



## To the study of personalized approaches and Convincion systems in Santhals

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### Abstract

Traditional Santhal leaders such as the Manjhi and Naeke play an important role in the Santhal society's decentralized yet very participative form of government. In the end, the study highlights how crucial it is to use indigenous knowledge systems, preserve traditional practices, and implement inclusive development strategies that take into account the unique sociocultural circumstances of indigenous communities like the Santhals. Though a person's religious views and practices may lend their deeds a more profound meaning, they are otherwise identical to those of nonreligious people. Besides uniting the community, these festivals also play an important role in passing down ancient wisdom and showcasing the diverse cultural heritage that exists there. The Santhal people have rethought their long-standing customs in order to participate in contemporary forms of government, learning, and commerce.

**Keywords:** Santhal, government, contemporary, culture and festivals

### Introduction

There is no hierarchy or complex social structure in the Santal culture, and everyone gets along. Some have claimed that Santal culture is completely alien to Hinduism. A more accurate classification of the Santali people would place them in the Munda subgroup of the Austro-Asiatic branch of the Austric family of languages. The "Proto-Australoid" motif has been identified in physical anthropology. The celebration of their event is not complicated because of their simplicity and uniformity. Cultural activities that are strongly ingrained in the traditions and customs of the Santal people are known as Santal festivals. These celebrations are important times for Santal people to come together as a community and honor their heritage via dance, song, and other traditional practices.

To celebrate and honor the Santal people, these events often include lively performances of music, dancing, painting, and storytelling. In addition to bringing people together as a community, these festivals also serve to preserve and pass on ancestral knowledge and showcase the rich cultural variety that is present there. There are religious and secular components to the Santal festivity.

Although separate from one another from an analytical perspective, these two facets of festival are closely related.

An individual's religious beliefs and practices might give their actions a deeper significance, yet in doing so, they are no different from their more secular counterparts. Secular activities like eating, drinking, making music, dancing, and singing take on a religious quality when they are practiced in a sacred setting. There has been an examination of both religious and secular aspects throughout this text.

An in-depth understanding of the challenges faced and opportunities presented by the Santhal tribe in Pakur district may be gained via research on their socioeconomic status. Researchers can get to the bottom of issues like low literacy rates, limited economic opportunities, and insufficient access to vital resources by looking at people's socioeconomic status. Because of this, targeted solutions may be created to address these problems. In addition, the Santhal people's socioeconomic situation must be considered if their rich cultural heritage is to be preserved. This heritage includes their unique writing, art, music, and dance, which are essential to their identity and pride.

There is potential to improve the Santhal people's standard of living by tapping into their economic resources, particularly in the agricultural and forestry sectors. Insights gained from this study may help policymakers make better judgments about the creation of policies and the distribution

of funds. Policymakers may use this information to create plans that will help indigenous communities thrive. Researchers may learn the best ways to help the Santhal people in Pakur district and similar communities by comparing their socioeconomic position to that of other locations. This will allow them to develop strategies that work. The analysis of the Santhal tribe's socioeconomic status is ultimately meant to empower and improve their quality of life, ultimately leading to an increase in their overall well-being.

The Santals have a long lineage in the Austro-Asiatic family, which includes the Vietnamese and the Khmer peoples. According to historians, they were the forefathers of the indigenous people who now live in eastern India (not including the hill regions). A member of the Austro-Asiatic language family, Santali is one of the Munda (or Mundari) branches. In Santali, you may find dialectical variants. The majority of Santals speak Northern Santali, yet there is a significant dialectical difference between them and Southern Santali.

### Literature Review

In the contemporary era, the Santhal communities of Singhbhum are navigating a complex socio-economic and cultural landscape marked by both continuity and change. While constitutional safeguards and affirmative action policies have offered certain opportunities for political representation and educational advancement, large segments of the Santhal population continue to experience systemic marginalization, particularly in terms of land rights, access to quality healthcare, and educational equity (Xaxa, 2005) <sup>[1]</sup>. The pressure of modernization, urbanization, and extractive industries—especially in mineral-rich Singhbhum—has significantly disrupted traditional livelihoods, displacing Santhal families from forest and agrarian settlements into wage-based labor economies (Basu, 2011) <sup>[2]</sup>.

