



# A Study About Santal community with Special Reference to SOHRAI FESTIVAL

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**Abstract:** *An ethnic group of Santals are native to eastern India. The livelihood of Santhals revolve around the forests in which basically they reside. Santhals are the dominant tribe in the Indian state of Jharkhand in terms of population and are also found in the states of Assam, Bihar, Tripura, Odisha and West Bengal. They are the largest ethnic minority in northern Bangladesh's Rajshahi Division as well as in Rangpur Division. They have a overriding population in Nepal and Bhutan. The Santals communicate with the Santal language, the third largest language of the Austroasiatic family.*

**Key Words:** *Ethnic Group, Santal, Homogenous tribal, Sohrai Festival, Eastern India.*

**Introduction:** Santals are one of the ubiquitous homogenous tribal communities of India, counting more than 10 million of peoples. Apart from India, Santals live in neighboring countries in Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. Despite this geographical detachment, Santals communicate with the similar language, cultural tradition and values. Social and religious system of Santals is very complex and complete in itself. Every village has five representatives who are selected by the village centre of population through consensus to run the village. They are 'Manjhi baba' the headman, the priest, Naika, 'Jog Manjhi' the assistant-headman, Paranik the youth guide, and Godet, the convener. All kinds of disputes, including family and individual problems, are discussed in the village meetings and are solved through common consent. Santals have some classical song-melodies and a variety of song and dance-forms that are sung and performed the same way wherever Santals live.

They follow oral traditions, songs, and ritual play an important role in cultural continuation and transmission. Some music tunes have been slightly modified due to the cultural persuade of the various inhabitants groups that live near Santal villages. However, the musical instruments and the basic rhythms are identical as they used to be ages ago. Formerly Santals were hunter-gatherers and known for clearing forests for agricultural purposes. Presently most of them are farmers. For centuries, Santals have been living as neighbors of other communities maintaining a cultural and social expanse. The Santals are regarded as one of the economically weaker segment of India. They are known to be jovial in character, honest, peace-loving, simple, fond of their rice-wine and ready to crack a joke. They are also identified as slow and lethargic people, reluctant to accept new ideas and changes. They are thought to suffer from an inferiority complex. These are some of the broad ethnographic impressions that are ubiquitous about the Santals.

**Language:** Santali is the universal language of the Santal is which belongs to the North Mundari group of languages, part of the Austroasiatic language family. The origin of the Santal is supposed to have been the Champa Kingdom of northern Cambodia. Their traditions designate migration into India by way of Assam and Bengal. Santals typically live in disconnect villages ranging from 400 to 1000 inhabitants each. Until today, mud houses were preferred; houses are often decorated with floral designs. Houses normally have one veranda and at least two rooms, of which the 'inner room' (chitar) contains the ancestors and the granary protected by them. The Santals were basically hunters and gatherers. As a group, they have a infinite knowledge of plants and animals. They also have an advanced hunting technology in the form of a variety of traps. During the course of time, their economic base shifted to slash-and-burn agriculture and animal husbandry; today they grow wet rice in terraced fields. Irrigation by canals and ditches is used on the plain areas. The Santals are usually non-vegetarian, and keep poultry, goats and cattle. Fishing is the most important practice whenever they have access to rivers and ponds. Traditionally Santals were experts in timber work and wood carving, which produced finely carved carts, utensils, and musical instruments, mainly for their own use. Weaving of mats, basket work, and making of dishes and cups from Sal leaves are some crafts of commercial importance. Santals retail their products for ready money or barter at local markets; they also trade with Hindu villages.

**Literature:** The development of conventional Santali language and literature was started from the very beginning of British empire since 1870-75 over the region by some literary loving British ruminator among them were P.O. Bodding, L.O. Skerfurd, Campbell etc in a Roman script. Britishers contributed to the Santal society by developing grammar, literature & dictionaries and



other academic means. It was the initial time when Santali Language, Culture and Folktales, Tradition were being brought out to the entire globe. Their work on Grammar, Literature & Dictionaries helped the Santali language to be cosmopolitan, at that time there wasn't any written scripture that could actually define the Santali language, culture.

Development of Literature in 19th century helped in bringing out the Santali folktales, lifestyle, and prosperous culture. Literature also presented the real dedication of Santals towards the nature. As and when development of literature started, Santali language and people started getting their identity all over the world as Indigenous People having rich culture and civilized social organization. Santali specially attracted the students, researchers, professors and entire world to know Santali and soon many researches were done on Santali language and literature. The further construction of distinct modern Indian script for the development of traditional modern Santali language, literature and culture was completed during the course of development of other modern Indian language, script or culture for the sake of modern literature & culture identity of Santals.

