

# SANTAL – CHILD OF THE NATURE

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**Abstract:** This paper demonstrates the community-centric existence of the Santal, from which emerges a socialistic view of religion. For the Santal, religion is the symbol and expression of a collective living. The Santal's idea of the sacred generates from fear, anxiety and survival strategies, and is not limited to an impalpable higher being, but also responds to different components of nature. The meaning of an individual's being is wholly manifested only in conjunction with other aspects of the world that s/he lives in. These comprise inanimate and animate elements of the nature, such as hills, forests, rivers, birds and animals, as well as a belief system that include gods, spirits and ancestors. As the Santal philosophy is based on pleasure principle and a pacifist view of life, it does not believe in dividing among the people.

Rather than centering religiosity on the hierarchical relationship with one high god, the Santal practices camaraderie with anthropomorphic spirits that intercept one's everyday life and activities. Although the Santal considers Dharam as the supreme spirit, s/he also believes in propitiating the village spirits as well as the ancestral and domestic spirits, who keep a watch over the villagers and stand for the betterment of the village, communal health and happiness.

Indigenous groups like the Santal perceive nature as complementing their being. This makes their understanding of religion and god sensory, inclusionary and a part of the mundane. They conceive different communal gatherings and festivities as well as birth, marriage and death rites in terms of bodily experience. For such an individual, the universe and the body share an inter-reciprocal relationship. The phenomenological essence of the Santal spirituality criticizes the modern fractured conception of the world that is essentially dualistic, mechanistic and hierarchical, and uncouples the body from the mind, culture from nature, and human from non-human.

**Keywords:** Santal, religion, body, community, spirits.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### **Communitistic Philosophy of the Santali Religion:**

The three main components of the Santal world-view are human, nature, and God, and it embraces the idea of an integrative and interactive relationship between the community, natural and supernatural forces. The Santal's identity primarily churns out of the totality of and interdependence among these relationships, such that the meaning of one's being is wholly manifested only in conjunction with other aspects of the world one lives in. These comprise inanimate and animate elements of the nature, such as hills, forests, rivers, birds and animals, as well as a belief system that include gods, spirits and ancestors. The Santal's socio-religious behaviour is similar to the Native American tribes that Forbes has observed as "...deeply bound together with other people and with the surrounding non-human forms of life in a complex interconnected web of life, that is to say, a true community. All creatures and things [are] brothers and sisters. From this idea comes the basic principle of non-exploitation, of respect and reverence for all creatures" (quoted in Wilber 14). The communitistic social system of the Santal perceives the land, forest, and water resources as common property that can be freely accessed by all. As a corporeal being, the Santal is chiefly a congregational rather than an individual identity, and makes religious offerings, sacrifices and libations at the level of a given social unit, such as a village, a sub-clan or even a family. Although the Santals today have migrated to different parts of the country and have nuclear units of households in cities and towns, their ancestors looked at village as the basic communal unit, and never settled alone or in an uncultivated land. As a rule, the Santal's worships are directly linked to the economy of primitive agriculture, cattle rearing and hunting (Mahapatra 112).

Pahan or Baiga, the oldest representative or founder is the chief both in the religious and secular matters. He offers public sacrifices to the sacred grove (Sarna) in order to propitiate the gods and spirits on behalf of the villagers, seeking protection from the ravages of wild animals as well as good harvests. Further, the Pahan is responsible for settling disputes, inflicting punishment for offenses, and representing the community in dealing with outsiders. For the Santal, it is a base idea to take a conflict beyond the village boundaries (Malley 131). The communal feeling among the Santals is especially realized during the Sohrae festival, when each house contributes paddy grain and a hen for a joint feast. Food and merriment during festivals and fairs help to celebrate the sense of togetherness of a village. As the Santal philosophy is based on pleasure principle and a pacifist view of life, it does not believe in dividing among the people (Tudu 31). In the words of W.S. Sherwill, "As he is unfettered with caste, the Santal enjoys existence in a far greater degree than does his neighbour, the priest-ridden and caste-crushed Hindu. The Santal eats his buffalo-beef,...enjoys a hearty carouse enlivened with the spirit pachwai, and dances with his wives and comrades to express his joy and thankfulness" (Sherwill 124).<sup>1</sup>

Rather than focusing his religiosity on the hierarchical relationship with one high god, the Santal practices camaraderie with anthropomorphic spirits that intercept his everyday life and activities. Although he considers Ponomosar or Dharam as the supreme spirit and sun and its rays as the symbol of Ponomosar, he also believes in propitiating the village spirits as well as the ancestral and domestic spirits, who keep a watch over the villagers and stand for the betterment of the village, communal health and happiness. In fact, the Santal myth alludes a clash between the high god or Thakur and the bongas or spirits, until the latter were defeated and sent to settle on earth as Thakur's messengers (Datta-Majumder 99).