Despite being officially recognized as a Scheduled Tribe, the Santhals face challenges in asserting their cultural and religious identity in a system that often subsumes indigenous worldviews under mainstream frameworks. Movements for the constitutional recognition of Sarna Dharma as a distinct tribal religion have gained momentum in recent years, highlighting the community's resistance against cultural assimilation and the demand for autonomy over spiritual expression (Ekka & Kujur, 2020) <sup>[3]</sup>. The spread of religious conversion—both Hindu and Christian—has led to intra-community divisions, further complicating their social cohesion.

However, the contemporary Santhal society also reflects resilience and transformation. Educational and political awareness have gradually increased, especially among youth and women. Grassroots activism, digital literacy, and self-help groups have emerged as tools of empowerment in many villages (Rycroft, 2006) <sup>[4]</sup>. Cultural festivals such as Karam Bonga and Sohoray Porob continue to play a crucial role in maintaining ethnic identity, though modern influences have modified their scale and performance. Efforts by NGOs and tribal welfare departments have attempted to preserve oral traditions, promote bilingual education (Santhal and regional languages), and create sustainable livelihood options, albeit with mixed success (Sundar, 2016) <sup>[5]</sup>.

Furthermore, the administrative system has undergone dual transformation. While traditional institutions like the Manjhi Hadam (village headman) still retain symbolic importance in village affairs, their legal authority has diminished in favor of formal panchayati raj institutions and political representatives. This has often resulted in a disconnection between state-led development efforts and indigenous needs, especially in health, education, and gender equity sectors (Tudu, 2018) <sup>[6]</sup>. Still, several Santhal individuals have broken socio-economic barriers and entered into professions such as teaching, policing, and even civil services, contributing to a slow but steady rise in community visibility and voice in regional governance.

In sum, the Santhals of Singhbhum today embody a dynamic coexistence of tradition and modernity. Their cultural survival is challenged by external pressures but also strengthened by internal community efforts and advocacy. The future of the Santhal community in Singhbhum depends on sustained and culturally sensitive interventions that respect their identity, promote inclusion, and empower their agency.

### Cosmology and the faith

#### Bongas (deities) and spirit world

Bongas, meaning "spirits" in Santal, refer to the many different types of spiritual entities that the Santal people believe inhabit their planet. According to them, these bongas encircle them entirely. They make up a fascinating backstory to explain the bongas' existence. According to their memory, the bongas did not dwell on Earth but instead lived as Thakur Jiu's or Chando's subordinates. It was at one point that they rose up in rebellion against him, claiming that they were underappreciated. Because the spirits are envious of Thakur Jiu's love for humans, they try to woo them and control them. The Santals, according to C. Das, are monotheists who may have adopted the practice of bongas, or spirits, much later in history. On the other hand, they do not prioritize the spirits in their life. What does he think?

Without a doubt, in Santal tradition, Thakur Jiu is the Supreme Deity. The lack of any particular kind of devotion to Thakur Jiu is evidence of his absolute dominance among the Santal pantheon. The ancestors of the nomadic Santal people came up with the idea of bongas, or spirits, —both good and evil—that needed to be appeased by sacrifice while the tribe was on the road.

#### Creation myths and origin stories

While Christian missionaries were interested in Santal creation myths and tales, evolutionist anthropologists were more concerned with categorization, origin myths, and unilinear evolution. H. H. Risley's description of the Santal people in his book *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* exemplifies this point. Following his incorporation of a condensed form of the Santal creation myth and the conventional account of the Santal migrations, Risley made the following remarks.

This tale of the Santals' wanderings doesn't seem to merit serious study either as a chronicle of their wanderings or as an illustration of how the ability of myth-making functions. It is highly unlikely that a people whose sole method of preserving information is by string knots would be able to

remember their history for an adequate period of time or to recall details with sufficient accuracy for their narratives to be considered historically significant. Read the paragraph below and see how I compared Karam Binti with Karam gurus.

