

# Lifestyle of the Santal Tribe

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***Abstract***—The ancestors of the Santals are one of the largest ethnic communities in India. According to many anthropologists, they are of Proto-Australoid origin. They are mainly found in Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Meghalaya, Assam and Tripura. They are skilled in various arts including music, handicrafts and have a rich cultural heritage. Literature on their customs, traditions and culture is still scarce. The people of this community are mostly deprived of education and hence they pass on their traditions and customs orally from one generation to the next. The dances they perform, the clothes they wear, the festivals they celebrate, the deities they worship, the crafts they specialize in, the work they do have been compiled in the study. In addition, other traditional practices have been included in the study. Documentation is necessary for ethnic knowledge to avoid extinction. This study is an attempt to document the rich culture of the Santal society.

***Index Terms***—Santal, Hola, society, culture, literature, language, script.

## I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most populous tribal communities in India, the Santals are mainly found in the Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar and Balasore districts of the state of Odisha. Apart from this, they are also found in the neighbouring states of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar and Assam.

The word 'Santal' is derived from two words; Santa meaning peaceful and tranquil and Hal meaning people. In the past, the Santals led a nomadic life. They gradually came to settle in the Chotanagpur plateau from the Hihili Pipili. Towards the end of the 18th century, they entered the Santal Pargana of Bihar and then they came to Odisha. They speak the Santali language which belongs to the Munda group of the Austro-Asiatic subfamily. Santali has its own script which was invented by Pandit Raghunath Murmu called "Ol Chiki" script.

### Method

What I have written is not my own writing. To write this, I have asked some people from our village and read some books and magazines on Santali language and literature. I have collected a

lot of information, especially from the people in the village. I have written this after asking some kind-hearted people from Odisha, Bihar, West Bengal.

### History

According to the mythology of the Santal people, initially there was nothing on this earth. There was only water. All the gods sat at the Chanriya Mela in Sarg Puri and discussed how we could create a flat land in a place where there was water all around. Lita was responsible for all the responsibilities. When she said Lita, she meant the youngest. That is why everyone called her that and she also did most of the work. Finally, she took some dirt from her body and created two birds named Hansli and Hansli and gave them life. They got life and flew in the open sky. To bring them in, Lita created a Siram Karam tree. Those two birds nested in that tree and laid two eggs. From those two eggs, two newborn babies were born. Their names were Pilchu Halam and Pilchu Budhi. From Pilchu Halam and Pilchu Budhi, seven sons and daughters were born. From that, human beings gradually increased in number. Pilchu Halam and Pilchu Budhi were brother and sister. Without knowing it, Lita made the brother and sister drink drugs and brought them together.

Their seven younger brothers and seven sisters also married their brothers and sisters. They were given different clans and got married. They were married according to the Santal customs. Even now, marriages are being done according to that in the Santal society. First, people grew up in Hihili Pipili. They became holy in Sasang Bedha. They grew up in Hararat. In this way, they formed many clans. Starting from Hihili Pipili, they crossed Chai Disham, Champa Disham, Ayre Disham, Kayer Disham, Ganga river, Nile river and finally entered Sant Disham of Bengal. From that Sant Disham they came and called themselves Santal. At first, they were known as 'Kherwal' and then 'Hal'. From Sant Disham, the present states of Odisha, Bihar, West Bengal, Assam and Jharkhand are spread.

### Religion

Santal people are not Hindus. They have everything on their own. They have their own religion. They are not Hindus or Sikhs, Muslims, or Buddhists. The religion of Santal people is 'Sarna' religion. They call it 'Sarna' religion. They only give more importance and faith to their religion. All the worship and festivals are performed according to the rituals of 'Sarna' religion. They do not worship in any temple or mosque. They love nature and worship natural water, forests, mountains, and trees. Their place of worship is 'Jaher Gal'. They worship it by chanting. They do not worship 'Jaher Gal' by sweetening coconuts. There is a connection between religion and nature. Santal people follow a nature-based animalistic religion called Sarna. Their supreme god is Singh Bonga (or Thakur). They worship local spirits, ancestors, and gods at the Zaher Thana - a sacred grove of ancient sal trees located on the edge of the village.

