



# Understanding Santhal Cosmology Through Their Creation Narrative

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## Abstract

Santhal cosmology, preserved primarily through oral traditions, offers a rich and complex understanding of the universe, humanity, and the relationship between the natural and supernatural worlds. This paper explores Santhal creation narratives as a key to interpreting their cosmological worldview. By examining core myths surrounding divine beings such as Thakur Jiu and Singbonga, as well as symbolic elements like water, animals, and eggs, the study highlights how cosmology is embedded in ecological consciousness, social organization, and spiritual practice. The paper argues that Santhal creation myths are not merely origin stories but epistemological frameworks that structure reality, ethics, and identity.

**Keywords:** Cosmology, Creation narrative, Santhals, Bongas, Worldview

## Introduction

Cosmology, in anthropological terms, refers to a culture's understanding of the origin, structure, and functioning of the universe. Among Indigenous communities such as the Santhals of eastern India, cosmology is deeply intertwined with oral traditions, rituals, and everyday life. Unlike written religious doctrines, Santhal cosmology is transmitted through myths, songs, and storytelling, forming a dynamic and living tradition. Santhal creation narratives are particularly significant because they reveal how the community conceptualizes existence, human origins, and the interconnectedness of life. These narratives are not static; they evolve across regions and storytellers while retaining core symbolic structures. Through these myths, the Santhals articulate a worldview that emphasizes harmony between humans, nature, and spiritual forces.

## Santhal Creation Narratives: Structure and Variants

Santhal creation myths exist in multiple versions, but they share common motifs. A widely documented narrative begins with a primordial world covered entirely by water. The supreme deity, often referred to as Thakur Jiu, initiates creation out of a desire to bring life into existence (Etribal Tribune).

In one version, aquatic creatures such as tortoises, earthworms, and crabs assist in forming the earth by bringing soil from beneath the waters. The earth is gradually shaped, often resting on the back of a tortoise, symbolizing stability and continuity (Indrosphere). This collaborative act of creation highlights the agency of non-human beings in cosmogenesis.

Another prominent version introduces birds such as swans or a female bird, who lay eggs from which the first human beings emerge. These primordial humans, often named Pilchu haram and Pilchu budhi, became the ancestors of the Santhal people (Hindu Blog). The use of eggs as a symbol of origin emphasizes fertility, regeneration, and the cyclical nature of life. Some narratives also include a failed attempt at creation, where divine efforts are thwarted by destructive forces, such as a celestial horse consuming early human forms (Etribal Tribune). This introduces the theme of imperfection and struggle within creation itself.

## Key Elements of Santhal Cosmology

### 1. Primordial Water and Earth Formation

Water is the foundational element in Santhal cosmology. The initial state of the universe as an endless ocean signifies both chaos and potential. The emergence of land from water represents order and the beginning of structured existence. The role of animals like earthworms and tortoises in shaping the earth suggests a cosmology where humans are not superior but part of a larger ecological system. Creation is thus a collective process involving multiple life forms.

### 2. Divine Agency and Spiritual Hierarchy

Santhal cosmology recognizes a supreme creator – Thakur Jiu or Singbonga, who initiates creation but does not act alone. Numerous spirits, known as *bongas*, inhabit the world and influence natural and social life. These spirits govern forests, rivers, households, and agricultural fields, reflecting an animistic worldview in which all elements of nature possess spiritual significance. The environment is perceived as a living system controlled by spiritual forces rather than inert matter (Springer).

### 3. Human Origins and the Symbolism of Eggs

The emergence of humans from eggs is a central motif in Santhal creation myths. Eggs symbolize birth, continuity, and the unity of life. This imagery connects human existence to the natural world, reinforcing the idea that humans are not separate from nature but born from it. The first human couple is often depicted as both progenitors and cultural ancestors, responsible for establishing social norms and practices.

### 4. Interdependence of Humans and Nature

Santhal cosmology emphasizes a deep interdependence between humans, animals, and the environment. Creation narratives consistently portray animals as co-creators and essential participants in the formation of the world. This

worldview extends into everyday practices, including agriculture, rituals, and healing systems, where maintaining harmony with nature and spirits is essential for survival and well-being.

## Cosmology as Social and Cultural Framework

Santhal creation narratives are not merely mythological accounts; they function as guiding frameworks for social organization and cultural practices. The emphasis on community, cooperation, and respect for nature is rooted in cosmological beliefs. For instance, the integration of animals into kinship systems and rituals reflects the belief that all living beings share a common origin. Similarly, the presence of bongas in everyday life reinforces moral and ethical behaviour, as actions are believed to have spiritual consequences.

## Comparative Perspective

When compared with other Indigenous cosmologies, Santhal creation myths share common themes such as the primacy of water, the role of animals, and the emergence of humans from natural elements. However, the specific combination of these elements and their symbolic meanings is unique to the Santhal cultural context. Unlike many hierarchical religious systems, Santhal cosmology is relatively egalitarian, emphasizing balance rather than domination. Humans are not positioned above nature but within it, as part of an interconnected web of life.

## Conclusion

Santhal creation narratives provide profound insights into their cosmological worldview, revealing a system of thought that is ecological, relational, and cyclical. These myths articulate a philosophy in which humans, nature, and the divine are inseparably linked. Understanding Santhal cosmology through these narratives not only enriches anthropological knowledge but also offers alternative perspectives on human existence and environmental ethics. In an era of ecological crisis, the Santhal emphasis on interdependence and balance presents valuable lessons for sustainable living.

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