### **Relationship with nature and ancestral spirits**

There were two gods in every family: the orakbonga, who was worshipped in the home, and the abgebonga, who was worshipped in secret and whose identity was revealed only to the oldest son. Even while bongas, or spirits, were mostly kind to humans, they may cause problems and suffering on occasion. Christian missionaries have been working among the Santals since 1862, yet neither Hinduism nor Christianity has had much of an impact on Santal religious traditions. According to Biswas, the difficulty of Christian converts losing their ethnic identity was a double whammy: they were already a minority population (Biswas, 1956: 217-218)

In Santal mythology, the bonga are more than just an abstract idea; they play an integral role in daily life. Not only do these specters live in human communities, but they also inhabit rivers, forests, mountains, and holy gardens. The Santals hold the belief that paying respect to the bonga is crucial to preserving balance between the material and spiritual realms. On the other side, bad things may happen if you ignore them.

### **Contemporary religious syncretism**

Religious syncretism the blending of different religious beliefs and practices-has become a defining feature of contemporary Santhal spirituality, particularly in Singhbhum and adjacent tribal regions. Traditionally, the Santhals followed Sarna Dharma, an animistic faith centered around nature worship, ancestral spirits (*bonga*), and sacred groves (*Jaherthan*), without temples or idols (Troisi, 2000) [15]. Their belief system was deeply embedded in seasonal cycles, agricultural rituals, and community festivals like Baha Bonga, Karam, and Sohoray, which upheld a cohesive cosmology rooted in land, spirit, and kinship.

However, postcolonial transformations-including missionary activities, Hindu reform movements, and increased interaction with state institutions-have contributed to the rise of religious syncretism within Santhal communities. Many Santhals today identify partially or fully with Hindu or Christian faiths, yet often retain elements of their indigenous Sarna practices. For instance, converted Christians may still observe agricultural festivals or consult traditional *Naeke* (priests) during times of illness or death, while Hinduized Santhals might participate in mainstream festivals like Durga Puja while continuing to venerate local spirits (*bongas*) through animal sacrifices (Rycroft, 2006) [4].

### **Balance of life rituals**

#### **Birth and naming ceremonies**

In Santal tradition, a baby's birth is a holy moment because it heralds the entrance of a new spirit into the world. Ceremonies that welcome the blessings of the spirits and ancestors and promise protection for the infant characterize this period. Consequently, the Janam chatiar ritual is carried out by the Santals. No other pursuits, such as hunting, may

be pursued until it is completed. Traditionally, the ritual is held on the third day for female children and the fifth day for male children. Each son born to the village's men and women who gathered at the home after the ritual bears the name of his maternal grandfather; hence, he is the third son to be born to a paternal grandfather and the fourth son to be born to a maternal grandpa. The process is same for girls, with the female relatives following suit in the same sequence.

### **Puberty and coming-of-age rituals**

Every boy and girl go through puberty rituals that are very symbolic of their own growth, both physically and socially. During these rituals, young men learn the skills they'll need to become men, like traditional hunting, farming, and more. When females reach puberty, there are traditions that mark the occasion and show that they are ready to be married. Coordination, reverence, and responsibility are emphasized throughout these rituals.

The function of the elders is vital, since they teach the younger generation the spiritual beliefs, survival skills, and traditions of the tribe. The cowshed and the bhitari, the holiest places in the home, are off-limits to females after they reach puberty. For a duration of seven to nine days, pollution is noticeable. Following the period's end, the home is cleansed by covering each room with cow dung. The females then wash their clothing and take a purifying bath to escape the filth.

### **Marriage customs and practices**

Marriage is a difficult concept, to put it simply. Marriage traditions and levels of matriarchy or socialism vary among governments and regions and across time. Geographical and temporal variations inevitably lead to divergent understandings of what marriage entails. The truth is that it's tough to choose a single, definitive definition of marriage. Assumptions regarding marital traditions vary, which leads to differences. Because of this, there are a variety of definitions of marriage offered by social scientists.

