help of semi-structured interview schedule. For holistic understanding of the problem, data was also collected from both educated and uneducated Santals.

Objectives of the Study

Keeping in view the above perspective in mind, the study makes a humble attempt to:

1. Highlight the traditional structure and function of the shamanism in the Santal society
2. Discuss its impact on the health culture
3. Explore the various changing dimensions of Santal shamanism

Results

Origin Myth of Santal Shamanism

Santal Shamanism has its origin myth. The first Guru is the Sun God (*Chando Bonga*) known as *Dharam Guru*. From Sun God shamanistic knowledge (*Birda*) was transmitted to Kamru, a person in Santal society. Santal people believed that there was a boy named Kamru and he wanted to visit Kayurn country. But his parents denied. The boy was born with some supernatural power. Kamru with certain training enabled him to go smoothly to the Kayurn country without any hurdles. He fled over the sky without thinking and not to be disturbed any way while undertaking the journey. But while flying, he could see a girl below and his concentration was broken, he got down. Later he came to know that the place where he got down was "Bharat". There he made friends with some cowherd boys and became a cowherd. There the Kamru used to take poisonous snakes and eat after burning them. His friends took him to Kaunri garden so that he would get more and more poisonous snake to eat. There he came across the girl which he met earlier again. He got married that girl and started living with her. But the girl to whom he married was a witch and she knew all about the art of witchcraft. She was indulged in giving trouble to the people by causing stomach pain, chest pain, severe fever and harassing the people there of. The disciples of the witch told her as to how Kamruguru was helping the victims by his supernatural power. She got so much angry that she wanted to eliminate Kamruguru forever. Accordingly she thought a diabolical plan, she set a bird (*Gundri*) when Kamruguru was passing through by that road and got frightened and became ill. He grew weak and became bed ridden. So one day when he was suffering from pain he told some of his disciples "please catch a fish called "*chanka*" and burn it. Then take it to the jungle and rub it against the particular tree i.e. "*Sal-Vishal*" tree, when you will find that the fish would recover and get back its life after being rubbed in a particular tree and you would bring the bark of that tree". So the disciples went to the jungle and when they were rubbing it to a particular tree and took that bark and returned happily. At that time they found the witch was washing clothes in a bathing ghat and she cleverly asked them that what they are carrying. The disciples of Kamruguru were so simple and they could not understand her plan and divulged

the truth. The witch cleverly told that Kamruguru for whom they were carrying these medicines, and she also told that Kamruguru was no more. So out of sorrow, the disciples threw away the barks and ran to see the dead body of Kamruguru. When they reached at their house they found him alive. They told the entire story before him. With a broken heart the Kamruguru told that he was going to die very soon. He advised them that to follow his teaching honestly and taking him as their guru and ordered them to dedicate their life for the service of the be-witched people. (Narrated by Narsingh Hansdah of Pahadpur village).

The Shaman in Santali term is called "Ojha". Dharam Guru is the creator (*Sirjonia*) of Santal shamanism and Kambru Guru had spread it to Santal masses. Bodding (2001) has mentioned that shamanism in Santal society descended from Kamru guru. He has classified the work of Ojha in to six kinds such as ojhas make divination, they sow rice, they bite people or rub them with a ball of rice flour, they dig up bongas, they exorcise bongas and give medicine to people.

Shamanistic Institution and Acquiring of Knowledge

The Shamanistic Institutions

The Santal shamanistic institution is called "GURU AKHLA" where disciples (*Chela*) are skilled on shamanistic knowledge. The *Guru Akhla* is usually located either at the courtyard of Ojha's house or in the middle of village with boundary made of bamboo. Important elements of the institution are; one "Tursi Dare" (Holy basil plant), a "Sid Dare" (one type of plant) along with a three barbed sword (*Barchhi*) in the middle.

