



From Oral To Written: The Role Of Missionaries In Development Of Santhali Language And Literature

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ABSTRACT

Behind every language and literature, there is a history of creation and development. Santhali language & literature are also not beyond it. This article explores missionaries' significant contributions to the Santhali language and literature development. Santhali, spoken by the indigenous Santhal community, was largely an oral language until the arrival of Christian missionaries in the 19th century. These missionaries, driven by a desire to spread Christianity, recognized the importance of language in cultural preservation and evangelization. They developed a written script for Santhali, translated religious texts, and encouraged local writers to produce literary works. This article examines the missionary-led initiatives that helped standardize Santhali orthography, grammar, and vocabulary, and also highlights the pioneering efforts of Santhali writers who produced poetry, stories, and plays. The study reveals that missionary involvement played a crucial role in elevating Santhali from a marginalized oral tradition to a recognized literary language, thereby contributing to the culture and social empowerment of the Santhal community.

Keywords - SANTHAL, LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, MISSIONARIES, DEVELOPMENT.

Introduction

Santhal or Santal are one of the largest tribal groups of the pre-Aryan period residing in the Indian subcontinent. According to many Anthropologists, they belong to the Proto-Australoid race. They are found mostly in Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Chattisgarh, Assam, and in some areas of Bihar and Nepal. They have their own distinct art culture, customs, and traditions which they have been following since ancient times. The name of the community is Santals or Santhals. According to Sreksfrud (1968) "the word Santal is a corruption of the word Saontar. This was adopted by the Santals when they lived in the area around Saont in the Midnapur district of West Bengal. The word Santal is an English word adopted from Hindi which corresponds with Saontar used by Bengali-speaking people"¹. Ordinarily they call themselves hor (man). There is another similar term hor which

stands for the way or means. A hor (man) is in search of hor (way or means) and effort continues till he finds a satisfactory result². They also call themselves as hor hopon which means child or children of human beings.

Interestingly Santhals are one of the tribal people who have maintained their aboriginal language till now. Santhali language belongs to the Munda, Ho, Mahli, Bhumij, and Kharia family of languages. "Peter W Schmidt has classified these groups as the Austro-Asiatic language group.

As the Santals belong to the Munda family of languages, they have been classified by Anthropologists as Pre-Dravidians, Kolarians, Dravidians, Proto-Australoids, Nishadies and Austriacs."³ At present more than 7 million people speak this language and now having a distinct unique script of their own they also practice it in writing. They developed their Script named Ol Chiki, in the first half of the twentieth century, it was developed by Raghunath Murmu in 1925, Unlike conventional Indian scripts, Ol Chiki or Santhali script is alphabetic, and does not share any of the syllabic properties of the other Indic scripts such as Devanagari. It uses 30 letters and five basic diacritics. It has six basic vowels and three additional vowels, generated using the GahlaTudag.

But this awareness and changes of documenting their culture, and having their script do not come overnight to this tribal community, although the Santhali language is very rich on its own having folktales, songs for various occasions, riddles, myths, proverbs, legends, and much more but sadly they used to follow the oral culture of transferring their knowledge so we do not find written literature till 19th century, it was Christian missionaries we should give credits for going to this tribal areas, trying to understand their language and culture and at the same time documenting them, although their main purpose was to mingle with them and propagate Christianity to these tribal communities, but they did understand the value of their traditions and customs and tried their best to record them. From here we can see the growth and development of proper written Santhali literature.

The missionary work among the Santals was initiated around 1850 and gradually the missionaries conceived a unanimous adaptation of writing the Santali language in Roman script. Among these missionary scholars, the work of Lars Olsen Skrefsrud and Paul Olaf Bodding stands unrivaled.