Sacrifices offered to the Orāk bonga or family spirits promote the Santal's sense of fellow feeling with the former, who will protect the house from diseases and distress (Kochar 62). The Orāk bongas are inherited patrilineally, such that domestic groups belonging to the same family line are likely to have the same Orāk bonga. In fact, the worshipers of Orāk bonga are called gharonj renko, meaning 'an extended household or a family.'<sup>2</sup> These family spirits, thus, determine the foundation of the Santal clan system through classifying each clan in terms of body substance.

The Santal's regard for the ancestors is realized from the fact that they sow their paddy and offer sacrifices in the latter's names. What is more, while drinking handi or rice-beer, the Santal sprinkles a few drops as an offering to his ancestors and to Marang Buru. In the words of Archer: "whether it is a time of drinking rice-beer, eating a meal, celebrating a festival, a birth or a wedding or placating the bongas the recent dead must be given their small offering" (Archer 341). The process of ancestor worship enables uniting the community of the present living individuals with that of the people who lived in the past. This makes it difficult to make a clear demarcation between the palpable self and the spiritual self, or that of the living and the deceased.

The Santal community's belief system looks at the ethereal existence or afterlife as a continuance of the ephemeral form. At the final funeral feast called Bhāndān, the Mānjhi and Jog Mānjhi recite the traditional creation story or the karam binthī. Similar Santal stories of creation and migration are narrated by a village elder in the evenings of the Sim Bonga and Marang Buru festivals (Troisi 100). This story-telling process is meant to draw a line of descent between the deceased one and the ancestors. Apart from lamenting, the indigenous groups bathe and anoint the dead with oil and turmeric powder. Moreover, the dead are given coins, ornaments and utensils to the grave. This implies that one's social personality is not annihilated but rather transformed with death, pointing to the principle of immortality that conceives the soul as a *bonga* or demigod.

### A Biocentric Religion:

According to Saraswati (1991), the Santal believes that the "primordial knowledge came to [man] from birds and animals" (quoted in Bhattacharyya 18). A biocentric view of the world shapes the values and basic habits of the Santal. A common thread connecting humanity with animality is realized from their origin-story, which has it that the first man and woman, Pilcu Haram and Pilcu Budhi, were brought to being by a pair of heavenly birds – Has and Hasil – created out of

1 The divide between the caste-Hindu and the Santal is much more complex in the contemporary politics of caste and tribe. Charulal Mukherjea notes that the women's position among the Santals of Mayurbhanj have significantly improved due to the application of the Hindu law of the Mitakshara school. Educated Santals are forsaking practices such as Bitlaha, now seen as defamation and intimidation that is punishable under constitutional law (Mukherjea 179).

2 Faith in the family deity symbolizes family bonding; in the recent times, it is observable that the weakening of family bonding is simultaneous with the decline of faith in the efficiency of the family deities (Kochar 63).

God's hair. That the human harmonizes between opposing elements is understood from the fact that their predecessor birds were mediators of opposing elements, the heaven and the earth. They flew below the sun and above the earth, making a contact with both the worlds. The idea of a close-knit bond between the human and the animal worlds is also reinforced through Santali folktales that refer to human mothers giving birth to animals and vice-versa. The Santali myth claims that the mortal world came into being through the earthworm consuming the earth and excreting it on the back of the tortoise for seven days and nights, and the latter finally bringing the earth above the all-pervasive water.