Institutions observe certain strict rules and regulations. Usually women are prohibited to step in but in some cases they are permitted. The prohibition is imposed upon to avoid entry of women during menstruation. Another reason for restriction is women who are believed to be witch can pollute the institution by malevolent powers. Drinking liquor and eating meat inside the *Guru Akhla* is strictly prohibited. Individuals desire to become *Ojha*, take admission into an institution. Age factor is not taken into consideration at the time of admission. An initiation ceremony is performed in the form of worship by the shaman. The sessions take place in the evening. Institution where women are not allowed to step in and when that is violated, purification of the institution is required.

A person can be a shaman within seven days, but it may also take one year. Interesting part of the teaching process is that, Guru does not transfer power to his disciples. He only teaches them the techniques of worship, which include drawing symbolic depictions, process of diagnosis, names of deities and spirits and *Jharni Mantar* (21 in number). Power comes to them by complete submission and deep meditation. Those who follow the rules and regulations of the shamanistic process strictly, get the knowledge and power directly from the deities usually in dream. It is also a fact that a person can be shaman without a guru, but common belief

indicates that a young shaman has to obey someone (senior shaman) as his guru. Guru protects him from attack of witches during worship. Completion of the course ends with an examination known as 'Sid Atang'. Transmission of Shamanistic knowledge is non-hereditary in nature. But in some cases son has to continue the shamanistic tradition of the family.

The Grades and Categories of Shamans:

In the Santal shamanistic hierarchy topmost position is occupied by the 'Jaan Guru' followed by the 'Sokha'. These two have matted hair. Fundamental difference between Jaan and Sokha is that, former does not go to patients' house for worship, but Sokha goes to patients' house. The above two are followed by different categories of Ojha. Under the section Ojha, classification can be made on the basis of supreme deity they worship. They are Kamru Guru, Sid Guru, Tursi Guru, Kainre Guru, Kadku Dharam, Jugdahar, Chakar Birda, Siba Sadhna, Kali Sadhna, Sawna Dharam and Muni Dharam.

Ojhas are graded by the people taking in to consideration the successful cases solved by the shaman. So people call the *ojha* who has solved very complicated cases earlier. Not only successful work but being honest, good behavior, immediate response also enhances *ojha's* popularity. Failure leads to the degradation of the shaman's position. The core distinction between shamans descended from Kambru Guru and others is that, successors of Kamru Guru do worship in any place, even in polluted houses, but other shamans usually do not worship in that situation.

Socialization, Training and Skill Acquisition

The life of the shamans is always believed to be dangerous. Therefore, proper socialization, training and skill acquisition are very crucial. Disciples are expected to learn all the mantras (*bakhen* in native term), skill to draw symbols (*khond*), name of deities as well as benevolent and malevolent spirits of the vicinity. They are trained to diagnose the disease by using array of methods, process of sacrifice and also regarding the seating posture at the time of worship. Most important one is the technique to find out the cause of the problem, whether natural or supernatural origin. They are also made familiar on the knowledge and administration of ethno-medicines by undertaking time to time expeditions to the nearby forests to collect ethno-medicines. The disciples are also given the knowledge of self protection during the worship. All the techniques are taught by the shaman during training periods.

Santal Shaman is Multi-Functional

Mendoza-Strobel (2010) describes the multiple roles and functions of the babaylan in the community as "indigenous, shaman, healer, priestess, ritualist, herb doctor, village therapist, diviner, mediator between ordinary and non-ordinary realms of reality". The present study discusses the multiple roles of shaman in the community.

In Rite de Passage

In every society, people observe various rituals starting from birth to death which are called life cycle rituals. Ojha plays a very important role in rite-

de passage, though it is limited but very crucial in the Santal society. Earlier when hospitals were not available, delivery of the child used to take place in the village with the help of Dhai. When there were complications during delivery of child, people used to call Ojha as they believed that problems were caused by supernatural powers. In the study area shaman's role in this aspect has gradually decreased as a result of increased institutional deliveries in the local hospitals.

