

Exploring Witchcraft and Superstition in Mayong, Assam: Navigating Social Stigma and Unveiling Opportunities in Dark Tourism

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ABSTRACT

Assam is renowned for its abundant flora and fauna and awe-inspiring natural sites ripe for exploration. Within these select sites, there exist several hidden and enigmatic locations that are shrouded in dark secrets and are notorious for their association with Blackmagic, witchcraft, and superstitions. Mayong is one of the destinations known for black magic, witchcraft, and superstitions. Many history of these unpleasant truths keeps the place for the probable prospect of dark Tourism. Certain former sites of punishment, torture, and death in different have now become popular tourist destinations, with many scholars referring to this trends "Dark Tourism". This paper seeks to examine a place called Mayong where superstition continues to thrive, thereby destroying families and society at large. Furthermore, this paper aims to explore the potential of Dark Tourism to generate revenue and eradicate the influence of superstitions and witchcraft in these regions.

Keywords: *Witchcraft, Superstitions, Dark Tourism, Societal impact, Flora and Fauna*

Dark tourism, a distinctive aspect of contemporary travel, entails visiting locations with a solemn or grim historical background. These destinations are frequently linked with mortality, calamity, or affliction, and allure tourists seeking to investigate the more shadowy aspects of human history and culture. This phenomenon can be observed worldwide, encompassing locations such as former correctional facilities, battlegrounds, concentration camps, disaster-stricken areas, and locations associated with notorious serial killers or paranormal activity. The allure of dark tourism is complex and varied. Certain individuals are enticed by a ghoulish captivation with the sinister, striving to face head-on and comprehend humanity's more somber periods (Welch, 2015). On the other hand, some are driven by a wish to honor victims and remember significant historical occurrences. Additionally, educational prospects are plentiful as these destinations provide enlightenment into the complexities of former disputes, societal dilemmas, and human conduct in extreme circumstances.

These extreme circumstances have a vicious effect in Assam which falls under North Eastern Region. The northeastern region of India, especially Assam, bears witness to a rich historical tapestry of witchcraft and black magic that has spanned centuries (Kuiper, 2010). Within these

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mystical landscapes, Mayong, situated in the Morigaon district, emerges as a captivating centerpiece. This once enigmatic realm, now transformed into a bustling tourist hub, had once held the illustrious title of the "Indian capital of Black magic." Surprisingly, this reputation attracted individuals from far-flung corners of the world who sought to unravel the secrets of the arcane arts and mystic spells that the region purportedly held. Stories of human sacrifice and chilling horrors, their imprints etched not only in contemporary literature but also enshrined within the folklore of the land, are veiled in the shadows of history. Mayong stands as an embodiment of the potent interplay between dark arts and human curiosity, an enclave where the echoes of ancient rituals and bewitching narratives continue to captivate the imagination of those who tread its enigmatic paths (Dowdy, 2017).

Mayong is situated in the Morigaon district of Assam, between 26° 12' North to 26° 15' North latitude and 92° 2' East and 92° 5' East longitude. Known for its diverse tribes and communities, Mayong is already a popular tourist destination due to its various attractions such as the Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary, which is home to the highest density of one-horned rhinos, as well as several other species of wildlife. The area is also home to several religious sites, such as the Kechaikhaiti Shrine of Burha Mayong and the Ganesh Temple of Hatimuria, and contains several ancient artifacts that are of interest to archaeologists. While Mayong is known for its blackmagic and occult practices, it is also a repository of knowledge about traditional medicine, with an abundance of medicinal plants found in and around the area.

The influence of witchcraft extends beyond the confines of Mayong in Assam, encompassing various communities and tribes scattered across the expanse of the Brahmaputra valley. Identified as "Bez" or "Ojaa," practitioners of these occult arts are believed to maintain ethereal domestics known as "Beera" or "Beera Bhut." Notably, suspicious activities attributed to "Beera" spirits within the heart of Guwahati, the city's core, garnered attention in newspapers and television broadcasts, indicating the far-reaching impact of witchcraft.

Regrettably, the practice of witch-hunting and witch-burning has become a prominent issue in the local newspapers of Assam, causing great concern and apprehension. The disconcerting nature of this issue has brought it to the forefront with alarming frequency. Shockingly, over 500 lives have been lost and 116 cases of witch-hunting have been documented in Assam alone since 2001 (Barman, 2020). The scarcity of witnesses willing to come forward only exacerbates the situation, resulting in a handful of cases making any progress. This complex tapestry of superstition, fear, and violence, continues to cast a foreboding shadow over the social fabric of the region. This paper aims to explore the potential for transformative change by illuminating the implications of this issue through the lens of Dark Tourism. By engaging with the dark history of these practices, Dark Tourism has the potential to catalyze eradicating such malevolent beliefs, shedding light on the shadows of the past, and guiding the way toward a more enlightened future. Dark Tourism could play a significant role in controlling superstitions in the region.

