

SANTAL: AN ANCIENT COMMUNITY OF INDIA

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Abstract: India is a country of multiracial people. According to the 'People of India' project of the Anthropological Survey of India, there are an estimated 4,635 ethnic groups in India. Of these, 705 belong to tribal communities. Out of 705 tribals, one of them is a Santal. They are considered an ancient community in present-day India. Santals are the third-largest among tribals in terms of population. In India, the Santals, like other ethnic groups, have distinct social customs, cultures, and traditions. In which Santals are said to be different from other castes. At present, Santals are settled in almost all the states of India. The mother tongue of Santals is Santali. The Santali language is as old as the Santal caste. Santals are priests of nature. That is why they worship on hills, forests, trees, rocks, rivers, etc. The main occupation of the Santals is agriculture. They prefer to live in groups or villages together. Santals are people who live in the middle of society, and they live under the aegis of Manjhi. From time to time, the Santals have also sacrificed their lives for the country. Santal also revolted for the independence of India or against the British. At present, Santals are classified as Adivasi, Scheduled Tribe, and Janajati in government documents.

Key Words: Santal, Santali, Literature, Culture, Tradition, Manjhi system, Festival, History.

1. INTRODUCTION:

India is a densely populated country that is home to many ethnic groups, including the Santals, one of its oldest communities. They are also known by various names such as Hor, Kherwal, Adivasi, Adimjati, tribal, and Janajati. Today, the Santals are widely distributed across several Indian states, including West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha, Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu. They also reside in union territories like the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Delhi, and Jammu and Kashmir. According to the 2011 Census, the Santals live in 33 states of India. Beyond India, Santals have a presence in countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, the United States, the United Kingdom, Singapore, and various Arab nations. However, their largest populations are concentrated in West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha, and Assam within India, and in Bangladesh and Nepal internationally. The Santals have a distinct identity marked by their own name, language, script, traditions, culture, social structure, customs, history, and literature, many of which trace back to ancient times. These unique features clearly set them apart from other ethnic groups.

2. AIMS OF RESEARCH:

Research on various ethnic groups is crucial for understanding the diversity of human societies and cultures. The Santals are one of India's most ancient indigenous communities. They possess a distinct language, culture, religious beliefs, and lifestyle elements that set them apart from mainstream society. The objectives of this study are: 1. To analyse the social and cultural life of the Santals; 2. To analyse their social structure, 3. to explore their culture, customs, and beliefs, 4. To highlight their lives, struggles, and history during the British colonial era, and 5. To assess the impact of modernity.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The primary source of data is books and articles. This study employs various methods, such as observation, surveys, analysis, library research, and document analysis. I have also incorporated descriptive, historical, problem-based, and analytical research approaches. My research is based on secondary data.

4. DISCUSSION:

How long have the Santals been residing in India? To this day, a clear and definitive answer to this question remains elusive. Nevertheless, many scholars hold the view that the Negrito community was the first to arrive in India, followed by the arrival of the Proto-Australoid group. Today, while no traces of the Negrito community remain in India, people belonging to the Proto-Australoid group are still found in various regions of the country. The Santal, Munda, Bhil, and Gond communities are considered to be affiliated with the Proto-Australoid group. If this theory is accepted, it can be asserted that the Santal, Munda, Bhil, and Gond communities rank among the most ancient communities of India. In ancient times, the Santal people identified themselves neither as 'Kherwal' nor as 'Santal.' During that era, they referred to themselves simply as 'Hor.' In antiquity, the Santals called India 'Sing-ot', which means 'The Land of the Sun.' At that time, their primary occupation was hunting, and they sustained their livelihood by hunting in the forests.

Over time, people from various foreign communities arrived in India and settled here. During that era, the Santal people sustained themselves by hunting wild animals and subsisting on fruits gathered from trees. Much later, the Santals gradually cleared the forests to render the land suitable for cultivation and subsequently began farming. They dispersed across different locations, built homes, established villages, and began residing permanently in fixed settlements. After mastering the art of agriculture, the Santhals began to settle in fertile and arable regions. Before the advent of farming, they had led a nomadic existence, sustaining themselves by foraging for food in the surrounding areas. Once permanently settled, the Santals developed their own distinct society, culture, and customs to ensure a harmonious and fulfilling life. Today, the society, culture, and customs of the Santals endow them with a unique identity that distinguishes them from other ethnic groups.