#### Society-

Santal society is very different from the society of other people. Because they all live together in the village. The behavior of Santal people is very beautiful. A society is formed by all the people of their village. They live happily in the village by following some rules.

#### ସାମାଜିକ ଜୀବନ

#### Family-

Among the Santals, the family is the smallest social unit. It is patriarchal, patrilineal and patriarchal in nature, the father is the head of the family and he manages all the family affairs. The Santal family looks very beautiful. Father, mother, brothers, sisters and grandchildren all live in the same house but in different quarters. If a new child is born in the family, he is traditionally named after his grandfather. If a daughter is born, she is named after her grandmother. It will remain like this forever.

#### Childbirth:

A Santal couple always welcomes the birth of a child. A Santal woman observes certain taboos and prohibitions during her pregnancy. The husband of a pregnant woman never kills any animal or participates in any cremation ceremony. He is also forbidden to touch a dead body. A pregnant woman is not allowed to go to the forest alone and to mourn the death of her relatives. These restrictions are imposed only to protect the child from evil spirits. A traditional midwife called a 'Dhaai' is called for the delivery of the child. After the birth of the child, she cuts the umbilical cord and places the placenta in a hole in the right corner of the door of the room.

#### Birth Chhatiyar-

The mother is considered ritually impure to remain in seclusion in the bedroom until the birth rites or purification work is performed. During this time, she is not allowed to enter the kitchen or touch anyone. This ceremony is held on the fifth or seventh day after delivery. On this day, the midwife bathes the newborn and the mother. All the family members take a purifying bath, clean the clothes and house, and throw away the used earthenware vessels. The ritual ends after they are cleansed with rice powder. On that day, the naming ceremony is held. On this occasion, the midwife takes the baby and with the consent of all the family members, the name of a deceased ancestor from either the paternal or maternal side is chosen for the newborn. The five panchayats of all the villages present there bless the child. They are entertained with festive food and drinks.

#### Chacho Chhatiyar-

Chacho Chhatiyar is the most important festival of the Santals which marks the entry of a person into adulthood and membership of the society. It enables the person to take his place in the Santal society and participate in its rituals and festivals. Without it, no Santal can be married or cremated.

### Marriage (Bapla) Rituals

Marriage (Dapla) is one of the most important events in Santal society. It makes a person a full member of the community. From an economic point of view, a man gets a life partner who can help him with all financial matters. For marriage, certain traditional rules and regulations are followed. Marriage within the same clan and brother-brother marriages are prohibited. In Santal marriage, there is no age restriction. The bride can be younger, older or of the same age as the groom. There are mainly thirteen types of marriages in the Santal community. Out of these, Sange Bariyat marriage is the largest. The cheapest and most beautiful marriage is Kandel Napam Bapla (boy marries girl of his choice/love marriage).

The marriage negotiations are first initiated by the boy's side. The elders of both the parties meet several times to decide on the traditional bride price. The groom pays a bride price in both cash and kind, including some money, a cow/bull, three saris, one for the bride's mother, one for her parents, and the third for her father's sister. A date is fixed for the wedding.

### Death penalty

In the Santal society, after the death of a person, the family members are invited and they bury the body. After returning from the graveyard, they burn straw at the entrance of the village and take a smoke bath. The grieving family members of the deceased do not consume any meat during the funeral. Purification and cremation are performed within 2/3 days because the Santals believe that the soul of the deceased remains in the house and can harm the family members and the villagers until the funeral rites are performed. Therefore, they rush to cremate the body as soon as possible. Both burial and cremation are practiced in their society. The remains of the deceased are collected and placed in an earthen vessel and left in the hollow of a tree. Before the Makar festival, they immerse the bones in the 'Gaya River' which is called the Damodar Yatra. Nowadays, they immerse the bones of the deceased at the ghats of the rivers near their area.