Objectives

1. To know the factors leading to superstitions.
2. To know about the prospects of Dark Tourism in Mayong.

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METHODOLOGY

The research paper is qualitative in nature. Primary data were being collected from Mayong. 15 people were interviewed from the place Mayong. People identity have been hidden due to their personal reasons, each member were being coded and details have been given below. Semi structure Questionnaires were being made and in-depth analysis has been done to reach a conclusion.

Secondary data was collected through the Internet, Books, and Journals.

Table 1.(Coding of the Respondents)

Name (Coded)	Occupation	Age	Gender	Tenure of Stay
P1	Daily Wage Labour	45	Male	By Birth
P2	Housewife	28	Female	By Birth
P3	NA	64	Male	By Birth
P4	Housewife	60	Female	39 years
P5	Daily Wage Labour	23	Male	By Birth
P6	Business (Small)	44	Male	By Birth
P7	Employed	49	Male	By Birth
P8	Labour	44	Male	By Birth
P9	Housewife	28	Female	5 years
P10	NA	71	Male	By Birth
P11	Housewife	36	Female	By Birth
P12	Housewife	45	Female	By Birth
P13	Business	55	Male	By Birth
P14	Employed	36	Male	By Birth
P15	Daily Labour	32	Male	By Birth

LITERATURE REVIEW WITCHCRAFT

The papers presented here offer various perspectives on the history of witch craft in different cultures. Russell (1980) puts forth the argument that modern witch craft in the Western world is a serious religion that provides valuable insights. Hutton (2004), on the other hand, proposes that a supranational model for the witch figure is feasible, but acknowledges significant variations across cultures. Anderson (1970) scrutinizes the history of witchcraft as an anti-Christian heresy with malevolent supernatural powers and proposes individual and group psychodynamics to account for the delusion. Cornish (2009) examines the dynamic and flexible ways in which the past is constantly being revised to meet the demands of the present, and how contemporary British witches are presently experiencing a radical change in the ways they perceive, justify, and rationalize their history. Collectively, these papers indicate that the history of witch craft is intricate and multifaceted, with different cultural and historical contexts influencing its manifestations. Narah (2020) and Islam (2017) have both explored the etiology of witchcraft beliefs, which can be attributed to factors such as illiteracy, inadequate healthcare accessibility, and traditional beliefs. The gravity of the issue has been underscored by Gogoi (2020), who has reported 210 cases of witch-hunting in Assam between 1989 and 2019, and has further deliberated on the legal frameworks that have been employed to counter

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this menace. Chakraborty (2013) has recommended a multifaceted approach that includes women's empowerment and the promotion of scientific thinking as potential measures to eradicate witchcraft beliefs and practices. Collectively, these studies have demonstrated that witchcraft beliefs in Assam are a multifaceted phenomenon that is deeply entrenched within the fabric of traditional beliefs and social constructs.

Dark Tourism

The papers collectively offer an extensive comprehension of the concept of dark tourism. Kunwar (2019) defines dark tourism as a multifaceted and diverse phenomenon that encompasses tourism related to heritage, history, tragedies, and other forms. Stone (2013) critiques the emergence and current direction of dark tourism scholarship, proposing that it is an intersection of death education and tourism studies. Biran (2013) introduces papers that explore tourist experiences at dark sites, the management of dark sites, ethical concerns in profit-making, and the involvement of indigenous peoples in site management. Minic (2012) concentrates on the development of "dark" tourism as a special interest tourism, scrutinizing the definition of "dark" tourism, tourist motivations, and the role of "dark" tourism in contemporary society. Overall, the papers present a discerning understanding of dark tourism as a complex socio-cultural phenomenon that surpasses a discussion of classifications and recognizes it as both an individual experience and a type of special interest tourism. The literature posits that dark tourism can be advantageous from an economic perspective. Jamin's (2020) research indicates that dark tourism in Malaysia can yield social, educational, and psychological advantages for visitors. Séraphin (2017) employed a multi-dimensional approach to assessing dark tourism as a sustainable economic pursuit for nascent destinations and discovered that it has the potential to bolster a destination's tourism offerings while giving locals the chance to embrace their cultural patrimony. Chang's (2014) study found that visitors' inclinations and environmental attitudes can impact the benefits derived from visiting dark tourism sites like social, educational, and psychological benefits. Kang (2012) found that visitors to a dark tourism site in South Korea enjoyed benefits such as a sense of responsibility, emotional catharsis, and edification. Overall, the literature proposes that dark tourism can result in economic gains for destinations, including heightened tourism and opportunities for safeguarding cultural heritage. The literature indicates that dark tourism can elicit both positive and negative psychological impacts on visitors. According to Chang's (2014) research, visitors who possess a stronger inclination towards dark tourism are more likely to exhibit positive environmental attitudes and experience psychological benefits, such as relief from emotional and mental stress. Similarly, Chang (2017) discovered that visitors to dark tourism sites can cultivate positive emotions, develop a robust geopolitical disposition, and exhibit greater empathy. In a recent study, Sun (2021) delved into the manifestation of dark tourism experiences and revealed that the mind and body operate in a bi-directional synchronization. Jovanović's (2021) research investigated the association between personality traits and the preference for dark tourism sites, and it revealed that only agreeableness and honesty-humility demonstrated a significant, positive correlation with the preference for dark tourism sites. These findings underscore the fact that dark tourism can have intricate psychological effects on visitors and that visitors' motivations and personality attributes may shape their experiences.