Unfortunately that time, it was rough to understand the Santali language and their expression when it comes to the written form because literature and grammar dictionaries were being printed in Roman script which was unable to pronounce the Santali language and expression. Guru Gomke Raghunath Murmu thought that Santals with their rich cultural heritage and tradition, also need a separate script to maintain and promote their language, the script known as 'Olchiki' script which also helped Santal language to be pronounced accurately. Olchiki is alphabetic and does not share any of the syllabic properties of the other Indian scripts. One of the fascinating descriptions of the Olchiki script is that it makes use of signs and symbols long familiar to the Santals. The purpose of shaping the symbols of the letters and arranging the letters in the script has been greatly helpful in the writing efficiency.

Numerous words in the Santali language are derived from natural sounds. Letters of Olchiki script are also derived from the physical environment and what surrounds the people - bees, birds, hills, rivers, trees, plough, sickle - the list is endless. Towards this goal, Guru Gomke Raghunath Murmu wrote over 150 books covering a broad spectrum of subjects such as poetry, grammar, novels, drama, and story in Olchiki as a part of his extensive programme for cultural advancement of the Santal community. Bidu Chandan, Darege Dhan, Sidhu-Kanhu, and "Kherwal Bir" are among the most acclaimed of his works.

Modern Santali literature has taken off in a huge way since it became an official language of Jharkhand in 2003, but it has not come of age because the government has not included it to the list of official Indian languages. Nevertheless with confidence of encouraging Santali language and culture the most of the Santali writers are still struggling to ensure the reach of voice of Santals and its culture, present-day Santali literatures now mainly focusing on Santali culture, folklore, customs, poem and nature as well as present condition of Santal people and their forest, land and river. Some are also raising the issue of human rights of Santals for their own language and literature. Around 50 Santali literature publishers every year but without any support they are lost, their voice of Santals, voice for nature, their dedication and love towards nature, their stories, their folklore, their culture everything is being lost. Moreover, Santali writers are still writing, creating and developing literature to bring out their voice and creativity for Santali language, culture and tradition in order to keep their community alive in form of literature. Current status of Santali literature is not in good health, not promoted and supported, this is why literatures are being created but lack of support they are rare to see in global market and for the same reason still Santali language, literature and culture could not be available and is yet to be recognised and understood.

**Kinship and social life:** The Santals are categorized into 12 clans and 164 sub clans. They are patrilineal and strictly endogamous. The clans are ranked according to previous functional divisions: The Kisku were kings but, the Murmu priests etc. Despite this clan ranking, Santals are basically egalitarian, thus contrasting with their Hindu atmosphere. The local descent group is of major organizational importance on the village level.

Santals follow diverse forms of marriage, reflecting the relative positions of the spouses. The ideal form is bride-price marriage normally leading to the couple living with the husband's family, but where grooms have least resources, bride-service marriages leading to residence with the woman's family do take place. Due to this flexibility in marriage customs one also finds divorce by mutual agreement, men marrying second wives, remarriage of widows, and special arrangements for finding grooms for unmarried mothers. Household units tend toward comprehensive families rather than nuclear one. It is, however, common for sons to separate before the death of the father. Hereditary rules are complex, but land is usually divided among brothers, with minimum portions going to daughters as dowry. Grandparents of both sexes are important for the socialization of new generations; through them children normally entertain their cultural education.



Recurring sources of conflict among Santals are jealousy, money matters, land disputes, sexual offences, and witchcraft. Witchcraft accusations are common. As a rule Numerous disputes are settled by compensation, decided by tribal assemblies which function parallel to the Indian courts. Among the most serious offenses is breach of tribal endogamy, which is the liability of the local kin group and is normally punished with strict ex communication.

**Religion and Expressive culture:** The Santal tribals includes near about 150 spirit deities, generally called bongas. Each village has a sacred grove, where benevolent bongas are found. The forest bongas are malevolent and consist of the souls of people who died an unnatural death. Santals believe that souls become bongas in three generations after death if they perform the truthful rituals. The dead body goes through a long process of death rituals where some bones are collected after cremation by the main mourner (eldest son), which are washed and ritually fed with milk, rice beer, and sacred water by female mourners. Later the bones are immersed in water and a series of rituals are performed, releasing the dead from peronel identity to become a nameless ancestor. The village priest naeke and his wife are recognized as representatives of the original Santal pair. Their function is predominantly related to festivals and ceremonies. The priest consecrates the animals offered to the sacred grove deities.

The ojha is a healer and diviner person. He drives away the malevolent deities, divines the reasons of disease, expels pain from the body, and performs the possible medical remedies. Traditional medicine is exceptionally developed and implies a large range of botanical and zoological knowledge. The making of remedies implies a considerable practical knowledge of chemistry. Life-cycle rituals like initiation, marriage, and funeral function are celebrated independently. Most collective rites are concern with the agricultural cycle or to hunting and gathering traditions. The most imperative function among them is the flower festival, which is also the festival of ancestors. Santal verbal tradition is rich and includes myths, riddles, folktales and village stories. Recently much of this material has been written down or recorded. Traditional songs are countless and varied; each song accompanied by a particular type of traditional dance.

