



# A Study On Santals And Their Culture

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## Abstract-

The ancestors of the Santals are one of the largest ethnic community in India. According to many Anthropologists, they belong to the Proto-Australoid race. They are found mostly in Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Assam, Chattisgarh, Meghalaya, Assam and Tripura. They are skilled in various arts including music, handicrafts and have a rich cultural heritage. Literature on their customs, traditions and culture are however scanty. Individuals belonging to this community are mostly deprived of education and hence pass on traditions and customs orally from one generation to the other. The dances they perform, the clothes they wear, the festivals they celebrate, the Gods they worship, the crafts they specialize in, the tasks they perform have been compiled in the study. In addition, other customary practices are included in the study. Ethnic knowledge requires documentation to avoid becoming extinct. This study is an effort to document the rich culture of the Santals society.

**Keywords:** Santal tribe, customs, ethnic knowledge, culture.

## Introduction:

The Santals are the indigenous tribal people of India. Officially they are known as scheduled tribes or Adivasi. Although the name is a given name by another tribe, the Santals have become accustomed to using the name Santal. Otherwise, they would have struggled with an identity or faced a crisis. They identify themselves as 'Har' which means human. Apart from that, they identify themselves as people of Kherwal clan. Their clan name is Kherwal. Santal are Kherwal caste. They have to identify themselves by other names to others, otherwise others will not understand. The name given by others has now become a beautiful honor and advantage or the situation has been created. But there are various differences of opinion among scholars regarding the origin of the word Santal.

Linguist Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay has commented that the original form of the word Santal is Sanskrit Samantapala (Corrupted) Sa-ant-al > Saotal (Bengali). Rev. L.O. Scafford has mentioned that the word Santal is a corruption of the word 'Saontar'. His argument is that at one time a part of the Medinipur district was called 'Saonta or Samantabhum'. They were specially known as Santal due to their long residence in this region. L.S.S. Mally of his book 'Bengal District Gazetteer Santal Parganas' said that the earliest mention of the name (Santal) appears to be contained in an article entitled 'Some extraordinary facts and customs of the Hindoos by Sir John Shore which was published in the Asiatic Researches of 1796. In this article, they were designated 'Soontars' and described as a rude unlittered tribe residing in Ramgur (Ramgurh) "The first mention of the Santals in this district occurs in Montgomery Martin's EASTERN INDIA". (Compiled from Buchanan Hamilton's Manuscript). Santal tribes mostly speak in Santali language. It is very old Indian language. At present, the language of people speaking this language is more than 7.0 million.

### Historical nature:

The santal tribe is one of the most ancient tribes on earth. There are many races in the world. Like those races, the santal tribe also resides in many regions. They belong to the pre-Aryan period. Since ancient period they have preferred to live independently. They waged war against the permanent settlement of Lord Cornwall in 1793. During the 1850s Santal hero Sidhu and Kanhu had accumulated around ten thousand Santals to run a parallel government against the British government. Baba Tilka Majhi was the first freedom fighter of India, Santal leader who raised weapons against the Britishers in 1789.

Santals are the largest tribe in India to retain a good language to the present day. Their mother tongue is Santali. The Santali language is a part of the Austroasiatic family, distantly related to Vietnamese and Khmer. Their language belongs to the Munda, Ho, Mahli, Bhumij and Kheria family of languages. Peter W. Schmidt has classified these groups as the Austroasiatic language group. Pandit Raghunath Murmu discovered Olchiki in 1925 century. They have developed their written literature with 'Olchiki' script. The script doesn't share any of the symbolic properties of other Indic scripts such as Devanagari. It uses thirty letters and five basic diacritics. It has basic vowels, and three additional vowels, generated using the Gahla Tudag. They did not have a written language until the nineteenth century. Santals are twelve surnames among them, those are Hansda, Hembrom, Kisku, Mandi, Tudu, Soren, Murmu, Baskey, Besra, Chore, Pauria and Bedea.