### Food and Drink-

The Santals mainly depend on agriculture, so their main food is rice and curries. Rice is called "daka" and curries are called "utu". They like to eat pakhaal very much. In Santal, it is called "da mandi" and in Basi pakhaal "baske daka". Pakhaal is eaten in a brass vessel. Their rice curries are cooked in an earthen pot. Along with pakhaal, they eat vegetables from the house or forest fruits, leaves, and herbs that are fried. They do not eat very hygienically. They always eat normal things. They are connected to nature. When guests come to their house, they make dry rice and serve it on a plate made of palm leaves and they also eat it.

Handi, a traditional rice beer, holds cultural significance and is drunk during all major rituals and festivals. The Prasad pot of Sarna Dharam is worshipped by the Santal community in all their pujas.

### Fairs and Festivals

To please their gods and goddesses, the Santals celebrate many festivals throughout the year. Since the Santals are agrarian, their festivals are mainly related to various agricultural activities and some are related to hunting and gathering of forest produce. Their most important pujas are Erok-Sim, Haryal-Sim, Ir Sid, Jantal, Shabdai. Magh-Sim and Jantal which are related to agricultural work. Erok-Sim is worshipped at the beginning of sowing of seeds in the field. Haryal-Sim is worshipped/worshipped after sowing and harvesting of paddy. The first harvest is offered to the gods. Jantal, celebrated in the month of September, is the festival of the mountain gods and is celebrated to bring about the arrival of the rainy season. The first fruits of the Kharip crop are celebrated as “Nua Khii”. The Cow Festival, Shabdai, celebrated in the month of November, is one of the main festivals of the Santals. They worship cattle to increase their wealth. Magh-Seem, celebrated in the month of Magh (January-February), occurs at the end of the year. During the Bahu festival, the Santals offer flowers of the goddess Jaher, such as Mahul, wild flowers and flowers of the Shaal tree. Apart from this, festivals like Karam, Sakrat, Chitaun, Gamha are also celebrated with great pomp and show. During the festival, the Santals come to their homes and sit together, eat pies, lettuce and, as per the Santal tradition, drink a little from the pot.

Music and dance are the hallmarks of the Santal community. During festivals and harvest seasons, women dressed in traditional red-fronted, white saris dance to the beat of the dhol (tumda and tamak). The Santal community has seasonal dances and songs. Baha, Lagne, Danta, Rinja, Dahar, Dasanya, Firkal, Dang, Jika, Karam.... . The time of singing these dances and songs is also different. Dances and songs are performed according to the seasons in the Santal community. Their calendar revolves around nature and agriculture. They do not follow the calendar. They celebrate from the day the first moon is seen, to the full moon day and puja is also performed.

### Dress and Ornaments-

The traditional dress and personal adornment of the Santals distinguish them from other communities. The male members wear hand-woven cloth (kacha), banyan, shirt and napkin (gamuchha). On other days, they wear gamcha and lungi. The women wear green or blue check sarees (jhal sarees). The white and blue check sarees are worn during various rituals of the Santal community. It is the sarees that have made the identity of the Santals. They wear that saree during various festivals and perform their work. In Santali language, it is called ‘jhal’ sarees. The kacha and sarees have images of Santal tradition. They also weave all the sarees in silk. They buy them from hand weavers. Santal women wear ornaments like Sud Pashi (hair pin), Sikimala (coin necklace), Baju, Shankhachudi, Sakam, Satul (bangles), Painri, Har Mala, Kan Phul (pagara), Phuli, Paili, etc. Getting 'Tatu' (Shikha and Khoda) has become a tradition.

### Settlement and residence-

First of all, the Santal people settle down in the place where they identify themselves. It is called Atu Chiya. Worship is done according to Sarna Dharma. There are mainly agricultural fields, pastures, ponds, ponds and small and large hills around the Santal village. On one side of the

village is their worship place or 'Jaher Gal'. In the middle of the village is a cowshed. This is called Dharam Akhara. Here, the facilities of the village and worship are discussed. This is a holy place. Here, the use of toothpicks and wearing slippers is prohibited. The gods and goddesses of the village also gather at this holy place.

