



An Ethnographic Study Of The Santhal Tribe In Nagaon District, Assam.

Himanshu Ranjan Borah, Department of Anthropology, Sikkim University.

ABSTRACT:

The Santhal Tribe is a Tea Tribe in Assam. In this study explore the cultural practices, social organization and their livelihood in Nagaon District, Assam, India. This research aims to write about the Santhali people there traditional language, religion, culture & festival, family & marriage, social control, livelihood with the adapted neighbouring culture and rapidly changing socio-economic environment. In this report data were collected in 4 months (July to October) using primary data through the participants observation method and secondary data was collected in research papers, articles, government census data and documentary and also using semi-structured interviews with community members. This study found the ethnographic study in Santhali community in emic perspectives there living style and livelihood, this findings contribution to understanding the socio-cultural images using the ethnographically study of the Santhal Tribe.

KEYWORDS : Santhal, Munda, Ethnographic, Socio-culture, Livelihood, Nagaon, Tea, Tribe.

INTRODUCTION :

The Santhals (also spelled as Santal, and formerly also spelt as Sontal or Sontha) are one of the Munda peoples who live mainly in the state of Jharkhand, Bihar, west Bengal, Odisha and Assam. There is also a significant Santhal minority in neighbouring Bangladesh and a small population in Nepal. The Santhals, who number more than 5 millions, consider themselves as a (tribal) people speaking a different language (austro-asiatic) and sharing a way of life. They are descendants of Proto-Australoid. According to Skreftsrud, the Santals lived in Persia, Afghanistan and the Chinese Territory. Although there is no proven record, the Santhal people claim their birthplace as Hihiri Pipiri, somewhere in present-day Pakistan. They are recognized as a disadvantaged tribe with respect to social, economic and political status.

The Santhals were the great fighters during the British regime in India. They waged war against the permanent settlement of Lord Cornwallis in 1855. During the late 1850 Santhals hero Sidhu had accumulated around 10 thousand Santhals to run a parallel government against the British government. Baba Tilka Manjhi was the first Santhal leader who raised weapons against the Britishers in 1789 (Free Encyclopedia /google india). The Santals have been classified as belonging to the Dravidian race, and this classification has been based on anthropological measures; linguistically there is absolutely no connection between the two, except a few words borrowed. The features are very much alike, and the anthropological measurements give very similar results. But a good many races in this world would in that case have to be classified as Dravidians.

When we call a tribe or communities then that includes many things like - origine, religion, culture, marriage, customs, livelihood etc. The Santhals are the third largest indigenous community in India

followed by Bhil and Gond. The Santhali peoples are basically the Tea Tribe in Assam. In this study, this paper represents the emic perspective of the Santhal Tribe of Nagaon District, Assam. Where their language, culture, religion, family and marriages, social control, and livelihood has been presented by me.

OBJECTIVES:

- 1) To find out the emic study of the Santhals.
- 2) Tea garden labour earning in Nagaon District Assam.
- 3) To analyse the standard of living experienced by the Santhal Tribe community.

AREA OF STUDY :

Nagaon district in Assam, India, presents an ideal setting for studying the Santhal tribe, one of India's largest indigenous communities. The district's diverse geography, ranging from forests and hills to rivers and plains, shapes the Santhals' interaction with their environment and influences their livelihoods, including agriculture and forest-based activities. According to statistical reports, the ST total population 2001: 2,314,629 & Total population in 2011: 115,153, in 2011 data based where Male Population is 57,759 and Female Population is 57,394 in Nagaon District, Assam. Kondoli, Bor-kondoli Tea garden, Sagunbahi, Bheloguri are situated in Kathiatoli, which is under the Kathiatoli Block of Nagaon District. These villages are basically a tea gardens area, with a very good environment and people are simple with their daily living and lifestyle.

LITERATURE REVIEW :

The Santhal tribe are basically the Tea tribe in Assam. They are rich in culture and vibrant indigenous group. Dalton depicted them as mystical forest people with strong animistic roots, and in *The Hill of Flutes* (1948), W.G. Archer vividly portrayed their stories through myths, songs, and the ferocious spirit of their 1855–1856 Rebellion against unjust treatment. Scholars such as P.O. Boddling, in *Santali Folk Tales* (1942), celebrated their rich oral traditions after independence; imagine vibrant dances and clan gatherings that maintain close-knit communities. Scholars such as P.O. Boddling in *Santali Folk Tales* (1942), celebrated their rich cultural oral traditions after independence; imagine their vibrant dances and clan gatherings that maintain close-knit communities in the santhal community. The study took place in Nagaon district, Assam, where many Santhals peoples settled in the 1800s to work on tea plantations in tea gardens in Assam. Bora examines in *Ethnography of the Santhals in Assam* (2005), Das Gupta's *The Santhals of Assam* (1981) demonstrates how they have adapted to a semi-nomadic lifestyle following the loss of their ancestral lands, assimilating into local customs. Kumar's 2010 book *Tribal Communities in Assam* highlights the difficulties within prejudice and vanishing identities. According to Dutta's 2018 work on Nagaon livelihoods, their economic focus has shifted from traditional slash-and-burn farming—which Das describes in *The Santhal: A Study in Culture Change* (1983)—to crafts and migration. According to the Mahapatra (2012) and Bora & Bora (2017), they face many contemporary challenges, such as health problems, ethnic conflicts, and climate change within this Community but their tenacity is evident. However, here is still a significant gap: there aren't enough current, practical studies in Nagaon that truly pay attention to their opinions of the current changes. In ordinarily help to shape better futures in Assam, this calls for fieldwork that feels human, connecting the past and present, and echoes calls for respectful Adivasi research like Xaxa's (2014).