4.1 ORIGIN OF THE WORD SANTAL:

The Santals are generally classified as part of the Proto-Australoid group. However, they were not originally known as 'Santal'. This term was given by outsiders, while the community has long identified itself as 'Hor', meaning 'human'. During the Mughal period, they came to be referred to as 'Kherwal'. Later, in 1795, John Shore, who served as the British governor of Bengal from 1793 to 1798, used the term 'Soontar' to describe the Kherwal people. Over time, this term evolved linguistically into the modern name 'Santal'. L.S.S.O. Malley wrote in his 'District Gazetteers-Santal Parganas'- "The earliest mention of the name (Santal) appears to be contained in an article entitled "Some Extraordinary facts, customs and practices of the Hindus" by Sir John Shore. Which was published in the Asiatic Researches of 1795, in this article they were designated 'Soontars' and described as a rude, unlettered tribe residing in Ramgar (Ramgarh)."¹ Even after this, numerous anthropologists, researchers, and writers have offered diverse interpretations and theories regarding the naming of the Santals.

"According to the eminent linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterji, the word 'Santal' likely derives from the Sanskrit term Samantapal."² It can be assumed that the 'Hor' or 'Kherwal' people came to be known as 'Santal' due to their residence in the 'Sant' place for many years. W. B. Oldham's statement regarding this matter-"The name (Santal) is an abbreviation of samantwala saamanta is another name given to Silda pargana whence the immigrant Santals, discovered by Mr Ward in 1878, deposed that they had come."³ Budheshwar Tudu wrote in his book, History of the Indian Independence Struggle of the Santhals- "According to Guru (preceptor) Koleyman hardam (aged man) ours forefather had been living in sant (name of a place. Now it is called Shilda, now belongs to the district of Midnapur west) that is why we are called Santhal." Regarding the naming of the Santals, Parimal Hembram has stated, "After living in 'Sant Disom' or 'Sant place' for many generations, they were named 'Santal'. "⁴ During the British rule, Santals existed in the Sant (Silda) region of Bengal in very large numbers. That is why the Santal originated from the Sant people. The Santals have adopted new names but still use the names 'Hor' and 'Kherwal' among themselves in modern times. The 'Santal' word is pronounced and written as 'Santal', 'Santhal', 'Chaontal', or 'Santar' in different languages and places. However, Santals introduce themselves as 'Santal (Santar)'.

4.2 SANTAL ORIGIN AND THEIR MIGRATIONS:

The Santals are one of the oldest indigenous groups of India. They have been living in this land since before the country was even named India. Today, they are organized into twelve major clans: Hasada, Kisku, Mandi, Saren, Hembram, Murmu, Tudu, Baske, Besra, Pauria, Chande, and Bedeya. According to tradition, this clan system was established in ancient times at Hihiri-Pipiri. In the Santali language, a clan is known as a 'Paris', while smaller subdivisions within clans are called 'Khunt'. Members of the community adhere closely to the customs and rules associated with their respective clans.

The Santal community has a rich tradition of myths about the origin of the human race and the creation of the universe. Their folklore contains stories that explain the mysteries surrounding the creation of the Earth and humanity. According to the Santal creation myth, humans were born in the east. Additionally, there is a prevailing belief among the Santals that they are the world's first humans.

