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Chapter - 4
**A Study on the Folklore of the Santhals in
Relevance to Their Folktales and Superstitions**

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Chapter - 4

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Abstract

The Santhals are one of the largest tribes in India spread across eight states in India and other neighbouring countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh and Myanmar. They are rich in cultural heritage as well as folklore. This study evaluates the folklore of the Santhals in particular their folktales and superstitions. Most of their folktales are related to their surroundings and beliefs. Their beliefs include their superstitions or beliefs in spirits they worship. Although, superstitions lack logical or scientific explanations, they however strongly choose to believe them. Their tales involve animals or other natural figures, indicating their strong bonding with nature. Till today the Santhals live in close association with nature and reside near forests and rivers. These superstitions are still considered even today and they are performed with fear.

Keywords: beliefs, folklore, folktale, Santhal, superstition

Introduction

A country as vast and ancient as India is rich in folktales. Folklore studies have roots in the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and philological studies. The word was coined British scholar William Thomas in 1846 ^[1]. Folktales exercise a powerful influence over the people. Earlier folktales were collected casually or for literary interests. However, during the 1970s that Indian folklorists trained in the US conducted scientific studies and classified Indian folklore, according to different schemes ^[2].

People should know what folktales really are and why they are still need to be read or heard. Research has been done on various tribes and their folk tales and they also have been published. However, there exists very little available literature on the Santhal folk tales. Folk tales are made known orally from one generation to the next. They are told in different forms, though many of them are similar. Folklore is also a means of applying social

pressure to fulfil a particular agenda and it also exercises social control over the people.

Superstition is “a behaviour which does not have a clear technical function in the execution of skill, yet which is believed to control luck and/or other external factors” ^[3]. They are a common phenomena in human society ^[4] and rely on numbers, forces, or astrology to make what they believe is the only right decision ^[5]. The reasoning behind the use and origins of an individual’s superstitious behaviour in various populations are unknown. Research explaining how and why an individual decides to believe in the power of superstition is scanty.

The Santhals have a rich heritage and have retained their language, institutions, tribal organization and religion. Santhal folk tales are divided into two classes based on their origins, one is purely from Santhal culture in origin and the other is absorbed from external sources. Those of the first class are the most numerous, and they throw a flood of light upon their social customs and traditions besides showing the superstitious awe. The second class consists of a large number of the more popular tales prevalent among the Hindus and semi-Hinduised Santhals.

Folktales

A Folktale is the product of societies which are based on agriculture and are also intermediate in complexity between the simple hunts-gatherer communities and the class specialized states. They reflect the life of the people belonging to ethnic societies, their beliefs, customs, cultures and way of life. However, tales which have been handed down from ancestors are also narrated by mothers to their children in several ethnic societies, with the specific purpose of enforcing taboos and imparting lessons. Folktales are used to transmit and preserve cultural values of the group ^[6].

Folktales are usually traditional oral narratives comprising of stories related to legends, history, tales etc. Stories usually portray an individual as a hero and people with certain behaviours like laziness, greed, selfishness are portrayed negatively and get punished. On the other hand people portrayed with characters such as honesty, caring, loving etc. are rewarded.

Folktale does have so much value and there are reasons why folktales are being told as should be told. They are narrated to children in families during mealtime to make children eat more or during the bed times to put them to sleep and also to make them hate evil and to instil a good character in them. They are also told to keep the adults awake for instance when farmers go to guard their crops at night or when shepherds take their

cattle for grazing during the day. Folktales usually carry a positive message and convey moral values. They are also told to educate children in the cultural and traditional values of the society. Folktales can be classified into various schemes like, romantic tales, tales of magic, etc. Every folktale would have different cycle and each cycle would have different kinds of categories such as, male or women centred tales, tales about families, tales about fate, death, gods, demons, ghosts or clever person and animal based tales ^[2].

Male and female centred tales

In male centred tales, men are the heroes. They take up responsibility and are hardworking. Their perseverance and patience later gets paid off. He usually leaves home in search of wealth or to complete a task encountering many obstacles which are like tests for him before he reaches his goal. Towards the end he is victorious and rewarded with wealth or a bride. The journey usually would be long with dangers in the form of animals, witches, people or supernatural beings.

In women centred tales, women are the heroes. She is depicted as a hardworking and responsible for rescuing men or mending relationships through her wit and sacrifices. In these tales, men are considered weak or stupid and controlled by a female character such as their mothers or their wives.

