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Nature, Culture And Social Control: An Analysis Of The Santal Baha Festival

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Abstract:

This article highlights the social and cultural significance of the 'Baha' festival of the Santal community. This spring 'Baha' festival highlights the good relationship between man and nature. The Santals do not use any new fruits, flowers, or leaves until the 'Baha' festival is held. This article discusses the rituals and ceremonies of the festival. The festival continues for three days – 'Um Maha', 'Sardimaha', and 'Baske Maha'. The village priest, who is called 'Nayke', - what is his responsibility in this festival is also discussed. Analyzing the socialist significance of the festival, it is seen that in this festival, everyone, regardless of the rich or poor of the village, forgets personal interests and conflicts and comes together and the sense of social solidarity increases among them. Analyzing from the perspective of environmental sociology, it is also seen that it is an unwritten social rule of nature and conservation. Unlike modern society, it shows a nature-centered sense of life. The customs of this festival highlight the historical customs of the Santals. The expression of loyalty to traditional leadership highlights their loyalty. There is also a clear but mutually respectful division of labor between men and women. This has a significant impact on the socialization of children from adults. This article highlights how this festival has a significant impact not only as a celebration of joy, but also as a means of maintaining one's own cultural heritage and existence.

Keywords: Baha Festival, Santal Community, Environmental Significance, Sociological Importance, Cultural Identity.

Introduction:

Human life is closely related to the word festival. It means a special arrangement of joy or celebration. People come together to celebrate festivals to get rid of the monotony, hardships and difficulties of daily life. It would be wrong to call festivals only entertainment. Because through the celebration of festivals, one can become aware of the culture of a society. It has tied people from different levels of society in one thread. These festivals play a big role in the socialization of the individual. On the one hand, it works as a means of preserving cultural identity and on the other hand, it is a tool for increasing harmony and tolerance between different communities.

We all know that India is a multicultural country where people of different communities live here. Their culture, language, customs and traditions are different. Like other communities, the *Santal* community occupies a significant place in the Indian society. They have their own festivals, 'Baha', 'Saharai', 'Pata' – these are the festivals of the Santals.

Identity of Santals:

According to Mr. Skrefbrood, the collector of Santal Puranas, the word '*Santals*' is probably a corruption of the word '*Saontar*' and they adopted this name after living in this country for several generations. Earlier, a part of ancient Medinipur was called '*Saontha*' or '*Samanthabhumi*'. According to linguist Sunitikumar Chattopadhyay, the word Santal probably comes from the Sanskrit word '*Samanthapala*'. Samantapala means 'border protector'. In the Middle Ages, this Samantapala word became 'Samantha-al' and later Saostal: Santal. Here the question naturally arises that not only Santals lived in the Samantabhumi, there were many other castes. Why were they not called Santals? Moreover, there is no historical evidence that the *Santals* were border protectors.

Among the tribal groups of India, the *Santals* are the largest and oldest after the Bhil and Gond tribes. They are an Austroasiatic-speaking Munda ethnic group of the Indian subcontinent. The Santals have a total population of about 7.5 million in India. Santals are more common in the states of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and Assam. Outside India, they also live in Bangladesh and Nepal. The Santals identify themselves as '*Har*', '*Harhapan*', and '*Kherwal*'. The Santals have their own language (Santali), script (*Olchiki*), culture, and a distinct social system. They have been nature lovers since ancient times. Historically, the Santals were hunters and forest gatherers. But over time, they have accepted agriculture as their main livelihood. In agriculture, both men and women work on the land equally. Apart from agriculture, they earn their living by collecting forest resources. In times of scarcity, they collect fruits from the forest. They sell them in the market. That is how their family runs. Most of the Santal villages are built near the forest. They are mainly divided into 12 tribes. Namely, Kisku, Hansda, Murmu, Hembram, Mandi, Soren, Tudu, Chande, Pauria.

'Baha' festival of santal

The Santali word '*Baha*' means 'flower'. It is basically a spring festival and highlights the relationship between people and nature. This festival of the Santals is a big festival in terms of religion. With great joy, they remember their worshipped deity '*Marang Buru*', '*Jaher Ayo*' at this time of the year. Basically, this festival starts after the Bengali festival *Dol Purnima*. It continues till the end of the month of Chaitra.