Both of these pioneers collected most of their data from areas around Dumka in the Santal Parganas of Bihar (now Jharkhand), L.O. Skrefsrud from his arrival in 1869 up to his death in 1910, and P.O. Bodding from his arrival in 1890 until he returned to Scandinavia in 1934 completely devoted themselves to these ethnic people and their culture, they found them very fascinating and vibrant. Skrefsrud and Bodding worked on a wide range of topics such as grammar, lexicography, folklore, and anthropological descriptions of the Santals. One of their most precious legacies is Bodding's Santal Dictionary, published in five volumes between 1932 and 1936. It was based on Skrefsrud's vocabulary of 13,000 words which had been more than doubled during Bodding's work. This dictionary contains a valuable source of information about the Santals. Bodding did not limit the account to a list of translations but offered ethnographic descriptions of various kinds in the articles as well as monographs⁴.

Some Prominent Missionaries and Their Contribution

Lars Olsen Skrefsrud who has done so much to promote Santhali literature and culture in the initial stage, was a Norwegian missionary belonging to the Lutheran Church and came from the parish of Fåberg situated north of Lillehammer in Oppland, Norway. As a young man he was imprisoned for three years, and during his incarceration started to both read the Bible and study languages. Upon his release, he studied at the missionary school of Johannes Evangelista Goßner in Berlin, where he was prepared for his mission⁵. In 1863, he left for India. Together with Hans Peter Børresen, he is regarded as the founder of the Norwegian Santal Mission. He settled in Benagaria village of now Dumka district of Jharkhand in 1867 and remained here till his death. When he started residing here, he sensed the need for knowledge of the customs and institutions of these tribal people and immediately took up the work to record them also He mastered Bengali, Sanskrit as well as Santhali language. In the year 1873 Skrefsrud published A Grammar of the Santhal Language, a work That has had an important influence on all later treaties on the Santal language and it is still a standard work. He was an excellent linguist

and a practical phonetician. he used Bengali characters for writing Santhali. He also opened a Santhali printing press in Benagaria in 1879. By 1880, he had made the first translation of the New Testament, which for unknown reasons he never published. He started a new translation ten years later, which his successor Paul Olaf Bodding helped to complete and which appeared in print in 1906. In 1887 Skrefsrud published in Santali the book 'Horkoren Mare Hapramko Reak' Katha – 'The Traditions and Institutions of the Santals', it was originally published in the Santali text but was edited by Sten Konow, later translated with notes and additions and published by P.O. Bodding in 1942. which over time became a guide for Santals in customary matters and was also referred to by Indian courts when customs were in dispute. Skrefsrud also started collecting material for a Santali dictionary and collected more than 13000 words but due to time crisis bequeathed his work to Bodding who completed it. This book 'Horkoren Mare Hapramko Reak' Katha – 'The Traditions and Institutions of the Santals' not only guides in customary matters of Santhal but also holds a great ethnological value⁶. According to P.O. Bodding 'the original work was taken down by Skrefsrud from the mouth of an old guru, named Kolean and according to a statement towards the end of the book the dictation was finished on the 15th of February, 1871'. In the words of P.O. Bodding, "Skrefsrud once told me, that he had hunted everywhere among the Santals to find a man who knew his people and their traditions and customs, and that Kolean without comparison was the best authority he had been able to find. Skrefsrud further told me, that the book contains absolutely nothing of his own, the whole being a faithful record of Kolean's words and language"⁷.

The other most prominent missionary who contributed to the development of Santhali literature was as mentioned above P.O. Bodding, he was also a Norwegian missionary settled in Mohulpaharia village. He easily and passionately mingled with these tribal people they became so fond of him that starting calling him 'Bodding Kora'⁸ means Bodding boy in Santhali. He precisely gave all his life to the Santhal community understanding their cultural customs and lifestyle and recording them in various forms like books, articles, monographs, grammar and a dictionary. Santal Dictionary, published in five volumes over 1932-36, is a comprehensive encyclopedia of everything that concerns the Santals. The author's intention in bringing out this work was, as, to show the Santal—how he thinks, speaks, and understands life⁹.