METHODOLOGY :

When I make this report, in this study I am using as primary data by participation observation method to understand the Santhal peoples' emic perspective. While conducting the fieldwork in these places, Kondoli, Bor Kondoli, Sagunbahi and Bheloguri. I conducted the field survey with one of my friends, who is also from the Santhali community. He directed me to where their tribe lives under the Kathiatoli Block. Also I am using secondary data, articles, research papers, books, and government census data along with the documentary of the Santhal Tribe. In the case study I collected 30 households' information about this place. They tell me everything happily. All the collected data in serial format is given below.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION :

1. Language of the santhals (santhali):

Santhal is the prime language spoken by the Santhal tribe. This Indian tribe also has a script of their own language called **Olchiki**. Apart from Santhali they also speak **Bengali, Oriya, Hindi and Assamese**. In central India, Santhal speaks **Sautali** and **Hindi**. In Assam they speak **Sautali** and **Bagania**, which is a mixing of Bhojpuri and Assamese language. The Santhali group organises a conference called '**Sautali Manyata Bhasanmilion**' every year. To improve and develop the language. The Santhal language is part of the Austroasiatic family, distantly related to the Vietnamese and Khmer.

In 1914, completed the translation of the 'Bible' into the Santhal language. In 1925 Akilman Raghunath Murmu created the Olchiki script for the Santhali language. Peter W. Schmidt has classified these groups as the Austro Asiatic language group. As Santhal belong to the Munda family of language, they have been classified by Anthropology as pre - Dravidians, Kolarians, Proto-Australoids, Mishadies and Austrics. The Santhals have their own independent language. Known as Santhal which belongs to the Munda, Ho, Bhumij and Kharia family of languages.

2. Religion of Santhal Tribe :

The Santhal pantheons incorporate around 150 soul divinities, ordinarily called bongas. These gods incorporate an enormous number of isolated classes, difficult to count here. Some identify with the subclan, however even here we should recognize the bonga of the spot of starting point of the family and its familial bonga.

Religion (dharma) is considered to be a part and parcel of Santhal life. Though basically they are animists, because of their cultural revivalism in recent times, they have named their religion after the popular name of their village 'sacred grove' as sarna. Hindu impact is especially prominent in the presence of Hindu goddesses as tutelary gods of Santhal ojhās. From one viewpoint, these goddesses belittle Santhal witches and present ailments; then again, their support is important to battle similar indecencies. Hindu images, for example, the spear, have become an intense custom of the Santal ojha.

In Nagaon, Assam some of the Santhal peoples transformed their religion after the Christianity. Because of this they provided the basic items like, school, clothes, food etc. And another hand As the Assamese dominant area slowly adapted Assamese culture and religion things.

3. Culture & Festival :

In the Santhal tribe there are many cultural programs highlighted by the many research scholars but in Nagaon District they perform Sarul Puja. The Sarul literally means worship of 'SAL', (year) it is

dedicated to mother earth. The festival is celebrated in the state of Orissa, Jharkhand, Bengal and Assam. It is celebrated on Chaitra Shukla tritiya, the third day of bright half in chaitra month. Here in Assam, the Santhal people celebrate it during a colorful festival, but for the last five years they have been celebrating it during the middle of April, because they cannot manage the holidays for children separately.

The oldest Man in the community described the Sarul puja - on the first day, a group of people will go to one of the oldest men of their community and bring him to the place where the ritual will be performed. On this day this man will play the role of priest. They worship in forest areas therefore first of all they light the lamp and inaugurate the festival by offering some meal to the earth. To satisfy the mother earth, they sacrifice Hen and also 'Hariya' the local drink.

At the family level, they worship their family deity and ancestral spirits called Hapram Bonga and Abge Bongaseated in the sacred place named Bhitari in every house. Besides, they worship deities of nature namely, Buru Bonga (hill deities), Rango Bonga (forest deities) and Basumata or mother earth. Now-a-days, they have started worshipping some local Hindu gods and goddesses. Apart from dance Santhals play great music using Tirio (bamboo flute with the seven holes), Dhodro banam which consists of belly called lac covered with an animal skin on which rests the bridge (sadam, lit, horse), an open chest (korom), a short neck (hotok) and a head (bohok), Phet banam (a fretless stringed instrument with three or four strings), Tumdak, Tamak, Junko and Singa. In Assam the "Santhali Dance" or "Santhal Nritya". They perform as a group of women with the interlock hand forming semicircles around male percussionists playing dramas like Tumdak and Tamak. In the influence of the Assamese and nearby Bengali culture Santhals are happily celebrating the Assamese and Bengali culture like - Bihu, Durga puja, Kali puja, raas mahotsav etc.