This is what Rupchand Murmu had to say about marriage in his book "Saonta Sanresh": "When we Santals enter youth, we are married privately or by love as we like." According to the Buddhist scholar Lakshmicharan Murmu, "Marriage is the union of a boy and a girl (husband and wife) to create and organize a new family through cultural purity recognized by one's own national society's spiritualism (belief in God and Goddess) religiousism."

### **Classical systems of knowledge**

#### **Ecological knowledge and resource management**

Santhal resource management practices reflect a nuanced understanding of ecological balance. For instance, their agricultural activities are closely aligned with the natural calendar, and they traditionally employ shifting cultivation (*jhum*) and mixed cropping, which enhance biodiversity and maintain soil fertility. Rituals such as *Karam Bonga* and *Erok Bonga* mark the beginning and end of agricultural cycles, and involve offerings to spirits believed to guard the fertility of the land. Forest resources-such as medicinal plants, fruits, firewood, and hunting grounds-are communally managed, with unwritten rules governing when, where, and how much can be harvested.

Contemporary efforts to document and integrate Santhal ecological knowledge into sustainable development and climate adaptation policies are gradually emerging. Scholars and NGOs working in Singhbhum argue that recognizing and supporting tribal environmental governance systems can offer more sustainable and culturally respectful alternatives to top-down conservation models.

### Ethnomedicine and healing practices

As part of their cultural transmission, Santals primarily pass on their traditional healing methods to subsequent generations. In traditional medicine, plant and animal extracts are used, as stated by those who took part in the field investigation. The majority of those who utilize traditional medicines nowadays are women (32.7%), according to this survey. Nonetheless, young women seek out allopathic therapy, particularly during pregnancy, for essential vaccinations. Additionally, they seek medical attention in hospitals in the event of an emergency or catastrophic illness. Homeopathic remedies are more often used by males.



**Fig 1:** In order to alleviate coughs and colds, the woman is describing the usage of Bakosh Pata, which is the local name for Malabar nut leaf (*Justicia Adhatoda*).

Despite their ecological wisdom, Santhal agriculture faces increasing challenges due to land alienation, erratic rainfall, deforestation, and lack of institutional support. The intrusion of commercial farming, mining, and industrial development in Singhbhum has reduced access to cultivable land, leading many Santals to migrate for wage labor. Additionally, government-led agricultural schemes often neglect tribal agroecological contexts, promoting hybrid seeds and chemical inputs that disrupt traditional practices and strain already fragile ecosystems.

Nevertheless, there is a growing recognition of the value of tribal farming systems in sustainable development discourses. Agricultural NGOs and community-based organizations have begun reviving interest in organic farming, seed sovereignty, and water harvesting techniques among Santhal farmers. These initiatives aim to blend traditional knowledge with modern agro-ecological methods, enabling the Santals to assert food sovereignty while preserving their cultural and environmental heritage.

### Resolution of conflicts and customary law

#### Principles of Santhal justice

The principles and ethics of every given community are unique. Including that community Everyone depends on that

social structure to be alive. Contrarily, Santal culture is not. On the other hand, their social justice system is packed with meaning and importance. The Santal people have put their trust in the social justice system from the beginning of time.

**Atu (Rural) Justice system:** The Santals have had a system in place to control their culture and society for a long time. Any family dispute in the village may be resolved via the village justice system, which includes the judiciary. This work was completed by five villagers. One of the five is the village's Majhi. The locals are led by his astute judgment. His aides include Godet, Jaga Paragan, Jaga Majhi, and Paranik.

**Pargana (Regional) Justice System:** A member of the community who is dissatisfied with a ruling from the rural justice system may seek redress in a regional court. To ensure that this judicial system is fully functional, "parganas" are chosen. Therefore, in honor of him, the legal system is known as Pargana judicial. The 'Parganas' are given slightly more respect than the 'Majhi'.