Shaman's role during marriage ceremony is considered very crucial. During the entire process of marriage certain signs or incidents are considered as "bad signs" which is called "ere" in native term. Santals believe that newlywed couple may experience severe problems; the result may be death of bride or bride-groom, if not worshipped by the shaman. In Santal society, it is (*Ere Bonga*) very seriously taken into consideration even by the educated Santals. All shamans cannot do this particular worship. Special shamanistic knowledge is required for this worship. Symbolic depictions are very difficult to draw and very few shamans are capable of doing this. Whether it is love marriage or arranged marriage, ere worship is compulsory in Santal society. Few shamans perform this worship inside the village but others perform outside the village boundary.

When death ritual (*Bhaandaan*) is observed, at the end of the village (*Dobati*), village shaman does worship. After completion of the worship by shaman, *jang baha* (bone flower) of the diseased is taken to the Damoder River, where it is finally immersed in the water for smooth journey of the soul.

In Village Rituals and Ceremonies

In Santal society, almost all the village level rituals and ceremonies are performed by village priest (*naike*). But in few special occasions shaman's role does come. During epidemic, chicken pox, diarrhea, unusual deaths, shamans do worship for the wellbeing of all the villagers. In every tribal village (Santal) above mentioned category of problems are believed to be caused by evil spirits which are brought into the village boundary by the witches (*Dan*). Doing this kind of worship has always believed to be dangerous, as witches of the village may take revenge against the shaman. The worship to remove the spirits from the village is called "*Bonga Odok*" which is led by the shaman.

Bhujni Bonga is one of the very traditional practices observed even today in every Santal village. Earlier there was no medical facility in remote tribal areas. To avoid different disease like epidemic, Santal worship '*Bhujni Budhi*' (female demon) once in a year as preventive measure in the month of April. Unmarried disciples (*chela*) go to forest with the village shaman to bring medicinal plants and roots. In the night they prepare sacred thread (*Dumbra*) for each and every individual in the village. In the evening, a worship is performed by the shaman at both ends of the village and also in the middle of the village, where they burry different ingredients to prevent the entry of diseases by supernatural powers.

Role of Shaman as a Medicine Man

Role of shaman as a medicine man is also very important. Shamans in Santal society administer various herbal medicines for the curing of illness and injury. As mentioned earlier, every shaman in Santal society is given the knowledge of ethno-medicines during training at the institution by undertaking time to time expeditions to forest. Data reveals that, Santal shamans administer ethno-medicines for various communicable as well as non-communicable diseases. P.O. Bodding (2016) has recorded extensive list (traditional medicines for 305 types of illness) of Santal medicines in his book "Studies in Santal Medicines and Connected Folklore" from Chhatanagpur area. In the study area, shamans not only treat humans by application of ethno-medicines, but also different ailments of domesticated animals like cattle, goat and sheep. Development and increasing easy access to modern medical services in the study area has posed potential threat to the knowledge on ethno-medicines. Shamanistic institutions are also found very rarely which are instrumental in transmitting traditional medicinal knowledge system to future generation.

Ojha as a Sorcerer

Sorcery and witchcraft are attempts to invoke the spirits to work harm against people. Although the words sorcery and witchcraft are often used interchangeably, they are also often distinguished. Sorcery may include the use of materials objects, and medicines to invoke supernatural malevolence. Witchcraft may be said to accomplish the same ills by means of thought and emotion alone.

Ojha in Santal society also sometimes acts as a sorcerer and may cause serious problem to the people. An Ojha has the power to kill a person by sending evil spirit which is called "Bonga Goj" in Santali. Shaman in Santal society does both benevolent and malevolent work. Certain health problems to the individual are caused by sorcerer in the Santal society are *tengen*, *chalon*, *pathry*, *muda*, *baan*, *aha* or *nojo*.

Shaman's role in other sphere

Shaman in Santal society plays not only the role to cure different diseases but also other different problems. For example; regain the lost objects (objects may be living and non-living), to do better in the examinations, to get jobs, to marry a woman by applying mantras or vice-versa and to win a case in the court. For this kind of worship (*bonga*), shaman does "*mansik*" and if it is fulfilled, shaman sacrifices what he had promised to offer to specific god or spirit.