In the beginning, there was nothing around this universe but water. The gods and goddesses would descend from their celestial abode to bathe in these waters. One day, while bathing, the thakuran fashioned two swans out of the grime of her neck; she breathed life into them and set them free. Of these two, one was male and the other female. A few months later, the female laid two eggs. From these two eggs, two human beings were born. These two humans were Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi. Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi were foreparents of Santal. Their sons and daughters are the current members of the Santal lineage. "According to the stories of the Santhal ancestors, it is revealed that their forebears were born in Hihiri-Pipiri, met in Khoj Kaman, organised themselves in Harata, and attained their caste in Sasanbeda."⁵ Regarding the origin of the Santals, Chaturbhuja Sahu wrote in his book, *The Santhali Women*- "The Santhal - the original tribe of India-claim their origin in Harappa and Mohanjodaro i.e. in Hihiri-Pipiri as mentioned in Santhal mythology."⁶ For the Santals, 'Hihiri-Pipiri' refers to a landscape where water dominates over land, resembling an island in a vast sea. Harappa and Mohenjo-daro may not correspond precisely to this notion of 'Hihiri-Pipiri', but there is little doubt that the Santals once inhabited this region.

The first human couple of the Santals, Pilchu haram and Pilchu Budhi, was born in Hihiri-Pipiri. From there, they migrated to Khajkaman. Due to the moral transgressions of the Santhals, a rain of fire fell upon Khajkaman for seven consecutive days. From this catastrophe, a single husband and wife survived; they sought refuge in a secluded cave known as 'Harata.' Eventually, they left the site of 'Harata' and moved to the region of Sasangbeda. Unable to remain in the 'Sasangbeda' region for long, they migrated as 'Jarpi Disom', crossed the 'Sin-duar' or 'Sin-darja', and began to settle in 'Ayre Disom', the land of Ayre. Subsequently, they moved from 'Ayre Disom' to 'Koyenda Disom.' From 'Koyenda Disom,' they proceeded to 'Chai Disom,' and from there, they traveled to the land of 'Champa.' It was in 'Champa' that the Santhals lived a peaceful existence. The Santhals resided here for many years; during this time, their population flourished, and they built a civilization. This 'Champa Garh', the basin region of the Indus River, is the ancestral homeland of the Santals. The names 'Chai disham' and 'Champa disham' were associated with the Indus Valley.

In Santal tradition, Champa is referred to as 'Eaenae Disom Champa'. The region is surrounded by seven rivers that flow both nearby and from a distance. It is often called 'Chai-Champa'. In ancient times, the term 'Sapta Sindhu' described the area where seven major rivers flowed. This primarily refers to the northwestern Indian subcontinent, specifically present-day Punjab and its surrounding regions, where the Indus River and its tributaries are located. This suggests that the Santhal people lived and thrived in the Indus Valley for many years. Subsequently, for various reasons, the Santhals eventually spread out from Chai-Champa to numerous regions, including Pukhuri Baha Bandela, Ichag Buta-Matkom Buta, Jana Jashpur, Ghaspal Belaongia, Shir disom, Shikhar Disom, Nagpur, Sant Disom, and Tundi Disom. The area known as Shikhar Disom was reported to contain two forests, Sinbir and Manbir. Over time, these forests gradually evolved into the regions that later became known as Singhbhum and Manbhum, both of which once covered extensive areas. Ultimately, during the British rule, this vast geographical tract was transformed into 'Damin-i-Koh'.

Historically, the Santals entered India through the Sing duwar (Khyber Pass) and Bai duwar (Bolan Pass). After this, they started living in villages in many coastal and forest areas of the country. Later, the people gathered among themselves but spread out in new places. "Various Santal folk tales and the legends of Bankher and Binti indicate that Santals once existed in the area along the banks of the river Yangtze, Java Island, Japan, Philippines, Afghanistan, Balochistan, Iraq, and Norway."⁷ According to Dr. Dumni Mai Murmu, "The Santals originated in the vicinity of Sicily (Egypt) region within the Mediterranean basin. Following the chronological trajectory of their development, they traversed the Red Sea, crossed through Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and subsequently entered India."⁸

Initially, the Santals migrated to Satbhum (including Silda in Bengal) from regions such as Nagpur and Punjab. From Satbhum, different groups of Santals dispersed further—some moved toward the Chhotanagpur region, while others settled in the Jangal Tarai area, which later came to be known as Santal Pargana. Over time, additional waves of migration from this region led to the spread of Santals into Assam, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and the Andaman Islands. Today, the Santal community is found across nearly every state of India.