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Findings and Discussions Factors leading to Superstitions.

1. **Age-old Myths:** In an era characterized by scientific progress and technological advancements, one may ponder over the coexistence of certain obsolete practices. However, the harsh reality prevails in Assam, where age-old myths and deep-rooted superstitions continue to intertwine lives. Surprisingly, these convictions maintain a steady influence, even as society progresses with contemporary ideas and lifestyles. Beneath the surface, a complex web of ancient myths and traditions persists, often taking a distressing turn when exploited by those who perceive opportunities in these entrenched beliefs. Despite the veneer of progress, the formidable power of historical beliefs endures, reminding us of the human psyche's resilience and vulnerability to the waves of change.

When asking one of the stakeholders about the consequences of Mayong, the person's viewpoint is more of supporting the claim made by the author. One of the stakeholders said (P1) "The age-old beliefs still prevail in the village and most people practice these rituals, these are stopping the development of the village and community as a whole. Steps have been taken by some NGOs and other members of EDC to stop these practices." Because the village is close to a Pobitora Wild Life Sanctuary in Assam, so they have a wider reach with different people, and steps are taken to control the practices. But some people residing in internal places have different viewpoints. P12 and P13 said that "These age-old beliefs are the cultures and customs of the region and it caters to the need in an emergency, when a child or pregnant lady get sick we take her to Ojaa's who gives "Jol Pora" (Water with some chants) which reduces the pain of the child and the lady.

2. **Complex Realities:** The instance of Ojaa or Bez has created a base in every area of the villages. Within the intricate social construct of rural Assam, the presence of "Bez" or "Ojaa" is often accompanied by a layer of complexity. Although some claim mystical abilities, a significant number of them are adept con artists who exploit the villagers' vulnerabilities by offering remedies for various ailments. In areas where access to medical facilities is challenging due to geographical obstacles, prevalent diseases such as malaria and cholera loom large. The absence of immediate healthcare solutions compels villagers to seek assistance from these local practitioners. However, the reality is different, as many patients go untreated despite promises, resulting in heightened emotions. Tragically, the failed attempts are sometimes met with accusations, attributing the death of the patient to the "Bez" or "Ojaa," triggering severe punishments, even death. Consequently, practitioners of witchcraft in Assam live in perpetual fear.

The viewpoint of a learned person follows P7 states that "Most of the locally or home brewed alcohol (rice beer) consumed in such areas contains a high alcohol content, running to even 40-70%. Due to regular consumption (often daily at the evenings) of such highly intoxicating and unfiltered alcohol, the thought process of the individuals essentially go wary, overwhelmed with emotion and it does not take anyone much effort to convince such people that the "Bez" and "Ojaa" in their neighborhood is evil and that he/ she needs to be killed."

3. **Unmasking Land Mafia Tactics:** The reputation of Mayong, though enigmatic, is illuminated by incidents that provide a distinct perspective. Certain claims suggest that

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the witch killings are not based on supernatural beliefs but are instead manipulated by the Land Mafia, a clandestine force. This perspective asserts that social superstitions are exploited as a cover for ulterior motives, namely, the displacement of families for coveted land at reduced prices. The malevolent actors behind such cases reportedly leverage existing fears and misconceptions about alleged witchcraft practices to orchestrate the decimation of families rooted on targeted lands. The Land Mafia employs Machiavellian tactics to engineer an environment of fear and hostility, compelling families to relinquish their property under duress. Law enforcement agencies have weighed in on this issue, asserting that some witch killings bear the hallmarks of premeditated murders driven by a lust for land ownership. Witchcraft serves as a smokescreen, diverting attention from underlying financial motives. By capitalizing on societal biases and irrational fears, the Land Mafia can pursue their agenda under the radar, evading suspicion while accomplishing their land acquisition objectives. These alternative explanations unravel the multifaceted nature of the narrative surrounding witch killings in regions like Mayong. While the village's historical associations with magic and mysticism persist, these reports cast a new light on the darker forces at play. The intersection of ancient superstitions, land ownership, and exploitation underscores the complexity of human behavior and the intricate interplay between tradition, greed, and power.