4. Family & Marriage:

The Santhals family is the smallest social group unit of the society. The Santhal family is basically a nuclear family. The Santhal community is patrilineal, patrilocal and patriarchal in nature to maintain the family. Father is the head of the family and he manages all the family affairs with him under surveillance. After marriage, the son is separated from his father and he establishes a new house. And also after marriage the daughter goes to her husband's house. Kinship relationships are classified into two groups; bandhupela, i.e; the affinal kins related by marriage and kutumpela i.e; the consanguineal kins related by blood. Both the kin groups participate in all socio-religious functions of the family.

Marriage (bapla) is one of the most significant events in Santal society. It makes an individual a full-fledged member of the community. From an economic point of view a man obtains a life partner who can help him in all economic pursuits. For marriage, some customary rules and regulations are followed. Marriage within the same clan and cross-cousin marriage are prohibited. In Santhal marriage, there is no restriction of age. The bride may be younger, older or of equal age of the bridegroom. Different types of marriages, such as marriage by negotiation (sangebariyat), marriage by mutual consent, marriage by capture (ipitut bapla), marriage by elopement (gurdaonapam), widow re-marriage (sangabapla), son-in-law in house (ghar-de-jamai), Hindu type of marriage (diku bapla) are prevalent in the Santhal society. Marriage by negotiation (sangebariyat) is the common practice in the Santhal community. Levirate and sororate types of marriages are also permitted in their society. But in the case of Assam only few are found, i.e; arrange marriage, love marriage, captured marriage.

5. Social control :

The political organization and administrative unit of the Santhals village are mostly governed by councils of elders who regulate the life of the people within the village and the order of the village outside world. Social control is considered as the smallest and most important unit at the ground level.

The Santhals social control system as a traditional village council (atu mone hor) constituted of functionaries like Manjhi (secular village headman), parmanik (assistant to village

headman), Gadet (secretary to village headman & messenger), Jog Manjhi (deputy village headman), Naike (village head priest) and kudam naike (assistant to village priest). These officials have to perform their functions, in accordance with the tribal system and that is why they are expected to be well acquainted with the santhal traditions, customs, religious beliefs and practices. Manjhi the village headman presides over the village council meetings and settles all the village social things.

6. Livelihood:

The primary occupation of the Santhal in Assam was a settled Tea garden. Both men and women are engaged in this pursuit. Seasonal forest collection is one of the important sources of subsidiary income. In cutting of tea leaves after six months they are bound to engage in other activities like-woodcutter, carpenter, and construction worker and they go to other places to work and earn the money and feed their family. In Assam every tea garden worker gets 6 rupees per kg in daily, it's upon them how much they cut the tea leaves a whole day. In the case study I found that some workers work the whole day and from morning 8 am to evening 6 pm, they collect 1 quintal. It means some workers earn 600 rupees per day. In kondoli and bor kondoli is the big size tea garden where every worker has a lot of tea trees to cut the leaves in large amounts. The women go to work in the nearby villages during harvesting time. They also sell local rice beer in local places like surrounding their houses. The local rice beer is called 'Hariya'. Which are sold as plastic bags and every bag costs 20 rupees. Local people buy them every morning and evening and there are snakes also with extra cost.

CONCLUSION:

From the above discussion, it is clear the ethnography of the Santhals (Tribe). Today their life-style is developed and modernized. In many santhal students are now educated and they work in private, corporate and government jobs. Now cooking style and food habits, language, dress pattern, accustomed to ready-made clothes, aware of political mobilisation are changed by the modernization and their health systems or medical system are developed because in kandoli and Bor kondoli tea garden there is situated a Kandoli Model Hospital to serve the medical treatment. In this study I found many view points to understanding their lives and lifestyles. This report is highlighted and shows the emic view point of the Santhal tribe in Nagaon District, Assam, as an ethnographic study.

REFERENCES :

1. Besra, L (2023) Changing society of the Santhal tribe in Bankura district of West Bengal. Quest Journals Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science.
2. Census India 2001 data online. Government of India.

3. Census official data tables portal. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India.
4. Dey, A (2015) An Ancient History: Ethnographic Study of the Santhal. Novelty Journals.
5. Dataset on Scheduled Tribe religious communities in Assam [2001.Data.gov.in](https://data.gov.in).
6. Das, S (2020) Santhal in Assam: Their status and position in the nation. (2020). International Journal of Education and Psychological Research.
7. Das, T (2020) Socio-Cultural Profile of Santhal Tribe in Lakhimpur District. Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research.
8. Mahapatro, S.R and Sethy, M (2024) Insights From a Study of The Santal Tribe Community in Odisha. JIMR Journal.
9. Ministry of Tribal Affairs Tribal Digital Repository on Santal. (2014) Government of India.
10. Territorial identity and boundary negotiations among Santhals. (2022). National Institute of Urban Affairs.
11. The cultural dimension of environment: Ethnoscience study on Santhal community. (2021).
12. Tribal Development Plan – Assam. (n.d.). Government of Assam.