4.3 SANTAL'S OCCUPATION:

The Santals are traditionally engaged in several professions, but their primary occupation is agriculture. Both men and women work on the farmland; men typically handle ploughing and sowing, while women are mainly involved in planting and harvesting. The ancient Santals lived mainly in villages in forests, mountains, and valleys. "For the Santhals, the primary sources of livelihood were the forests, mountains, valleys, and similar natural surroundings. From there, they would gather wood, leaves, and twigs to sell in the market. Furthermore, the forests abounded with various types of fruit-bearing trees; consequently, they never had to worry about food."⁹ Traditionally, they relied on the forest for food, firewood, hunting, and other resources. Since then, they have made their living by building paddy fields and farming near their settlements. After the British arrived in India, many Santals were considered labourers. In modern

times, agriculture has been the main occupation for most Santals. Apart from agriculture, most of the Santals are now educated and work in government jobs, teaching, or the private sector.

4.4 LANGUAGE, SCRIPT, AND LITERATURE OF THE SANTALS:

The Santals speak Santali as their mother tongue. It is a branch of the Austro-Asiatic language family. The speakers of Austro-Asiatic languages are mostly concentrated in the forested areas of the Indian states of Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha, Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, etc. According to the 2011 census, Santali is spoken by 73,68,192 people in India. The Santals have been referring to themselves as 'Hor' among themselves from the beginning. Their language was thus called the 'Hor language'. After the Mughals came to India, they left 'Hor' and came to be known as 'Kherwal'. At that time, their mother tongue had become Kherwali. During the British rule in India after the Mughals, they again abandoned Kherwal and adopted the name Santal, and their mother tongue became Santali from the Kherwali language. Which has remained continuous to date. Santals believe that the Santali language is the language given by the 'Marangburu' and obtained by the 'Pilchu haram - Pilchu budhi'. The Marangburu is the main God of the Santals. That is why their language is 'God language'.

The Santali is a language with its own special characteristics and has literature that dates back to the very beginning of the ancient century. On 22 December 2003, the Lok Sabha passed a bill to include the Santali language as the 8th schedule language of India. The Government of India recognized the Santali language under the eighth section of the Constitution on 7 January 2004. Santali has gained 2nd official language status in Jharkhand and West Bengal. At present, this language is taught in many Santal areas. Research activities related to the Santali language are also going on in colleges and universities.

The Santali is a verb-based language, and it also has Gahla and Glottal checked sound. The Santali language is estimated to be even older than 9,000 years. The script for writing this language is 'Olchiki'. The meaning of 'Olchiki' is 'writing script'. The word 'Olchiki' is composed of two words: 'Ol' and 'Chiki'. In Santali, 'Ol' means 'Write', and 'Chiki' means 'Script'. This 'Olchiki' was invented by Pandit Raghunath Murmu in the year 1925. "Olchiki" is the script of the Santali language and it is also recognized as the official script for the Santali language in India."¹⁰

Olchiki is the phonetic script, which originated from symbols of nature, animals and birds, physical posture, and daily life activities. One of the interesting features of the Olchiki script is that it makes use of signs and symbols long familiar to the Santals. Letters in the Olchiki alphabet are initiated with 6 vowel sounds. Letters are written side by side from left to right. There are two types of script in Olchiki. One is the script for printing, and the other is for writing. Later, Olchiki is recognized as the Santali alphabet. There are thirty-five pictographs in the Santali alphabet. Of these, six are vowels, twenty-four are consonants, and five are Japag chiki (Additional letter). It has a sufficient contribution to writing the different sounds of Santali clearly.

Santali literature is as old as the Santali language in the world. The written form of Santali literature did not exist since ancient times. It was practised orally among the Santals. Santali literature is mainly divided into two parts. One is oral literature, and the other is written literature.