Until the Baha festival is held, no girl in the village can wear new flowers on her head. In the beginning of spring, the leaves of the trees fall and new leaves appear on the trees, and various types of flowers bloom. However, the Santals do not use any of these flowers and fruits until their Baha festival is held. They cannot even eat anything from the new leaves. Boys also do not do these things. It is important to mention here that the date of the Baha festival is different in each village. Starting from the full moon of Dol till the end of the month of Chaitra, the people of each village gather and decide on which day they will celebrate the Baha festival. The village people choose the day and the Baha festival is held on those days in that village. Therefore, the date of the Baha festival is different in each village.

Rules and regulations of the 'Baha' festival

The 'Baha' festival is one of the most festive festivals among the Santals. They wait for the day from the day it is fixed. The festival lasts for three days. The first day is '*Um Maha*', the second day is '*Sardi Maha*'. And the third day is *Baske Maha*.

‘Um Maha’ :

From the morning, the girls of the house start cleaning the house and putting on clean clothes. Both the boys and girls check and clean their necessary things and also take a bath and clean themselves. In the past, since shampoo was not popular, they used a kind of clay as shampoo. This process of cleaning the head with clay is called ‘Nadka’. Nowadays, due to the use of modern things, this method has largely disappeared, but in some villages, where there are elderly women or men in the houses, they do ‘Nadka’ on this day instead of shampooing their heads with soap.

The Santals choose one person as the priest to perform puja during any festival in the village. This person is called a ‘Nayke’. In every village ceremony like ‘Baha’, ‘Saharai’, ‘Mag Sim Jam’, marriage – Nayke worshipped. On *Um Maha*, ‘Nayke’ takes the items used by the gods to the pond and cleans them. The village boys are sent to the forest. From there, they cut branches of the sal tree and bring them. The holy place where the puja is done in the village of Santals is called ‘Jaher Than’. It is a place marked on the way to the village or at the very end of the village. All the pujas of the village continue at this holy place. In this holy Jaher Than, the village boys make a small tent with bark and leaves, which is called ‘Jaher Sadim’. One of these three tents is for ‘Marangburu’, ‘Jaher Eera’, ‘Mare Ka Turui Ka’. Another one is named after ‘Gonsare’ and another one is named after the village’s ‘Majhi Devta’.

In the evening, the village priest, dressed in clean clothes, cleans the tent with cow dung. Each tent that is built is called a ‘Than’. In each of the ‘thans’ that will be built, the priest sprinkles oil and vermilion in their names. After completing these tasks of the ‘than’, the priest returns home. After returning home, he cleans the cow dung in a place in the yard and makes a ‘than’. He brings all the items used by the gods there and places them. At that place, he sprinkles oil and vermilion in the names of the gods. Then everyone in the village dance and sing and play the ‘Dhmsa madal’. They present all their activities of that day through songs. They sing-

Akay da goy sa-sabat kan ho

Ja Gonsai sasa ghati ghat re?

Akay da goy ume nadkah kan ho

Ja Gonsai meral ghati ghat re ?

Nayke eray sa-sabat kan ho

Ja Gonsai sasa ghati ghat re

Nayke doy ume nadakah kan ho

Ja Gonsai meral ghati ghat re.

That is, here it is said, who is spinning clothes at the *Sasa Ghati Ghat* and who is bathing at the *Meral Ghat*. In response to this, it is said, the wife of the ‘Nayke’ is spinning clothes and the *Nayke* is bathing.

In this way, they dance and sing all night long. It is important to mention here that the tune of the songs for each festival is different. The tune of the Baha festival and the tune of the *Saharai* festival do not match. Similarly, in the case of marriage, there is a different tune for the song. The next morning, the villagers get ready to go to the ‘Jaher Than’.

‘Sardi Maha’

In the morning, everyone in the village gathers at the *Nayke*’s house in clean clothes. When everyone in the village arrives, everyone takes the necessary items for the puja from there and sets off for ‘*Zaher Than*’. The items used by the gods are arranged and placed in a trough, and the *Nayke* walks in front with a bowl of water in one hand. And the villagers follow him behind him. The men of the village start playing the *dhamasa madal*. And the girls slowly move forward holding each other’s hands in a row. In this way, they reach *Zaher Than*. When *Zaher Than* reaches, the *Nayke* stays in the tent that was built the day before. When they start cleaning it with cow dung, the women of the village sing.

After this, the *Nayke* starts the work of worship. He collects shawls and mahua flowers. These flowers are offered to the gods at ‘*Banga Than*’.