### Village set up:

The Santals usually establish their villages by choosing high places near forests and rivers. Most of Santal people live in rural areas. In every village, a road can be seen from one end to the other. This road is carefully maintained so that wood from the forest or grain from the field can be easily brought to the house by loading it in a cart. There are rows of houses on both sides of the road. Their houses are mud walls and straw thatches. Outside the village or at the entrance to the village there is a 'Jaher Than'. Marang buru, Jaher era and Moreko Turuyko are worshipped here. Another place worth mentioning in the Santal village is 'Manjhi Than'. This Manjhi Than is located near the house of the Manjhi or village headman. They believe that the souls of four men from the first Manjhi who founded the village reside here. The houses of the Santals are very clean.

### Leadership and social organization:

In social, economic and religious life, the Santals place great value on their village organization. No one disobeys the orders of the village organization. Every Santal village has its own panchayat. The following office bearers are present in the panchayat meeting.

**Majhi:** Village headman called Manjhi. All the responsibilities of the village are entrusted to him. In births, marriages, deaths, pujas, festivals nothing happens without the orders of the village headman. In order to show respect to the village headman, he was previously allowed to use uncultivated land.

**Jog Majhi:** He is the director of the youth of the village. He is responsible for observing the moral character of the unmarried youth of the village. The Jog Majhi has to be very vigilant so that no reprehensible thing like illegal love affairs happens in the village. If the Jog Majhi is unable to perform his duties, then five people from the village tie him up with ropes in the Majhi's cowshed and fine him. The Jog Majhi directs the dance and singing in the Sahray, Karam etc. ceremonies. The youth do not dance and sing without his orders.

**Paranik:** He is assistant to the Majhi. He performs the duties of the Majhi in the absence of the Majhi. If the Majhi resigns from the post or dies and if he has no brother or descendant, the Paranik becomes the Majhi.

**Godet:** Godet is the messenger of the Majhi. When a meeting or committee is called, the Godet informs the people of the village on behalf of the Majhi. The Godet has great responsibility in organizing pujas, festivals and ceremonies.

**Nayke:** The village's worshipper. Nayke performs the puja during all festivals and ceremonies. However, apart from performing the puja, the Nayke has no special responsibility.

### **Festivals:**

The Santals have different number of festivals celebrated over different seasons and different months throughout the year. They create these festivals based on the events of their daily life. Just as they celebrate the 'Erag Sim' festivals when the time comes for sowing seeds. They celebrate the 'Hariyar Sim' festival after the seeds are sown. Just as they celebrate the 'Janthar' festival when the time comes for harvesting crops. Among the Santals 'Sahray' festival is the largest festival. The word 'Sahray' comes from 'Sarhao', which means thanksgiving. This festival celebrates of the santals five day long every year. Those days name are Um maha, Bongan maha, Khuntao maha, Jal maha and Jajle maha. After the Sahray festival, Baha festival is the most important festival among the santals. 'Baha' meaning flower festival. It is celebrated during the flowering or budding of plants. They do not pluck or cause damage to any trees or plants. The festival is celebrated with music and dance throughout the village. Rituals are performed in their fields and delicacies are prepared. It is celebrated with great pomp and enthusiasm. It is similar with other harvest festivals such as Bihu and Bwisawgu in Asam, Pongal in Tamil Nadu, and Baisakhi in Punjab. The Santal festivals are always accompanied with traditional home-made rice beer. It is intoxicating and has a pungent smell and is a delicacy among this community. Festivals are accompanied with singing, dancing, music and eating comprised basically of meat.

### **Artifacts and Instruments:**

Hunting has been in the blood of the Santal people since ancient times. It has to do with their life journey. So the Santals are skilled in making several structures from bamboo, leaves and other naturally available resources. Every instrument in their household is made of wood, bamboo, leaves or grass. They are actively involved in hunting and fishing. But now a day they involved cultivation work in the fields. Their hunting tools include the bow and arrow called as Ak Aparisar which is also used to protect them from enemies. A long segments with the tips sharpened is used to catch animals. A traditionally made catapult is used to hunt birds and other animals.