In Santali literature, oral literature is richer than written literature. Since ancient times, Santals have been practising their language orally because they are illiterate. In 1837, Reverend Jeremiah Phillips visited India and gave himself the first written form of the Santali language. At this time, the Santals practiced orally in their own literature. The literature of the Santals is called 'Ror Sanwhet', which means 'Oral literature'. According to the division, Santali oral literature was divided into 11 sections. They are- 1. Hor sereng (Folk song), 2. Hor kahni (Folktale), 3. Binti (Ancestral knowledge), 4. Kudum (Riddle), 5. Gidra Baoli (Lullaby), 6. Men katha (Proverb), 7. Bhenta katha (Idiom), 8. Bankher (Prayer), 9. Mantar (Mantra), 10. Jharani (Exorcism), and 11. Hor katha (Folklore). With these, Santals have kept their language, literature, and society alive since ancient times. This is still being studied. In modern times, though the Santals have educated themselves, they continue to practise oral literature.

The history of Santali written literature is not very old. Santali written literature started in India during the British Rule. The Santali language was first written by Reverend Jeremiah Philips. It published a book named 'A Santali Primer' in 1845. This book was the first book of Santali. Reverend J. Philips's next book is 'Sequel to a Santali Primer.' This book was printed and published in 1850. The third book in the Santali language is 'An Introduction to the Santali Language'. The book was published in 1852. Historically, the written form of Santali literature was given by Christian missionaries. After the missionaries, Ramdas Tudu 'Reska' was the first Santal to publish a book. He had published a book in 1894 named 'Kherwal Bongso Dharam Puthi'. After this, Raya Saren published a book of essays titled 'Chhotrai Desh Manjhi reyak katha' in 1917. This book was the second book in the history of Santali literature. The third book was a book of poetry titled 'Baha Daluwak' written by Paul Jujhar Saren in the History of Santali Literature. The book was published in 1936. After this, Chaitanya Hembram Kumar published a book of essays named 'Santal ar Pahadiya kowak Itihaas' in 1937. This book was the fourth in the history of Santali literature.

Following the adoption of the Olchiki script for Santali, discussions about the language and literature are now primarily conducted in that script. It is estimated that more than 100 Santali books and magazines are published annually in the Olchiki script. With the introduction of Santali language instruction in schools, colleges, and universities, the development of the language and literature has progressed significantly compared to the past. Currently, discourse on the Santali language and literature is no longer confined solely to the Santal community; rather, people from diverse backgrounds are now engaging with and understanding it with keen interest on a universal level.

4.5 SANTAL SOCIETY:

The lifestyle of the Santals is very different from that of other communities. They are worshippers of nature. That is why they are known differently from other communities. These are social people and like to live together. Santal society is a Manjhi system society. All Santals live their lives in the Manjhi system of society. There are five posts for the administration in the Santal village. The posts are - 1. Manjhi, 2. Paranik, 3. Jagmanjhi, 4. Nayke, and 5. Godet. With these five persons, all the activities of the Santal society are accomplished. "The Santals have a robust governance structure. At the village level, the Manjhi, Jogmanjhi, Paranik, Godet, and Nayke, along with the elders and the cooperation of the villagers, manage and oversee the village's governance, cultural activities, festivals, and celebrations."¹¹ The Manjhi is the pillar of the village people. Its job is to see that the people of the village live a happy life. The Paranik helps in the planning and guiding of the village of Manjhi. Similarly, the Jagmanjhi also helps in the management of the village and takes care of the boys and girls of the village. In the village, the Nayke's work is only to worship and serve the gods, and the Godet would spread the news about the village headman and immediately call the people of the village. In a Santal village, all kinds of work are done by these five people. In Santal society, this system is called 'Manjhi Ari'.

4.6 SANTAL CULTURE AND TRADITION:

The Santal culture sets them apart from others. The worship and customs of the Santals are very different from those of other societies. The Santal culture, intrinsically linked to the Santal people, is one of India's most vibrant indigenous traditions. The Santal people have preserved their distinct identity through their language, customs, art, and a profound connection with nature. Their culture reflects a deep sense of simplicity, harmony, and community living. Among the Santals, religion is deeply intertwined with nature worship. The Santals are nature worshippers. The name of its divine shrine is 'Jaherthan'. They believe in a supreme deity known as 'Marang Buru' and also venerate numerous spirits (deities) associated with forests, hills, and rivers. Music and dance are inseparable components of Santal culture. The Santals have different dances and songs at different times. The Santal art is also particularly noteworthy, especially their murals (wall paintings) and decorative motifs created during festive occasions. Santal culture serves as a beautiful testament to how human life can remain deeply connected to nature while simultaneously upholding its rich traditions and social harmony.