Totemism also points to the Santal's sense of connection with the animal world. Among Santals, the concept of individual body substance cannot be uncoupled from one's membership to a clan and association with a totem. Every Santal clan is believed to have descended from a totemic animal, and this animal is supposed to be related to the birth and deeds of the ancestors of that clan. As a way of showing respect, the totemic animal is considered as a clan member and is never hunted or consumed. In fact, killing a totem is considered equivalent to killing a member of one's own clan, and even seeing a dead totem entails observing death rituals. Just as intra-clan marriage suggests pollution caused by incest, marriage between clans that share antagonistic totemic relations, for instance, the kingfisher (kisku) and the weed (marndi), where the former is the consumer and the latter the consumed, is also prohibited. By virtue of celebrating distinctiveness and specificity in terms of stories, totem, clothing, food and deities, the clans consciously avoid the possibility of overlapping into selfsameness through endogamous alliance.

The Santal believes in transmigration of souls. Being part hunter-gatherer and part agro-based settler, he values crops and fields as much as the forests. In fact, he sees hunting as a spiritual exercise, which is done under the guidance of the hunt priest or dihari, the spiritual and secular leader of a hunt. The dihari decides the day for commencing the hunt and the places where the hunters are supposed to spend the nights, and also arbitrates the disputes centering the claim of a game. For this community, it is never desirable to challenge the nature, such as by cutting or throwing stones at a tree when it is resting in the night, or by hunting a sleeping animal. A tree that has fallen in the Sarna cannot be taken away without the permission of the Pahan, and sacrifices have to be made before removing a tree from the Sarna, lest the spirits over there are hurt (Sinha 47). The Santal rears domestic animals as one's own offspring and inherits them as valuable assets. He does not deprive a calf of its mother's milk immediately after its birth for the fear of the latter cursing the householder.

A sense of environmental hygiene is intrinsic to the Santal social values, as one is not supposed to pass excreta in the open, which might dirty the abode of a deity (Hembram 122). His respect for the larger ecological system is understood from the Dimtang Puja, which entails the construction of a symbolic cattle-shed with Sal wood and leaves, and inside this structure images of cattle are kept on five small heaps of new rice (Sinha 53). Furthermore, the Santal's thankfulness and regard for the soul of animals that are potential sources of food is perceived from their act of not touching any creature with feet, lest its spirit is angered (Bhattacharyya 25). In hunting, the principal claimant of a game is the one who hits it first. However, the hunter is obliged to offer a small portion of the game to the deities and share his hunt with the village members, keeping only a certain part to himself. Apart from being a source of food, the parts of dead animals and plants are used for medicinal purposes. Moreover, animal paintings are used for rituals and are believed to dispel evil forces.

The Santal's spiritual beliefs are deeply interwoven with nature and natural forces. He believes that the human psyche alters with the climatic changes (Tudu 30). For example, Dharti Mai (literally: the Mother Land) is considered a female benevolent spirit who is revered by the entire community and is responsible for agricultural productions. Jaher Era or the Lady of the Sacred Grove, who is invoked for the goodness of the villagers and their cattle and crops, is benevolent and supposed to be concerned about the bodily needs of the Santals. The Jaherthan as represented by a grove, the Gosae era that is installed under a Mahua tree, and the Pargana bonga that is installed under a Sal tree – are all national bongas that epitomize the ritual unity and social solidarity of a village (Patnaik 144). Spirits are also represented through tactile objects of nature, such as a carved wooden post that symbolizes the Baranda-bonga, and a large stone in the shape of a lid that stands for the Mahadan-bonga. Apart from Bongas and deities, spirits are also believed to be present in atypical natural objects, such as gnarled bamboo-shoot, tree roots, unusually shaped hills and waterfalls. Though not worshipped, these spirits need to be exorcised with the help of shamans (Biswas 137). The Santal ensures his field's prosperity by planting Bhelwa and Mahadeo Jata in the middle of the paddy field, with rice tied up in a Bhelwa leaf packet at the top of the Bhelwa branch; whereas Bandai is an occasion for propitiating the cattle through washing their feet with raw milk and water, smearing their horns with oils, and offering sacrifices to deities for their wellbeing (Sinha 60-61). During the Jantal festival, the bonga for 'first fruits' is worshipped.