"For his literary work, he usually had a group of co-workers (from two to six) whom he referred to as his 'living dictionary'. Sido of Ambajora village was the leader of the group assisting Paul Olaf Bodding with his work on the massive 'Santal Dictionary', which was his main aim at that time. These workers who were literate were of great help in collecting and writing the stories and folklore. One of them – Sagram Murmu from Mohulpahari was considered to be an expert writer and it is he who has documented most of the stories collected by Paul Olaf Bodding¹⁰.

His one of the most remarkable work on santhal tribe was Studies in Santal Medicine and Connected Folklores, published by Asiatic society of Bengal in three part, first in 1925, second in 1927 and third in 1940, naming - The Santal Disease; Studies in Santal Medicine and Connected Folklores; and How the Santal Lives, consecutively. These monographs covers various aspects of santhali life and enriched the Santhali literature. He also wrote Santal Folktales which are the authentic folktales he had listened to and collected from his co-workers or from villagers around his area. There are over 93 Folk Tales published in three volumes sorted according to their Subject matters, and also translated into English. To maintain the authenticity of the tales in santhali he placed the narrator inside the story witnessing and describing it while in English translation the storyteller was placed outside the setting of the story and thus these efforts make his collection quite authentic and unbiased.

Beside this P.O Bodding has written in santhali language too and translated many of his English work in santhali also, like

Kuk'li Puthi written in santhali was a book of riddles, published in two additions in 1899&1935 respectively. He has also written Santal Folktales in their native language named as Hor Honsiko which was published by Benagaria Mission Press in 1924. In English he wrote A Santal Grammar for Beginners, published in 1929, Traditions and Institutions of the Santals which he published after he returned to his country from Oslo in 1942.

This book was the translation of Skrefsrud's *Mare Hapramko*. He also wrote many articles in English in different renowned journals like

The Meaning of the words 'Burus' and 'Bongas' in Santali for Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society, in March 1926.

Further Notes on 'Burus' and 'Bongas' (Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society, June 1926)

Witchcraft among the Santals (Oslo Ethnographical Museum, 1940)

A Note on the 'Wild People' of the Santals (Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, New Series, 27 1931)

Santal Riddles (Oslo Ethnographical Museum, 1940)

The Different Kinds of Salutations Used by the Santals (Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 67 (3) 1898)

The Taboos and Customs connected therewith among the Santals (Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 67 (1) 1898)

Ancient Stone Implements in Santal Parganas (Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 70 (2) Pt.3 1901)

Shoulder-Headed and Other Forms of Stone Implements in the Santal Parganas (Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 73 (2) Pt.3 1904)

Some Remarks on the Position of Women among the Santals ((Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society, Patna – 2, September 1916).

He has also written Notes on Santals in the Census of India document.

Andrew Campbell was also one of the missionaries who resided in Santhal-dominated areas and contributed to the enhancement of the Santhali language and literature. He was a Scottish missionary and spent the greater part of his life in Pokhuria in the Manbhum district in the colonial era. He wrote mostly on folktales, edited his Santali-English dictionary in 1899 and later on also wrote an English-Santali dictionary, making it easier for both people who wanted to read Santali or English.

W.J.Culshaw's book *Tribal Heritage*, and his articles have helped a lot in promoting a better understanding of Santal's religious beliefs and practices. Rev. Johannes Gausdal's book, *The Santal Khuts*, is an ethnographical masterpiece on Santal sub-septs. He also published several articles on the same subject.