Generally, Santal villages are large and the number of families is from fifty to a hundred. Their houses, surrounded by the boundary, are arranged in a linear pattern on both sides of a wide village road. The village streets are always kept clean and tidy. The Santal houses are large, beautiful, clean and attractive, with multi-coloured paintings on the outer walls. The lower part of the walls is painted with black clay, the middle part with white clay and the upper part with red clay. The houses are multi-roomed and are tiled with local tiles (kharpar) or straw (busub). The walls are plastered with cow dung and mud. Each house has a long verandah and a pinda is made. Towards the corner of the main room, there is a sacred space called 'Bhitar' where the spirits of the ancestors are worshipped. The main room is divided by an earthen wall, which is used to store rice and other agricultural produce and is placed on a wooden platform. On one side of the main room are the kitchen, the living room, and the bedrooms. The houses are beautifully decorated.

#### Household items

The Santals have many household items in their homes. Such as beds made of sabaighas, threshing machines (ukhula), gudna, kharchalij, tatka, kula (hat), kankara poti, clay pot (tukuz), bamboo basket (tunki), rice container (bandi), broom (jan) dhinkhi etc.

Various types of musical instruments such as flute (tiriau), horn trumpet (saka), stringed instruments (banam), tumda, chalchuli, regela, bell-bell, tamak, dhak, kartal, jhamar, harmonium. Agricultural tools such as plough (nahel), joa (aran), leveler (algam), scythe (dataram), hoe (kudi), guitar (kakuwa), sabal.

Hunting tools such as bows (Ag) and arrows (Sar), spears (Barchi), sacrifice axes (Kapi), knives (Khaku).

Fishing tools such as jigs, snails (Tardang), janjid, feka, tul nets are found.

#### Life and livelihood

The main occupation of the Santals is farming. They mostly spend their lives farming. They farm according to the season. They depend a lot on paddy cultivation. After harvesting the paddy, they save it in a pot. They make their sons and daughters work in farming. During the kharif season and the rainy season, they cultivate various types of vegetables, oilseeds, pulses, fruits. They also keep various types of animals at home. Such as cows, goats, sheep, chickens, ducks. They earn their living by selling them. Along with this, they also do various handicrafts. The livelihood of the Santals is really very beautiful.

Additionally, they earn some money by collecting small forest products such as tree roots, bark, fruits, tubers, green leaves, barley grass, honey, honey flowers, etc. They collect kendu leaves from

the forest and tie them up or sell them. Which allows them to be cared for for 3 to 4 months a year.

### Social System

The Santals have a well-established village organization. It functions at the village, inter-village (Atu or Pulashi Atu) and regional (Dism) levels. The village is considered the smallest and most important unit at the ground level. There is a traditional village council (Atu Sangha Hol) which consists of functionaries such as Majhi (village head), Yoga Majhi (sub-village head), Parnik (assistant to the village head), Gadet (news bearer), Naike (village priest). All the heads of families are members of the village council. The Majhi presides over the village council meetings and resolves all disputes related to theft, disputes, divorce, division of property, adoption of children, land disputes, violation of social customs, traditions, etc. at the village level. The council meets in the village hall. If the dispute is not resolved here, then the headman and the arbiter of that neighboring village come and resolve it. However, if it is not resolved, the Pil Parganas take the case. The final decision is the "lobby" decision. If the dispute is not proven, then he is socially ostracized from the village. He will be deprived of the support of the villagers.

### Santali language

Santali is an Austroasiatic language of the Munda subfamily, spoken by about fifteen million people, mainly in the Indian states of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha, Bihar, Assam, Manipur, and Sikkim. There are also Santali communities in Bangladesh and Nepal. It is one of the twenty-two official languages of India and carries an important cultural heritage for the Santali people, the third largest tribal group in the country. Historically, Santali was mainly an oral language until the arrival of British missionaries, who began documenting it in the Latin script during colonial times. In the early 20th century, a scholar named Pandit Raghunath Murmu developed the "Olchiki" script specifically for Santali, which has become the most common writing system for the language. It has evolved into various dialects as speakers have mixed with different linguistic communities. In recent decades, there has been a revival movement for the promotion and teaching of the Santali language in schools, which has led to its presence in modern literature and the media. The language is not only a means of communication but also an important aspect of Santali identity and cultural expression.