Reading and Diagnosis of Diseases

Reading and Diagnosis of disease is called 'Khali'. Shamans in Santal society follow several techniques to uncover the cause of illness/problems. Illness may be of somatic or psychosomatic in origin. In Santal society even today people believe that illness is caused by disobedience to deities, by witches, evil spirits or other supernatural forces.

Charej Khali (dry grass used for making broomstick) is one of the very common procedures followed by the Ojhas in Santal society. Two dry wild grasses (equal in length approximately 20 c.m.) are

used. Other techniques are Soonoom Khali (using oil), Sindur Kahli (vermillion), Jal Nel (testing urine with oil), Adoa chaole khali (using rice) and Natka chapu (testing nerve).

Healing Practices

Shaman cures illness by using two techniques; worship or using ethno-medicines. Worship includes sacrifices or promise to sacrifice, Jhal (chanting Jharmi mantras), Soonoom Palhao (oil reading) and Boolong Palhao (Salt reading). If the cause of illness is natural, then shaman uses ethno-medicines. But when illness is due to supernatural forces, then sacrifice of animal is must. It is also believed that, if the cause of illness is by supernatural forces, without worship other medicine does not work.

Another technique is the sucking cure (gair), in which the shaman goes through the motions of sucking a disease from the patient's body. Usually he "extracts" something which he shows to the patient and other persons present as proof that the sickness has been removed. The objects extracted from the patient's body may be stones, pieces of wood, bone remains and other objects.

Case of Daram

"Daram" is an accident with malevolent spiritual beings which creates very serious problem to the individual. Santal believe that when shadow (umul) of malevolent spirit falls on the individual by accident, the individual suffers from severe stomach pain and chest pain. *Ojha* plays a very crucial role in such cases. Immediate role of the shaman is to find out the deity or evil spirit responsible for the problem. If the *Ojha* fails to identify the particular spirit, the consequence is believed to be fatal. There are some places in the tribal areas, where it is believed to be the abode of evil spirits. *Ojha* identifies the responsible spirit and consult his tutelary deity regarding the requirements to satisfy the supernatural being. This process is done very quickly. Then shaman makes a promise to sacrifice a cock or hen (as per the requirement) if the victim cures immediately.

The Process of "JHAAL"

This is one of the healing practices adopted by most of the shamans in Santal society. This is done by chanting '*Jharni Mantras*' which vary from disease to disease. There are around 21 *Jharni Mantras*. These are sets of *bakhen* delivered by singing like a song. Nothing is required for this purpose. Shaman repeatedly sings the *mantra* to reduce the problem.

Chhadao

Chhadao is removal of evil spirit from the house and from patient's body. Most of the illnesses of psychosomatic origin are cured by *Chhadao*. Shaman sacrifices two cocks and one hen, which includes one white cock, one black hen and one red cock (varies from shaman to shaman). A black hen (*hende kalot*) is sacrificed for "*kali-kudra*" (malevolent spirits), red cock (*arah sandi*) for village guardian spirit (*goram*) and white cock (*pund sandi*) for safety of the shaman.

Trance and Spirit Calling

The Shaman is an intermediary between the members of his society and the supernatural world with which he communicates to the spirits and listening to their replies through possession. So Trance is interpreted as possession by spirits or gods, but more commonly this state is viewed as bringing the entrance into direct communication with supernatural beings. Trance or state of trance consists of convulsive seizures, catalepsy and hallucinations. Trance and spirit calling is called "*Rum or rumuh*" in Santali term. The objective of trance and spirit calling in Santal society is to solve the problems associated with supernatural being/forces and to find out the cause of problems by communicating directly with spirits or gods. This practice is an important part of Santal society not only in shamanism but also other family and village level rituals practices.