In “*The Invention of the Plough*” ^[7] (Santali), the Haram (the old man or the father of all Hor or being), tells Thakran (mother of all Hor or being) that he is going to the forest to explore a good piece of wood with which he might be able make a plough. The old woman tells him not to take much time, and that he should get back home soon. The old man doesn’t get back as advised, so the old woman sends messages through some mosquitoes to get the old man back home soon. Later she sends a tiger with the same message but this doesn’t work either. Finally the haram gets back with the plough on his shoulder. The Thakran takes the plough and throws it away, breaking it into many pieces. She then tells the Haram that making the plough wasn’t his task or power. She then goes to the forest and makes a plough with a single piece of wood and gets back. It does not break even after it was thrown down. The Haram then blesses Thakran and all the women community that they are free from the hard labour of ploughing the land and even touching the plough will be a taboo and this is continued even today.

The tale shows the superior intelligence of a woman and makes the men look weak and stupid. The tale also indicates that ploughing is for men and women are not supposed to touch the plough even. This practice is being followed even today and women are forbidden from even touching the plough although, they are involved in other household activities. The tale also depicts the task or responsibility of a man to till the land and take the responsibility to feed his family. It also indicates that women fold should not be given heavy tasks to perform. Such tales have contributed to reduce the women abuse in homes. Women are thought as witty and they are supposed to advise men on how they should work and carry out other activities.

Tales about families

Family tales revolve around relationships in a family and include relationships between brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, sisters and brothers-in-law, sons and daughters-in-law, mothers and fathers-in-law and often around contrasting and trouble causing set of relations. According to Ramanujan, such tales explore not only bonds of love and affection, but also of betrayal, rivalry and cruelty ^[8].

“The Seven Brothers and their Sister” ^[9] (Santali) is a Santhal folktale about how the brothers sacrifice their own sister just to get water from a tank. According to the tale, the seven brothers involve in digging a well to make their name known. In spite of their deep digging, they do not find water. They then see a Jogi Gorae who is a wise man and they began narrating their ordeal to him. The Jogi then advises them saying that, to make water gush out from the well, they must sacrifice their only sister to the spirit of the well. In spite of her being their only sister they all agree to sacrifice her except for the youngest brother who doesn’t fully approve of their decision. The brothers then plan and in the evening they tell their mother that when their sister comes to bring them food the next day, she must be wearing clean clothes, be well dressed, neatly comb her hair, put on all her ornaments and come with the food near the well. The following day the mother tells her daughter to do accordingly. She does as advised and sets out for the well digging area carrying boiled rice for her brothers in a new basket. On her arrival, the brothers ask her to get them water from the well although there was no water. On-going to the tank she doesn’t find any water but she sees the sheen of water in the centre and goes down to fill the pitcher, however, suddenly, the water rises rapidly drowning her. Later, the brothers go home and tell the whole incident to their mother who on hearing begins to mourn the loss of her daughter.

This tale shows both cruelty and betrayal. Cruelty, because they did not pity even their only sister. The seven brothers were selfish and wanted name and fame at any cost. They also lied to their mother and betrayed their sister who was both innocent and obedient. She was totally unaware that her brothers had planned to sacrifice her to the spirit of the well. The story is also a way of making one aware of problems or complications that may arise even in a family. Although family relationships are considered very close, there are possibilities that complications could arise. Greed for money, name and fame are not hated by everyone. It also implies that someone's loyalty or innocence should not be taken as their weakness, instead they should be respected. It also implies that lying to parents is also evil. The mother could have given them a better advice, had they consulted her. Hence it is always advisable to take the consent of the parents before taking someone else's consent to do any task. The tale also implies to love and consider family relationship as sacred.

Tales involving supernatural forces

Magic is usually a vital component of folktales. In these tales, men and women often have the capacity to transform themselves into any other powerful character or other forms. Such characters make the listeners astonished or wonder. The Santhals strongly believe in spirits and worship them. Hence such characters are usually found in their folktales. Some spirits are considered to be good and helpful whereas others are terrifying and wicked. However, it is always the good that wins over the evil.

Animal tales

Tales on animals are the oldest and most well-known tales. They are meant specially to make children understand and differentiate between good and bad. They are usually informative. The use of animals as human characters is done to highlight attitudes and behaviours of certain people in a way jovial way projecting their actions in real lives. Animals are used as tools to convey messages to the people without personalising any individuals for rebuke. It is in fact a clever and a safe way of interpreting anything particularly to children and is free of discrimination or stereotyping of any kind. In addition, such representations make it easy for children to easily understand the moral of the story.