Fishing tools involve structures made with bamboo mainly. Khaloy is a triangular shaped structure closed on all sides except the front portion to allow fishes to enter. Saira is a long flat bamboo made structure that has an opening to let fishes enter and is placed in a bund through which water can flow and enter. Burum is a bulky structure that is placed on running water area and has a single small opening to allow fishes to only enter and not come out. Jhimri is a similar bulky structure having 2 to 3 inlets. Fishes are kept in a bamboo made basket called Khalai. Fishes are also caught by handmade fishing nets which are stitched and aligned by the men folk of the community. A conical structure made of net called as Cabhi is used to catch fishes as well.

The Santals are skilled hunters. They perform hunting along with their daily activities. During harvest, as the grains are cut, grain eating rodents are plenty in the fields. These are a delicacy among the Santals. Traps made from bamboo called Godo sitap and a long metal net made trap called Tusi is used to catch these rodents. They use an indigenous made catapult called as Gorkha to kill birds.

### **Household appliances:**

The Santals make different Rice grains are placed. It is held by the farmer from which grains are sowed during farming. Phatiak' is smaller to Ari and is used to distribute rice during festivals or weddings. The smallest is Tuplak' which is used to eat puffed rice which is a favourite food among the Santals and is commonly served during any gatherings. The baskets are smeared with cowdung to close any openings present except for Tuplag'.

The Santals make their own mats from date palm leaves called Patia. Broom called Sirom Jonak' is made from giant long grass to clean houses and their outdoor surroundings. The broom is unique in appearance and the mats also make their own cots called Parkom. It is wooden frame on which jute rope is woven in a uniform reticulate manner. It is easily movable and light, enabling them to rest or sleep wherever they like to especially under the trees and outside the homes. A smaller version of this Parkom is called Machi



which accommodates only one person to sit only. A similar structure made of wood completely is known as Pata Gando.

The Santals love making their own food such as flattened rice, rice cake made from rice flour, dal and turmeric. To grind these, they have a structure called Dhinki, which is a long heavy wood placed horizontally in a stand and has a wood pointing vertically which can fit into a hole dug into the ground where materials to grind can be placed. On the posterior side, one can stamp on the wood which makes the wooden frame to rise and on releasing, the vertically pointed structure in the front can pound the material placed in the hole. Akhaini is a long bamboo having an extension at the anterior end to lift and throw hay to the desired place and is used after harvest.

### House:

Santals houses are usually built of mud. Beautiful designs are painted in the walls using mud of different varieties which give different colours after application. Structures of flowers, animals, birds or other familiar figures are made on the walls. The kitchen is usually very spacious with an oven called Chulha made of clay where all the cooking is done. The Chulha is placed in a way where other members of the family can sit near it and get warmth during winters. It is also a place for small discussions or talk during winters. The roofs of the houses are made of long grass Chero or Saori which is found in forests or straw. Although due to modernization, several homes now are made of tin and brick-built house. They keep their houses clean and tidy.

The walls are sometimes made from harvested jute stems plastered with either mud or cowdung. To make fire in the Chulha, cow dung is collected and made into thin cakes, dried in the sun and then used as fuel and they also collect the fuel from forest. Handmade Serum Jonok', Hatak', Patia, baskets and other items are usually kept in the kitchen. They have little need for heavy furniture and other luxury items and are content with the simple structures which they make themselves for their own use. But now a days they use various types of furniture at house.

### Conclusion:

The main highlight of this paper is to look at the Santals people and their culture are a valuable part of our society. The Santal community has complied their culture, tradition, customs. Through their social background study, it can be said that they are originally hunters and dwellers in the jungle. Their social organization is very complete. Looking at them through their creativity, also gives us certain ideas about the tribe. Knowledge obtained from experience gained over time has played an important role in the daily lives of the majority of people globally. It is also considered to be an important part of cultural identities. Although now a days Santals live side by side with other culture, the originality of their culture is being lost.

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