The Santal also believes in tree or jungle spirits (Dants), considered as the spirits of the ancestors whose ghosts have not been ritually brought back to the house owing to their abnormal death. Malevolent spirits like Bhula misguide people from the right path in the jungle, whereas chordeva affects the harvest of crops. The boundary spirits like Sima Bonga are made offerings to prevent draught and failure of crops. Similarly, Kisar Bonga is thought to cause disease, and if not got rid of in time, can 'eat up' an entire household. Some of the bongas, such as the Rongo Ruji manifests an acute obsession for sex and demands to be entertained with obscene songs and stories.

### Interface of Religion and Everyday:

There is an experiential and mundane dimension to the indigenous religiosity. A transactional relationship between the Santal and the bongas is realized from the myth that the Santals picked up the tradition of worshipping the latter from the abutting Munda tribe, only after the bongas helped them escape from Champa and saved the dignity of their maidens (Datta-Majumder 99).<sup>3</sup> Mary Douglas and other critics believe that Santali and other indigenous religions are based on neurotic dread, in other words, angst (Troisi 78). For instance, the Kharia holds sacred performances to get rid of pox, as pox is perceived as a wrath of the Mother Goddess or Mai Bimari. Similar ailments, such as head and stomach aches, are believed to be caused by a malevolent spirit called Chhitta. S.C. Roy (1937, 351-52) points out how khunt and Baghia spirits are offered sacrifices to protect man and cattle from wild animals and ensure the welfare of the villagers. The household and similar public-infested domains that are considered as the axes of everyday living also encompass the notion of the sacred. For example, Baa-Bid-Bid Puja, a worship related to the sowing of paddy, and Neo-dem or eating of the new crop are both performed in the kitchen of the Santal household. During these occasions, Burha-Burhi or the first ancestors are respectively offered bread of rice flour and beaten rice in the kitchen. In the same way, the akhra or training centre, the cattleshed, and the threshing ground are considered consecrated. Menstruating women are not allowed to enter the cattleshed. The courtyard of the Santal household is the site for organizing Jitiya and Raj-karma festivals. The Akhra is considered as the communal dancing platform located at the centre of the village, where boys and girls dance.

The Pauri from the Bhuiya community of Orissa believe that their village gods usually accompany them formless and invisible to the jungles for hunting, and also keep a watch on the crops. The interaction of these spirits and gods with the corporal world is conceived through a range of imageries and imaginations -- Gāi-srī, presented as an old lady in a reddish silk cloth, Thākūrāni presented as a female infant and a golden sword, and the Hill God as a stalwart male in regal robes riding a horse (Roy 1935, 209-210). These bongas and gods can reveal their wish for offering through dreams, hallucinations, or even possessing a person and speaking through him or her. What is more, in a Santali village, the religious heads are identified in parallel with the administrative leaders. This is understood from the fact that the Pargana Bonga is analogous to Parganait or the head of the Pargana, and the Manjhi Bonga is identified with Manjhi-Haram or the village head. In fact, Manjhi Bonga stands for the spirits of all the village headmen and is the only instance in the Santali religion, where the spirit of a living person is worshiped at an altar.

## 2. CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates the community-centric existence of the Santal, from which emerges a socialistic view of religion. For the Santal, religion is the symbol and expression of his collective living. His idea of the sacred generates from fear, anxiety and survival strategies, and is not limited to an impalpable higher being, but also responds to different components of nature. Indigenous groups such as the Santal perceive nature as complementing their being. This makes their understanding of religion and god sensory, inclusionary and a part of the mundane. They conceive different communal gatherings and festivities as well as birth, marriage and death rites in terms of bodily experience. For such an individual, the universe and the body share an inter-reciprocal relationship. The phenomenological essence of the Santal spirituality criticizes the modern fractured conception of the world that is essentially dualistic, mechanistic and hierarchical, and uncouples the body from the mind, culture from nature, and human from non-human. In being holistic and relational, it is reminiscent of Julia Russell's observation:

The nation exists in the context of all nations that make up the whole political body of humanity. And all of humanity exists in a biosphere that is the body of the whole Earth. We exist as part of a seamless whole in which everything is connected to everything else (quoted in Wilber 88).

3 It is believed that the Santal women's honour felt threatened by the notoreity of an infamous man called Madho Singh (Tudu 27).

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Rather than promoting divisive notions, the Santal philosophy of life dwells on the concept of harmony, egalitarianism, and 'this, here, now.'

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