The Santal community's life is deeply rooted in traditions, customs, and strong communal values that influence every stage of life from birth to death. In Santal society, significant life events such as birth, marriage, and death are celebrated with specific rituals that involve active participation from the entire community.

(i) Birth Rituals:

The birth ritual of the Santal community is quite distinct from those of other communities and is of significant importance. When a new baby is born in a family, it not only affects that family but is believed to impact the entire village. "After the birth of a child, the house is considered polluted. So the Santals perform the Janam chatiar ceremony."¹² During this time, village pujas and auspicious tasks cannot be conducted. Consequently, family members perform a purification ceremony under the guidance of Manjhi Baba, who protects both the family and the village. In Santali, this purification ritual is called 'Janam Chatiar'. This Chatiar ceremony is performed on the fifth day for a male baby and on the third day for a female baby.

The second one is Chacho Chatiar. "Chacho Chhatiar is one of the most important ceremonies of the Santals which initiates a person into adulthood and the membership of the society. It enables the individual to take his place in Santal society and participate in its rites and ceremonies. Without this, no Santal can be married or cremated."¹³ The Chacho Chatiar ceremony may be observed on any chosen day, spanning the period from a child's first birthday up until their marriage. Villagers, guests, and relatives are invited to attend this event. On the designated day, villagers, guests, and relatives gather at the venue. On the day of the ceremony, arrangements are made to provide food and refreshments for the villagers and guests. On this day, the villagers and guests immerse themselves in singing and dancing. Thus, the birth ritual is performed within the Santal community.

(ii) Marriage Rituals:

In Santal society, marriage is one of the most significant events, and it is regarded as a sacred bond, which is known as 'Bapla' in Santali. The customary rules and traditions govern it. In Santal society, marriages within the same

clan and cross-cousin marriages are strictly prohibited. There is no fixed age restriction for Santal marriages; the bride can be younger, older, or the same age as the groom. In Santal society, the search for a bride is initiated by the groom's side. Marriage does not take place within the same clan. The dowry system does not exist in Santal society; however, there are established rules regarding divorce. If a wife passes away, there is a custom permitting the husband to marry her younger sister, and the remarriage of widows is also recognized. "In Santal society, Pilchu couples first married and started married life, and they formed the first family."¹⁴

In the Santal society, marriages are primarily of two types: first, love marriage; and second, arranged marriage. In a love marriage, when a young man and woman dream of marriage, they both express their desire before the Jagmanjhi at the boys' village. Once their union receives the approval of the society, their marriage is solemnised through a ceremony known as 'Bahasanwha'. In the Santal society, this type of marriage is called a 'love marriage.' The Love marriage is called 'Kandel Napam Bapla' in the Santali. In the Santal society, there are two additional forms of love marriage: (1) Ar Itud Bapla and (2) Gurlatam Bapla. The Ar Itud Bapla occurs when a young man takes a liking to a young woman and desires to marry her. Under this tradition, the young man forcibly applies vermilion (sindoor) to the young woman's forehead (hair parting). If the young woman accepts the union, the community recognizes the marriage; however, if she rejects it, the young man is penalized. Nevertheless, in contemporary times, this particular marriage custom has all but disappeared within Santal society. Secondly, 'Gurlatam Bapla' is performed when one of the partners, a man or a woman, living together without formal marriage, passes away. In such a scenario, their unfulfilled marital rites are completed, followed by the performance of the deceased's final rites. Through this process, society accords them recognition as husband and wife.