P14 Many people have lost their lives due to land ownership disputes, and many have also been displaced. Education and medical care in rural areas are essential to mitigate this issue, but they alone aren't enough.

Civil societies, medical bodies, educational bodies, the police, and local bodies (can be women's forums, student organizations, etc) have to work hand-in-hand to make the people educated and aware. The project Prahari, initiated by the Police department has to intensify their drive and invest in community policing and running campaigns among the village chiefs and elders.

4. **Education Mindset:** Addressing the prevailing challenges requires a crucial reorientation of the perspectives held by the educated class within the state. Throughout the region, there are widespread instances of individuals who claim to have acquired curative abilities through dreams, subsequently transforming themselves into self-proclaimed divine figures who attract a multitude of followers, including highly-educated individuals, top officials, and successful entrepreneurs. It is of paramount importance to recognize the significance of this transformation due to its potential impact. Although some well-intentioned individuals have genuinely assisted the underprivileged with their knowledge of herbal medicine or spiritual practices, it is essential to maintain a clear distinction. This separation is crucial to avoid confusing the issue of witchcraft with religious beliefs. To achieve this, fostering discernment among the educated populace is crucial. Increasing awareness about the difference between genuine healing practices and superstitious assertions is vital. This requires the promotion of critical thinking, rational assessment, and an analytical approach to purported claims. P6 stated that "Mayong is rich in biodiversity and natural herbs and the Bez or Ojass has knowledge of this and has cured many people having a serious disease, A person was admitted to G.M.C.H hospital (Gauhati Medical College Hospital) and could not be cured by the doctors but the Bura Ojaa has cured him in one month"

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Probable Prospects of Dark Tourism in Mayong

1. **Cultural Preservation:** Dark tourism, a form of tourism that involves travel to places associated with death and tragedy, has the potential to generate interest in the cultural heritage of Mayong, a village in India known for its association with black magic and witchcraft. By seeking to understand the history and stories behind the village's reputation, visitors may contribute to the preservation of local traditions, folklore, and historical knowledge. This can lead to a greater appreciation of the cultural heritage of Mayong, which can help to ensure its preservation for future generations.
2. **Educational Perspective:** Dark tourism presents an opportunity for education as it enables tourists to engage with history and culture in a distinct manner. Through the exploration of Mayong's past practices and beliefs, visitors can acquire a more profound comprehension of its traditions and the influences that contributed to their development. It has been also found that Mayong is rich in medicinal plants. Based on the rich traditional medicinal knowledge of Mayong, the place can be promoted for attracting tourists seeking traditional/natural/herbal/ayurvedic treatment (Gurung,2020).
3. **Economic Boost:** Most of the people in Mayong is in poverty. Due to low income and age-old beliefs, they are not developed. Mayong can potentially receive a significant economic stimulus through the attraction of visitors who engage in various tourism-related activities, such as patronizing accommodations, local businesses, availing of the services of tour guides, and participating in cultural events. This could result in the creation of employment opportunities and an increase in income for the local populace.
4. **Community Empowerment:** The concept of community empowerment has been bolstered by the interest garnered from dark tourism. Local communities have been inspired to take ownership of their heritage and cultural resources, leading to various initiatives that aim to showcase the village's history, promote local crafts, and share traditional knowledge.
5. **Empowerment through Story telling:** By embracing the concept of dark tourism in Mayong, the opportunity arises to present an alternative view of the village's history and offer visitors a chance to gain a more nuanced understanding of its identity. This approach moves beyond the sensationalized tales that have been perpetuated and has the potential to bring about significant change within the local community. Through the use of storytelling, the indigenous guides and storytellers gain a powerful tool to narrate their community's history from their own perspective. Not only does this immersive approach foster a deeper connection between tourists and the local culture, but it also allows the locals to directly impact the visitor experience, instilling a sense of pride and ownership in the preservation of their unique heritage.

CONCLUSION

Mayong is a distinct and intricate destination within the realm of dark tourism, which surpasses mere sensationalism. It presents an opportunity for transformation, enabling visitors to uncover an alternative narrative of its history and explore the village's identity to a profound extent. This narrative, enriched by the genuine voices of local storytellers and guides, acts as a conduit linking the past and present, forming an immersive experience that bridges cultures

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and encourages understanding. By empowering both visitors and the community, dark tourism provides a responsible and empathetic approach to exploration. Mayong serves as a testament to this potential, where the exchange of stories becomes a symbol of shared humanity.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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