After this, the sacrifice period begins. The villagers pray for the well-being of the villagers, for the cure of diseases, for a good harvest and for protection from other natural disasters. So, to please the gods, they sacrifice chickens or goats. When these tasks are completed, everyone in the village goes to their own homes. Khichuri is cooked with the meat of the sacrificed goat. This khichuri is distributed among the villagers. The villagers accept it as a prasad of the puja. Khichuri is cooked in separately with the goat’s head. But only the men of the village can eat it. No women eat it. The priest of the village cooks khichuri separately for him. His wife helps him in this task. The two of them eat that khichuri. No one else can eat that khichuri. After the meal, the rest of the village goes home, but the priest stays at the ‘*Jaher Than*’.



(Baha Festival celebration; source collected by Sharmila Mandi)

Later in the evening, everyone in the village dressed up in their traditional clothes and went to the ‘*Jaher Than*’. There, the priest hands over the flowers to them as a blessing. The girls tuck them into their bosoms and the boys tuck them into their ears. When the blessing ceremony is over, the girls hold hands and start dancing and singing in a row. The boys play the *dhamasa madal*. In this way, the dance and song ceremony continues for a while in *Jaher Than*. Then, the priest slowly comes towards the village with the flowers and a ‘*Lota dah*’ in one hand. Behind him, the other boys of the village follow him with all their belongings and move towards the house. The girls on both sides bring the ‘*Nayke*’ home while dancing. Before entering the house, the girls wash his feet. As a blessing, he gives the

flowers and sprinkles the 'Lota dah' on their head. After that, he enters the house. Thus, the second day's work is completed.

Baske Maha



The third day is *Baske Maha*. On this day, the boys of the village go out hunting. After returning from hunting, they gather at the house of the village headman, called 'Majhi'. Before entering there, the village girls wash their feet. Then they enter the house. *Majhi* give them a pot of 'Handi.' Then the pouring of water begins. This is called 'Dah Dul'. Everyone in the village pours water on the heads of those who are related to them, such as their , grandfathers, brothers-in-law, sister-in-law and grandmothers. In this way, everyone dances and sings while pouring water while getting wet. This is how *Baske Maha* is celebrated.

Sociological significance of the Baha' festival

The rules and regulations that Santal adhere to while observing Baha have a positive impact on society, such as:

1. Social cohesion and collective consciousness:

This Baha festival creates a collective consciousness among the people of the Santal community. During the Baha festival, every person in the village forgets personal interests and conflicts and gathers at *Jaher Than*. Rich and poor, everyone worships the gods, dances and sings together. Everyone participates in the feast. It strengthens the spiritual and social bonds among the members of the Santal community, overcoming the monotony and distance of daily life.

2. Environmental Sociology: Santal Society

Nature and culture are intertwined in an inseparable unity. From a sociological perspective, Baha Parab is an unwritten social rule of the Santal society for environmental conservation. After the new flowers or fruits appear on the trees, no one consumes them before offering them to the gods. This is basically a primitive but very effective strategy to preserve the diversity that occurs at the beginning of spring. In contrast to today's modern consumerist society, Baha Parab teaches a nature-centered way of life. Here, people consider themselves not the masters of nature but a part of nature.

3.Traditional leadership and social control:

Power structures and social control are essential for the stability of any society. The rituals of the Baha festival legitimize the traditional political and religious structure of Santal society. All the rituals of the festival are conducted under the guidance of the ‘Majhi’ and ‘Nayke’. When the girls wash the feet of the priest during the festival, it essentially expresses social obedience to the traditional religious leadership. Also, specific rules about who will fast, who will clean the shrine, how the puja will be performed – these help maintain order within the society.

4.Gender roles and socialization: The work of men and women in the ‘*Baha Parab*’ is a good example of sociological division of labor. Although it is patriarchal, there is mutual respect between them. Men mainly do the work of arranging the public space, collecting and bringing the items for worship from outside, performing sacrifices, going hunting, etc. On the other hand, women in the house handle the household chores, entertaining guests. During the festival, young children learn social norms, folk songs, dances, and manners from their elders. This has a significant impact on the socialization of children.

Conclusion

They feel one with themselves. When they worship the sal tree as a deity or ‘*Banga*’, it shows their unwavering faith in nature. How dependent and sensitive the Santals are on nature for their livelihood can be understood through these festivals. From these festivals, people can learn about their social culture. They keep their own culture alive. Along with this, they get an opportunity to expand their tradition in the world court. They preserve their own songs, musical instruments, costumes and religious beliefs and strengthen them through these festivals. In this way, the Santal community has preserved their culture and their existence through the celebration of their social festivals.

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