In the Santal community, the custom of arranged marriage comes after that of love marriage. This is currently widely prevalent. In the case of an arranged marriage, an intermediary (matchmaker) is required, whereas in the case of a love marriage, it is not. The intermediary exchanges messages between the families of the bride and groom, finalises the marriage alliance, and plays a significant role in establishing social ties between the two villages. A total of ten types of arranged marriage customs are practised within the Santal community. The marriages are as follows: 1. Sange Bariyat Bapla, 2. Duwar Bapla, 3. Tunki Dipil Bapla, 4. Gulayti Bapla, 5. Hiram Chetan se Chhutki Jang Bapla, 6. Ghardi Janway Bapla, 7. Kiring janway Bapla, 8. Agu Goso Bapla, 9. Em bolo Bapla, 10. Sangha Bapla.

On the other hand, divorce is recommended by the Santal society. In the Santal society, divorce is relatively common and can be initiated by either the husband or the wife. A husband may seek a divorce if his wife does not follow his instructions or frequently returns to her parental home. On the other hand, a wife may seek a divorce if her husband fails to provide her with adequate food, clothing, and other necessities. If a wife divorces her husband and chooses to marry another man, her new husband is required to reimburse the former husband for the bride-price and other associated expenses. Conversely, if the husband initiates the divorce, he must pay her compensation as determined by the 'Atu baisi' (village Panchayat).

(iii) Death Rituals:

In Santal society, upon the death of an individual, the funeral rites are conducted in three distinct stages. The first stage is cremation or burial; the second stage is known as Jiling Dahar, the immersion of the Jung Baha; and the third stage is called Bhadan. In Santali, this entire process is collectively referred to as 'Morna'. "The Santals believe that the soul persists after death, but it is accorded the status of an ancestor only after the Bhandan ritual has been duly performed. Ancestors are accorded the same level of honor and respect as living family members. Their blessings are sought during auspicious family occasions, and their assistance is invoked during times of distress."¹⁵ No auspicious ceremonies or events are observed within the household until the rituals of Morna have been fully completed. These rites are performed exclusively by the deceased's family members, and it is believed that, through this ritual, the soul of the departed is ceremonially established within the home.

4.7 SANTALS FESTIVALS:

The Santals celebrate many different types of festivals. The festivals are deeply intertwined with their folk life. All these festivities are celebrated collectively and are rooted in nature and agriculture. The Santals celebrate fourteen festivals over twelve months, reflecting the vibrancy of their cultural life. The Santals celebrate three major festivals with great joy and enthusiasm. Those are Baha, Sohrai, and Sakrat.

(i) Baha Festival:

The Baha festival is one of the most prominent and highly significant festivals of the Santal community. "Every year a flower festival called baha porob is held around the full moon of the lunar month of Phagun (February/March) in sacred groves on the outskirts of each Santal village. The baha festival celebrates the blooming of the sal (*Shorea robusta*) and mahua (*Madhuca longifolia*) trees and involves the whole village community and invited relatives in worshipping and dancing for three days."¹⁶ In this worship, the flowers of the Sal and Mahua trees, along with the fresh fruits of the season, are ceremonially offered; only after this offering are they consumed. On this occasion, all the

villagers gather at the 'Jaherthan' (Sacred grove of Santals) to pay homage to their deities. They express their joy and devotion through traditional dances and songs. Thus, the Baha festival presents a beautiful confluence of collective jubilation, reverence for nature, and cultural traditions.

(ii) Sohrai festival:

The Sohrai is the most prominent and grand festival of the Santal community. Due to its grandeur and magnitude, it is often likened to an elephant, as the festivities span a full five days. It is a celebration not only for human beings but also for the honour and care of animals. "The word Sohrai means 'Sahrana' that is to be praised."¹⁷ According to the Hindu calendar, the month of Kartik (October–November) is known as 'Sohrai Chando' in Santali. Consequently, the festival celebrated during this month is called 'Sohrai'. "Sohrai is celebrated on the honour of cattle. It is celebrated on the month of Kartik, next day after Diwali."¹⁸ On this auspicious occasion, sisters, daughters, and nieces are affectionately invited. Homes are filled with the aroma of meat, rice cakes, and a variety of other delicious delicacies, which are then lovingly served to the guests. Thus, the Sohrai festival is celebrated as a symbol of familial affection, hospitality, and community unity.