Santali is an Austroasiatic language spoken by about minimum 15 million people, mainly in India (Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar) and the Santali community in neighboring Bangladesh and Nepal. It is the most widely spoken Munda language, recognized under the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India, and is written in the unique Ol Chiki script.

Santhali is one of India's most ancient living languages and is among the 22 languages protected under the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution, having been added via the 92nd Amendment Act in 2003.

### Olchiki script

Olchiki was developed by Pandit Raghunath Murmu in 1925 to provide a scientific and dedicated writing system to Santali. Key linguistic features include: Specially designed for Santali 30 Letters Representing Vowels and Consonants Each symbol directly corresponds to a specific word Accurately captures glottal stops and unique acoustic elements Unlike the adapted script, Olchiki provided a linguistically accurate and culturally original means of written expression. The introduction of OlChiki was a turning point in the evolution of Santali as a written language. By providing a script rooted in linguistic authenticity, it enabled language to transition from a purely oral medium to a structured written form. The script made it possible to record vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation with accuracy. It also facilitated the standardization of language use, thereby supporting teaching, translation, and publication.

Unique Features- Unlike traditional Indic writing systems (which are abugidas, where vowels are secondary diacritics), OlChiki is a true alphabet.

One Symbol, One Sound- It consists of exactly 30 letters—dividing vowels and consonants equally where each letter maps distinctly to a single sound.

No Conjuncts- Unlike Devanagari or Bengali, OlChiki uses no conjunct letters, resulting in a cleaner structure.

Cultural Symbolism- The shape of the characters often mimics natural objects, human actions, or things culturally familiar to the Santal people.

Unique Diacritics- The script employs specialized diacritics for features like aspiration, nasalization, and vowel prolongation, including the "ahad" (a deglottalization

## II. SANTALI LITERATURE

### Oral and Folk Literature (Pre-1854)-

For centuries, the Santali language was entirely oral, with knowledge, mythological stories and social values being passed down from generation to generation. This ancient narrative contains a wealth of highly poetic creation mythological stories, supernatural tales and riddles, parables and folk songs.

### Missionary Period (1855-1940)-

Written Santali literature emerged from the mid-to-late 19th century through the efforts of European scholars and missionaries. They adopted it in Latin, Bengali and Odia scripts and documented the language.

### Modern Literature (1947- )

Santali literature has flourished in the post-independence era, benefiting from the inclusion of the language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 2003. Now the literature of the Santali language has come a long way. They are writing in their own script, in their own script. The government has also extended its hand of cooperation on how to further develop the literature

of the Santali language. Starting from the Sahitya Akademi Award to the Padma Shri Award, writers are being awarded.

#### Santal Uprising - 1855-56

The Santal Uprising, also known as the Hull, occurred between 1855 and 1856. It was a significant uprising by the Santal tribal community against the oppressive revenue system and exploitation by the British authorities and the local landlords (zamindars). The uprising was led by two brothers, Sidhu Murmu and Kanhu Murmu, who belonged to the Santal tribe. They were early leaders who encouraged their community to fight for their rights and against systematic exploitation. The Santals were forced to revolt due to exploitation, high taxes and land grabbing by the landlords, moneylenders and the British colonial administration. Therefore, Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu are associated with this uprising. During the uprising, Sidhu and Kanhu called upon their community to take up arms against the British. They declared that they would establish a Santal state free from British oppression and exploitation. The rebellion spread rapidly in the Rajmahal Hills of the present-day Indian states of Jharkhand, Bihar, and West Bengal. The Santals received considerable support from other tribal groups and farmers. The British eventually suppressed the rebellion with the help of military force. Despite its defeat, the Santal Rebellion is remembered as a symbol of resistance against colonial oppression and exploitation. The rebellion led to changes in British administrative policies, especially regarding tribal and rural communities, which highlighted the repressive nature of their system.

### III. CONCLUSION

In short, the Santals are not a static community but a dynamic, evolving society in flux. Although they face persistent challenges related to economic marginalization and forest conservation, their resilience, rich cultural identity, and rising educational attainment point towards a future of empowerment and sustainable development.

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