Changing Trends in Santal Shamanism

Modernization and modern education after independence has brought many drastic changes in the age old traditional practices. Rise in the literacy level and awareness regarding modern health practices has definitely weakened the practice of shamanism. Earlier not only Santals, but other tribal communities believed that most of the diseases are caused by supernatural forces. So they failed to explain the cause of disease. Gradually with the spread of modern medical practices, Santals came to understand and able to explain the causes of frequently occurring diseases especially in tribal areas disease like malaria, diarrhea etc. So the role of shaman is definitely declining in this particular problem. So there is paradigm shift in the shamanistic performances. There is gradual decrease in curative worship and on the other hand increase in preventive form of worship by the shaman. So position and status which they had in the past is gradually declining in the Santal society.

In India, with the rising population, the problem of educated unemployment is also rising. It is very difficult to get a job both in private and public sector due to high level of competition. Santals do consult shamans to make worship to get success in competitive examinations. Shamans also worship for the students for good performances in the examinations. If you do not like your wife/husband or daughter-in-law and vice-versa, shaman can help you in getting rid of him/her. It is believed that shaman has the power to make disturbance in the peaceful family. Another very interesting change in Santal shamanism is that shamans' worship is increasing in the economically well established Santal families. Many Santals are now working in both private and public sectors with handsome earnings. These are highly educated and well acquainted with modern health practices. It is a common belief that people in the villages do not tolerate one's economic growth. So, financially sound families believe that, they are the most vulnerable group to the attacks of witches. They consult shaman to perform preventive worship. Preventive form of worship may be for one year or six months. If family members remain disease free for a

particular time period shaman sacrifices animals which had been promised earlier.

Mushrooming Growth of Sub-Categories

As discussed in the above sections, many new categories of shaman have come up in the Santal society. The shamans descended from Kamru guru do not worship Hindu deities, but new categories worship Hindu deities like Goddess Durga, Kali and Lord Shiva as their supreme deity. These new formations of Santal shamanism are indirectly affecting the very strong age-old unity of Santal villages. There is growing divisions of villages into two or more groups due to new shamanistic knowledge and modern politics. These emerging divisions are affecting severely the social relationship in the village, decreasing clan unity, disrupting religious practices etc. In long run this may lead to decline of *Sarna Dhorom* in the Santal society. If these sub-categories persist, new generation would automatically pass on to next generation regarding new formation on religious practices and not the original *Sarna Dhorom*. Shamanism can play a very important role in maintaining unity and solidarity in the Santal society if they understand this unique practice properly.

It is also a fact that shamanism creates problems in the society. Few shamans do not maintain honesty in the profession. Shaman is the person who brands a woman as witch without any proof. This not only decreases the social status of that woman but also to her family members. In the district of Mayurbhanj large numbers of women have been killed in the name of witchcraft. Shamans also sometimes exploit the innocent poor family. And they obey each and every words of shaman because of severity of the problem. Inter family and intra-family disputes also increases due to the verdict of a shaman. So shamanism in Santal society has both negative and positive sides.

Conclusion

Ethnographic research has often led to debates concerning the relation between religion and shamanism. Ritualized behavior is an essential part of shamanism due to its instrumental character: shamanism is not conceived as a religion but rather as a set of healing practices presented as a synthesis of many spiritual traditions. Anthropological research has shown that, generally speaking, traditional practices do not need explicit explanations of why certain actions should be performed in a particular way, although elaborated doctrines could provide those explanations. Mutual learning from these diverse perspectives can significantly enhance our ability to alleviate the suffering of the people. For this we need a new conceptual framework which can integrate the finer elements of these seemingly diverse systems. There are indeed many positive developments taking place in this direction. During

last two centuries the Western world has experienced a recession in religious belief and practice, and as a result of the processes of secularization the influence of institutionalized religious behavior has receded in many aspects of social life. As Vishwanathan (1998) writes in his article in *Science*, Indian society celebrates diversities and contradictions, and has the tradition and resilience to absorb new systems and practices. There is a real hope that a new breed of psychotherapies will emerge in India which will be useful in the contemporary world.

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