(iii) Sakrat festival :

The Sakrat is the Santals' year-end festival. It is also the Santals' third major festival. "The Sakrat festival, much like the Sohrai festival, is one of the most cherished festivals of the Santhals. This festival is celebrated on Push Sankranti. Although the scope for dance and music is not extensive, the Santhals derive immense enjoyment from this festival. Fathers, sons, wives, and unmarried daughters, regardless of where they reside, all come together for this celebration."¹⁹ This festival is celebrated for five consecutive days. Since this is the final festival of the year, everyone participates in it with immense enthusiasm. Sakrat is primarily a festival dedicated to spending time with family and enjoying communal feasts. During this period, people typically wear new clothes, and traditional delicacies such as Jil Pitha (chicken/meat cake), Leto, Dubuk, etc. are prepared; everyone partakes of these meals together, celebrating the festival of Sankranti with great joy and festivity. In addition to these three festivals, the Santal community also celebrates Magh Sim, Makmore, Erok Sim, Gomha, Karam, and Jantar worship with great joy as festive occasions.

4.8 SANTAL'S HISTORY:

Historically, the Santals are known to have laid down their lives for the defence of the country and the protection of caste and religion. The Santals were the first to revolt against the East India Company or the British in India. Under the leadership of Baba Tilka Manjhi, the Santals fought against the British from 1771 to 1785. This struggle was led by forced indigo cultivation, high taxes, and the ill-treatment of Santal women. "Tilka Murmu (Tilka Manjhi) was the first martyr of the Santal community. Tilka Manjhi was hanged in 1785 for the killing of Cleveland."²⁰ He waged an armed struggle against the British for approximately 13 years, from 1771 to 1784. Tilka Murmu not only staunchly resisted British rule but also raised his voice against the exploitation by local moneylenders and feudal lords. In colonial India, Tilka Murmu was the first person to rebel against the British and the moneylenders.

After this, the second rebellion in 1855 was the 'Santal rebellion'. This rebellion was also against the East India Company and the usurer Mahajan-Zamindars. The leaders of the Santal rebellion were Sido Murmu, Kanhu Murmu, Chand Murmu, Bhairo Murmu, Fulo Murmu, and Jhano Murmu. "The Santal Rebellion began on July 7, 1855. The innocent Santals emerged in the guise of Bhairava and set out to dismantle the well-established British-Zamindar-elite system of rule and exploitation in the eastern part of India."²¹ More than 30,000 Santals participated in this rebellion. After this rebellion, the Santals faced many dangers and problems. As a result of this Santal rebellion, more than fifteen thousand Santal men, women, and children were brutally massacred. British troops set fire to many Santal homes and completely devastated twelve villages. Facing a British army equipped with cannons and guns, the Santal rebels could not hold out for long and were ultimately forced to flee into the forests. During that period, part of the Santals went to Assam, and another part settled in Nepal. During the same period, many Santals have moved to new parts of the country and settled in.

5. CONCLUSION:

The Santals are one of the most ancient tribal groups in India, and their history is equally glorious and rich. Currently, they inhabit almost every state across India. They belong to the Proto-Australoid racial group. Santal's mother tongue is Santali. The Santali language is a branch of the Austro-Asiatic language family. It is written in the 'Olchiki' script. In the Santal society, oral literature is more enriched than written literature. Agriculture serves as their primary means of livelihood. Their social organization is based on the 'Manjhi Ari'. The Santals are nature worshippers, possessing their own distinct culture, customs, traditions, and pantheon of deities. Numerous festivals and celebrations

are observed throughout the year in Santal society, with Baha, Sohrai, and Sakrat among the most prominent. The Santal community has made numerous sacrifices for the nation. In particular, their struggles and contributions against British rule occupy a significant place in Indian history. Since the independence of the country, the Santals have been living their lives independently. Since ancient times to the present, the development of the Santals has been more rapid than ever before. In independent India, youth are gaining the strength to move forward by receiving government facilities. In modern times, Santals are distinguished from others by their professional skills.

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