Such tales also portray relationship between humans and animals. Animals are often depicted as helpful such as animal nurses who rear humans after they have been abandoned as infants. In some animal tales, the animal repays with its life in return for an act of kindness performed by a

human. The relationship between humans and animals then is often perceived to be mutually beneficial, as the animal's life is spared. In some cases, the animal is transformed into a human resulting from an act of kindness it had done or received.

"The story of a tiger" ^[9], a Santali tale, is an example of a helpful animal's tale, where a jackal helps the humans and on the other hand, the tiger fools the humans by promising one of them that it would not eat them up. The tiger here falls into a quagmire and gets stuck, and when he sees the shepherds passing by, he asks them to help him get out of the quagmire. They agree to help him out, but with a condition that he should not eat them up. Once they help the tiger come out, the tiger changes his word and says that he will devour them since it is his nature. The humans then ask the trees of the forest, if it was right for the tiger to eat them. All the trees reply by saying that men are not good, because they cut down trees and they return evil for good, hence it is fit for them to be eaten by the tiger. The humans then ask a cow, who replies with the same answer. Finally, they ask a jackal for his opinion who replies wittily. The jackal asks the tiger to show how it fell into the quagmire. The tiger agrees to do so, and it gets trapped in the quagmire again. The jackal then tells the humans to pelt stones on the tiger and kill it.

The tale shows the power of nature and also the power of animals. Though all the trees and the cow agree that humans are not good, it is only towards the end we see that it is the jackal that outwits the tiger, though the tiger is more powerful than the jackal. This tale comes with a moral, never to trust anybody. Although the response from the cows and trees saying that humans were rude, were correct, it makes the listener introspect on their activities against nature. The tale instils a love for nature. The Santhals live in close association with nature and totally dependent on it for their survival, hence such tales are very common in their folktales. They are nature lovers and till today prefer to stay in areas surrounded with nature.

Superstitions

Animal related

A bird called *Piacere*, when its cries are "*Pia Pia*" indicate that visitors such as friends, family etc. will arrive and this sound is melodious to hear whereas when it cries "*Cher Cher*" denotes the some sickness or death might happen in the family.

When a cock crows at night indicates a bad omen. It is a sign that sickness could happen in the family. To nullify it, either the comb is cut of or it is killed immediately in one single breath.

When a dog drags his anal region on the ground, it indicates something bad will happen. To nullify this, the dog is beaten and its cry from the pain is thought to ward off the evil that is bound to happen. Although it is known that dogs drag their anal region to relieve themselves from itching resulting from parasitic infections or other irritations.

The heads of cobra killed on Tuesdays and Sundays are thought to have medicinal value. The heads are dried and kept for future usage.

Snake called as “Bandipora” (Krait) when it crosses a bund in a field, it is thought to break open. Also, when this snake is killed, it is buried in a circular fashion and a thread is kept upon it in the same fashion. After a few days, the bones of the snake form a necklace in the thread that was kept upon it.

Another snake called “Boda” which is a python, when it encircles a cow and drinks its milk results in more milk production on the cow. Another snake called “Kari naggin” causes grass to die on its treaded path. It is also thought to have a light of its own.

Also, while on a tree, one should not pluck the fruits and eat. It is thought to cause the tree to produce less fruit henceforth. Also, women folk are not allowed to touch the plough or climb a roof top. While making a parkom, which is a traditional handmade cot, it has to be made in one day and each strap indicates life and death. They start with life and has to end in life and not death. Hence, the total number of straps in the parkom must be an odd number.

Instruments related

During a heavy rainfall, in the occurrence of heavy hail stone falling, members of the family throw any metal instruments such as axe, machete, while holding the breath. Doing this is thought reduces the storm intensity.

In the instance of a hail storm, rice mixed with salt is thrown separately while inside the house. This is thought to reduce the size of the hail stones.

Natural phenomena related

During a lunar eclipse, trees, plants are beaten lightly and this is thought to make the plants bear more fruits. Also barren women are beaten lightly and this is thought to make them bear child in the near future.