### Types of offenses and sanctions

Santhal customary law categorizes offenses into moral, social, religious, and economic transgressions. Common moral offenses include adultery, public intoxication, and domestic violence. Social offenses encompass breaking taboos such as inter-clan marriage (a strict violation of exogamous marriage rules), elopement without consent, and disrespecting elders. Religious or ritual violations-such as failing to observe clan-specific ceremonies, insulting the *Naeke* (priest), or defiling sacred spaces-are viewed as grave breaches that not only harm the individual but endanger the spiritual balance of the community

### Modification and patient-specific changes

#### Impact of religious conversion

Religious conversion has been one of the most profound agents of change in the cultural and spiritual landscape of the Santhal community in Singhbhum. Historically adherents of Sarna Dharma, a nature-centric and animistic belief system, the Santals practiced rituals involving the worship of spirits (*bongas*), sacred groves (*Jaherthan*), and earth deities such as *Marang Buru*. However, with the arrival of Christian missionaries during the colonial period, many Santals began converting to Christianity-primarily due to access to missionary-run schools, healthcare, and relief from exploitative social structures dominated by non-tribal landlords and moneylenders (Bates, 1995) <sup>[13]</sup>.

The process of conversion, however, did not lead to an outright abandonment of Santhal culture. Instead, it resulted in a unique form of religious syncretism, wherein Christian Santals continued to celebrate traditional festivals like Karam, Sohrai, and Baha, albeit in more symbolic or modified ways.

### Legal interventions and state regulations

Post-independence, several legal measures were introduced with the stated aim of protecting tribal rights. The Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution recognized the need for special governance in Scheduled Areas like Singhbhum, where the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act



(PESA), 1996 was later enacted to empower traditional tribal self-governance. PESA legally acknowledges the authority of Gram Sabhas to manage natural resources, resolve disputes, and uphold traditional customs.

### **Educational influences**

Education has emerged as a transformative force in the socio-cultural evolution of the Santhal community in Singhbhum, significantly reshaping their worldview, customs, and aspirations. Traditionally, Santhal knowledge systems were orally transmitted, rooted in storytelling, songs, seasonal rituals, and communal labor. However, with the spread of formal education-especially through missionary schools during the colonial era and government programs in the post-independence period-new paradigms of learning have gradually replaced indigenous modes of knowledge transfer.

### **Technology and media exposure**

The advent of digital technology and mass media has introduced a new and rapidly evolving dimension in the cultural life of the Santhal community in Singhbhum. In recent decades, increased access to mobile phones, satellite television, social media platforms, and the internet has expanded the horizons of Santhal youth, connecting them to global cultures, languages, and trends. While this exposure has brought benefits such as information access, online education, and political awareness, it has also led to cultural shifts and transformations in traditional practices, values, and identities.

Media exposure has significantly influenced lifestyle aspirations and social behaviors among younger Santhals. Youth increasingly adopt mainstream fashion, Bollywood dance, film dialogues, and popular music, sometimes displacing traditional Santhal songs, attire, and rituals. Moreover, the presence of mobile technology in rural homes allows even remote communities to watch TV serials, religious programs, or use social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp. These platforms serve not only as entertainment sources but also as tools of identity reconfiguration, introducing new worldviews that often challenge traditional customs such as arranged marriages, gender roles, and community hierarchies.

### **Conclusion**

The dynamic between tribal autonomy and state-led development programs. By using qualitative analysis and field findings, it highlights the Santhal people's ability to maintain their identity in the face of relocation, marginalization, and governmental apathy. The Santhal people have rethought their long-standing customs in order to participate in contemporary forms of government, learning, and commerce. Therefore, researchers, planners, and developers will be able to use this study as a springboard to design and execute cheap, ecologically friendly housing and settlement choices, which will successfully tackle the displacement issue. From an analytical standpoint, these two aspects of the event are distinct, yet they are really somewhat interconnected. Though a person's religious views and practices may lend their deeds a more profound meaning, they are otherwise identical to those of nonreligious people. Traditional Santhal

leaders such as the Manjhi and Naeke play an important role in the Santhal society's decentralized yet very participative form of government.

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