Other Works -

Other than missionaries many British officers and employees took an interest in the life of these tribal people and published many papers and books, the government gazetteers also played an important role in having authentic information about the tribe. C.H. Bompas's book '*The Folklore of the Santal Pargana*' is still ideal for folklore research. 'Sir John Shore's article "On some Extraordinary Facts, Customs, and Practices of the Hindus," published in *Asiatic Researches*, 1795, contains the earliest mention of the Santals where they are designated as 'Soontars'. Scholars believe that the first account of the Santals of the Rajmahal Hills occurs in Montgomery Martin's book *Eastern India* compiled from Francis Buchanan's *Journal* kept during the survey of the district of Bhagalpur, 1810-11. H.C.Sutherland obtained information about the early history of the Santals through investigations into the land tenures of the Paharias of the Rajmahal Hills and from Captain Walter S.Sherwill's notes taken during his tour of the Rajmahal Hills and published by the Asiatic Society of Bengal. E.G. Man, Assistant Commissioner of the Santal Parganas came with another early account of the Santals through his book *Sonthalia and the Sonthals*. The *Little World of an Indian Officer*, the autobiography of R. Carstairs, who served as Deputy Commissioner and as Settlement Officer, contains a very good description of the land and its people, the formation of the new district, the Census of 1881 and the government of the district. It is based on the number of years he served as Deputy Commissioner of the Santal Parganas and later as the person entrusted with the codification of Santal law, that W.G. Archer wrote not less than eighteen articles and four books on the Santals'¹¹.

'About the Santals' early life, there are other sources of knowledge which include the various government district gazetteers, Census reports and handbooks and the three settlement reports H.L.L.Allanson, J.A.Craven, J.F.Gantzer, and H. McPherson. L.S.S. O'Malley, H.H.Risley J.H.Hutton, W. Hunter, and Col. Dalton have left us very good accounts of the Santals, their land, customs, and habits. R.C.Dutt in 1882 through his article "Aboriginal Elements in the Population of Bengal" gave a very fascinating account of the Santals but it was really with the work of Sarat

Chandra Roy that the Indian anthropologists started taking interest in the tribes of the Chotanagpur plateau-the districts of Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Dhanbad, Singhbhum, Palamu, and those of the Santal Parganas. With Sarat Chandra Roy, anthropological research in this area witnessed the beginning of a golden and constructive period. Indian anthropologists, sociologists, and ethnologists have by now published quite several studies on the Santals'¹².

Conclusion

We cannot deny the fact that missionaries took an interest in Santhals because they wanted to propagate Christianity and they accomplished it, but we also have to agree that their engrossment also led to some crucial development in the life of these tribal people and area, especially in terms of developing their literature and language, although the missionaries influence started to diminish in mid of 20th-century literary progress in Santhali language did not stop, now the Indigenous people starting coming forward writing stories, novels, Folklores in Santhali, the invention of their own Oi Chiki script added a new dimension to their prospectus. Many Santal writers have spent their valuable time on this language and literature. One of the notable original books of this time was written by Majhi Ramdas Tudu. The name of the books 'Kherawal Bangsa Dharma Puthi'. Some other Santhali writers are Paul Jujhar Saren, Sadhu Ramchand Murmu, Pandit Raghunath Murmu, Mangal Chandra Turku lumang Saren, Salman C. Murmu, R. R. Kisku Rapaz, and so many others. The Santali Language and literature got a new life thanks to the outstanding contribution of all these writers during the period. During this time, Language and literature made the most progress, so this period is also considered the golden period. These all were the fruits of seeds planted by the missionaries.

Language is a way to communicate and express your emotions and ideas, and more literary treasure means more rooted that community and its culture is. Santhals are ancient people having an enriched heritage, but these missionaries became torchbearers of the new enlightenment and helped them to identify their identity and revive their culture through literature. The role of missionaries in the development of Santhali language and literature is a testament to the power of language in shaping cultural identity and community empowerment. Through their tireless efforts, missionaries helped transform Santhali from an oral tradition to a written language, paving the way for a rich literary heritage. While their primary motivation was evangelization, their legacy extends far beyond religious conversion. By recognizing the value of the Santhali language and culture, missionaries played a crucial role in promoting cultural preservation, social upliftment, and education among the Santhali community. Today, as we acknowledge the complex history of missionary involvement in indigenous cultures, we must also recognize the significant contributions they made to the development of the Santhali language and literature. Their work serves as a reminder of the importance of language preservation, cultural sensitivity, and community engagement in any development initiative. As we move forward, it is essential to build upon this legacy, supporting the continued growth and recognition of the Santhali language and literature, and celebrating the rich cultural heritage of the Santhali community.

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