**Festival:** Sohrai is the principal festival of the Santals. The Santals of Birbhum, Bardhaman district, Dinajpur, Malda, Murshidabad, together with the Santals of Assam, Jharkhand, Nepal, and Bangladesh, celebrate this festival with a variety of rituals, singing and dancing up to the end of Bengali calendar month of Poush (i.e. between December and January as per the Gregorian Calendar). This festival used to be celebrated during Kalipuja in the month of Ashwin-Karthik (i.e. from the middle of September to the middle of November month) in earlier times. According to the geographical conditions of the area of Hazaribagh, the cultivational calendar was different. The festival was celebrated when Paddy crop was harvested in the month of Ashwin. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, they settled in the productive low land of Santal Pargana; the nature of cultivation got changed – the Poush month entered even before harvesting the main crop. After the Santal Revolution in 1855, the inhabitants of Santal Pargana were dotted all over, but they carried their cultural history with them. The Santals of Bankura, Midnapur, Purulia and Odisha still follow the old tradition of celebrating Sohrai during Kalipuja.

The term 'Sohrai' is derived from the root word 'Sarhao' which means 'thanks giving'. In this festival, thanks giving is bestowed to the good morale of the families and of the villages for providing compulsory food to keep them healthy throughout the whole year. The first day of the celebration is called 'Um Hilok' i.e. the day of bathing and cleaning. All the villagers clean their premises in grounding of the festival. With the instruction of the manjhi haram, the headman of the village, the godet, the messenger of the village, along with the children collects a one-fourth kilogram of rice, a handful of pulses, four to five potatoes, some firewood, salt, chilly, cooking oil and a chick from every family of the village. A got-tandi, altar is built in the external part of the village in the clean field. There the naeke, the village priest sacrifices those chicks in commemoration of the spirits of their forefathers and the village spirits. After the sacrificial ceremony, all associates, make mixture with the rice-pulses and have there itself. The village priest, having kept an egg in the field, asks the cowherds to usher their herds over that egg in the evening. The owner of the cow touches the egg with its leg which is supposed to provide an earthen pot of rice beer in the next feast of the month of Magh. Touching the egg with the cow's leg is considered as an indication of good omens to the family. Then all people get together in the village playing tumdak, drum behind the village priest.

The second day is celebrated as Bongan Hilok, a day of becoming spiritually infused with the good spirits. All members of the family spent most of the time among themselves. The head of the family fasts whole day and worships the family spirits with the finest rice beer. Then he shares the rice beer with the family members and after that with the neighbours. A delicacy is prepared with meat and fish in every family. Dancing and singing begins in the evening. The third day is the called as Khuntao. It is the day dedicated to all the domestic animals. All the persons clean their axe, plough, spade, grubber, sickle, etc with water from the morning itself. and applies oil on them, and keeps them arranged in the courtyard. Buffaloes, cows and other domestic



animals are also washed and oiled, they are tied to the pegs on the sides of the village streets. They are garlanded with paddy laddu, sweet around their horns and necks, and the santals sing and dance in their honour.

The fourth day is termed as Jaley which is a day of strengthening relationships. All the villagers are engaged in dancing and singing in union along the streets of the villages. During singing and dancing if they enter the house of any family they are entertained with rice beer. The singing and dancing function continues throughout the day and night. Dancing and singing together eradicates all forms of stifles and misunderstanding among their links and neighbours.

Usually a day is preserved for the relax after the fourth day of celebration. It is called Haku-Katkom i.e. a day of enjoying fish crabs and. The last day is regarded as Sakrat which is the day for keeping them back to their relevant places for those spirits who were worshipped and brought into the village on the first day. The priest, leads the male members into the forest for hunting in the morning. All gather at the field near the village while come - back in the evening,. The wife of the village priest attaches three breads made up of rice flour on the pole of banana plant, and these are shot down with the arrows from specific distance. It means, if any evil spirit who has entered the village, has been intimidated and chased away in a peculiar manner. Then the pole is cut into some segments and the one who has first shot the bread down carries them over his shoulder and thereby he would be mounted on the shoulder of a bachelor to enter the village. During this valuable time, the children of the village display their acrobatic feats, skills, etc. then all go to the residence of the village headman. The priest and other elected members while singing; and having taken rice beer they return to their respective houses. It is just a feast of having rice beer and singing and dancing, but there is a glimpse of Santal Philosophy found within it. This is the real example of the cultural life of the community. The community life is the supremacy that has helped them remain independently with their own cultural milieu amidst diversity of cultures for centuries.

**Conclusion:** In summarized way we can say that the Santal community is very immense community with an adventurous life and naturalistic culture. Though there has been a continuous effort since independence by the government to raise their socio-economic standards whereas some things say that somehow this community is disconnected with mainland India and always deprived in our society. This mindset of us should be change else we will lost an indigenous community of this geographical area and it will be a loss for humanity in view of culture, literature and history. Countless Santhal youths are moving towards town and urban areas for education and in search of job which can be really seem to be an upliftment for this community.

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