At the end of the year, 12 Colocasia leaves are tied, each indicating a month of the coming New Year. They are opened the next day and based on the presence of materials inside the leaves, events that are bound to happen

throughout the year are predicted. In case a leaf assigned a particular month has water, it indicates floods during that month. Presence of dust indicates that a storm might happen. If nothing is present, it indicates a normal month.

After a harvest, some grains are kept for plantation in the next year. In case these kept grains are healthy, it indicates that the harvest will be good and plenty. In case, there is a hole caused by insects or other modes in the anterior tip or head of the rice grain, it indicates more rains will occur early. Hole in the mid portion indicates that abundant rain will occur during the mid of the season and a hole in the posterior end indicates that more rains will occur towards the end of the season.

After boiling rice grains, if the grains still germinate, it is considered a bad omen. To nullify it, one is supposed to do a puja called as Karam puja. Doing this is thought to ward off the evil that is supposed to happen.

Human related

Some women are considered to possess powers and witchcraft knowledge. They are thought to be normal women but secretly perform supernatural activities. They are called *ad Dan* and are thought to feed on the liver and heart of other people while they are still alive. The ones they feed on are thought to die slowly. Such women meet at nights under Banyan trees or other big trees and they sit on the tree which acts as a vehicle to ferry them to a place called *Kundli pukhri*, where *Dan* women from other places also gather to discuss their activities. The tree is brought back within the same night after the discussion is over. When she leaves her home at night, she leaves a lookalike structure of herself in the bed to make others realize that she is still in the bed asleep.

The Santhals believe in the presence of men and women from other realms. Such men are called as *Bonga Kura* and such women are called as *Bonga Kuri*. Several village members have claimed to have witnessed their occurrence among other village members particularly during events such as weddings and festival seasons. *Bonga Kuris* are thought to involve in dance greatly. Village members have also reported to instances when such forms are encountered by members of the village and at times they fall in love with mortals. They usually appear at night and one cannot differentiate them easily. It is believed that once a mortal falls in love with them, they are taken away into the other realm by the *Bonga Kura* or *Bonga Kuri*. Even today, several villagers have claimed to see them and have had vivid encounters with them. It is believed that the ones who play flute are usually prone to get lost in forests, other paths with trees which is believed to be caused by a

spirit which takes them away to their realm. It is believed that once he is taken away in spirit, he is made to get wedded and stay there. Whereas, his body at his original place slowly begins to die. Sometimes, it is said that one can also return from that realm.

Conclusions

This study has brought out how the community has maintained their culture, tradition, customs and their religion. Through their social background study, it can be said that they are originally hunters and dwellers in the jungle. In most of their folktales we get to know that they mostly lived near forests and depended on it for their food. We also get to see that the social organization is very complete. Through their folktales their culture is studied and their history also can be traced. A folktale is an oral tradition, passed on from people to people, and stories about the Santhal community is also passed on similarly and that is how we get to know their history. Their indigenous beliefs can also be studied in their folktales and tells much the Santhal community. Their folktales bring out about the different types of gods and goddesses the community worships. Looking at them through their creativity, also gives us certain ideas about the tribe.

Folktales, which refer to the stories that have been passed down from the ancestors of a particular group of people to the younger generations. Folk tales are a part of folklore, where folklore refers to the traditional beliefs and stories of a community. They include the stories that belong to a group of people that is passed down orally. Folk tale can include adventure stories, fairy tale, historical tales and even ghost tales. Folk tales can be quite different from one another and do not belong to the same genre.

The Santhal folk tales, unlike other folk tales show superstitious awe. The tales from other sources have been modified by the Santhal to suit their language. Just like other folk tales, Santhal folk tales mostly have humans as main characters and some of the characters also have special powers. They also have supernatural elements. In the Santhal society women have to perform all the household work. Moreover, there are many taboos against women and it can be seen in the folktales. Like every folk tales, even the Santhal folk tales provide the listener moral values. Superstitions exist with the intention of making ones word done easily. Such thoughts instil fear in a person and compel them to perform a desired task.

It has also observed in this study that the history of written Santhali literature is a short one, though it was started during the British rule in India. In fact Santhali folk literature can be considered as the main Santhali

literature even today. In the past, older people used to convey the stories and different culture-traits to the younger generation orally. This tradition is now almost dead and it is necessary that folk tales be kept alive, since tells us about the way life was for the common man. It is folktales and folklores which remembers the hopes, fears, dreams and details of everyday life. They tell us our history they describe, where we lived, what are our values and ultimately who we are.

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