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Chapter - 5

The Santhals: Their Culture and Traditions

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Chapter - 5

The Santhals: Their Culture and Traditions

Priyanka Soren and Waluneba Jamir

Abstract

The Santhals are one of the largest tribes in India. They are found in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Orissa, Assam, Meghalaya, and Tripura. They are also found in Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Nepal. They are skilled in various arts including music, handicrafts, and have a rich cultural heritage. They possess their own language and script which belongs to the austro-asiatic language group. Literature on their customs, tradition and culture are however scanty. Individuals belonging to this community are mostly deprived of education and hence pass on traditions and customs orally from one generation to the other. The dances they perform, the clothes they wear, the festivals they celebrate, the gods they worship, the crafts they specialize in, the tasks they perform have been compiled in the study. In addition, other customary practices are included in the study. Ethnic knowledge requires documentation to avoid becoming extinct. This study is an effort to document the rich culture of the Santhals and their customary laws and traditions.

Keywords: culture, customs, ethnic knowledge, Santhal tribe, traditions

Introduction

The Santhals are one of the largest indigenous tribes in India. They number approximately 6.8% of the nation's total tribal population according to the 1991 census ^[1]. They are spread over the eastern part of India in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya. They are also found in the neighbouring countries of Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and the islands of South East Asia. They are mostly agriculturalists and consider land as precious as their own life. They are involved in agricultural operations and collecting, hunting and fishing as a source of living. They are also actively involved in animal husbandry.

They are one of the most primitive castes among the oldest tribal groups in India. They lead a simple and distinct life and believe in superstitions and these things in one way shows their backwardness. The Santhals possess magnificent skill of making musical instruments, mats, baskets, cots, clay ovens, brooms and fishing materials ^[2]. Their villages are located mostly in forested areas, where members hunt, fish or clear the land for rice agriculture. While many people choose to remain in their traditional villages in present day, another significant population has joined the industrial workforce in coal mines, steel factories or large-scale agriculture.

Now, due to modern technologies, the spread of education there has been so much of changes in the social, economic and cultural life of the group. The impact of such changes can be seen in their social values, occupational structure and role perception. In the traditional tribal society, specific roles were assigned to men and women for cultural norms, traditions and values.

Due to their highly ritualized dance ceremonies and festivals, strong, separate language and tribal sovereignty within the Indian State, the Santhals have maintained their identity and cohesiveness over centuries when bombarded with invasion, new government, and technologies even into the modern era.

Historical nature

The Santhal tribe belongs to the pre-Aryan period. They are one of the largest groups of tribes in Indian subcontinent ^[3]. They belong to the Proto-Australoid group and they were great fighters during the British regime in India ^[4]. They waged war against the permanent settlement of Lord Cornwall in 1885. During the late 1850s Santhal hero Sidhu had accumulated around ten thousand Santhals to run a parallel government against the British government. Baba Tilak Majhi was the first Santhal leader who raised weapons against the Britishers in 1789 ^[2].

They are the largest tribe in India to retain a good language to the present day. The Santhali language is a part of the Austroasiatic family, distantly related to Vietnamese and Khmer. Their language belongs to the Munda, Ho, Mahli, Bhumij and Kharia family of languages. Peter W. Schmidt has classified these groups as the Austroasiatic language group ^[4, 5]. They have developed their written script which is called 'Ol Chiki.' The script doesn't not share any of the symbolic properties of other Indic scripts such as Devanagari. It uses thirty letters and five basic diacritics. It has basic vowels, and three additional vowels, generated using the Gahla Tudag.

Santhals did not have a written language until the nineteenth century. The script is a recent development; it was devised by Pandit Raghunath Murmu in 1925 ^[5].

There are twelve clans among the Santhals, they are Hasdak', Murmu, Kisku, Hembrom, Marandi, Soren, Tudu, Baskey, Besra, Chore, Pauria and Bedea. The last two clans have been lost. They cannot marry a member of the same clan; if they did then they are committing clan incest. They would be cast out of the community and the village as well.

Reverend Paul Olaf Bodding, a Norwegian is one of the famous missionaries who is well known by the Santhal tribe. He studied their culture, traditions and learnt their language as well. He served in India for forty-four years (1889-1933) and operated mainly from the town of Dumka in the Santhal Parganas region of present day Jharkand. He completed the translation of the Santhal Bible in 1914. The Santhal economy is primarily based on agriculture. Collecting, hunting and fishing were once very important sources of their living, but now have reduced to a subsidiary status. Due to the increase in the population, the loss of land, the need of money, money lenders and land-lords have led a large number of Santhals to migrate to the tea-gardens, coal-mines and factories where they worked as laborers. Now, due to education, there are some Santhals who are engaged in various modern jobs.

Village set up

A typical Santhal village consists of houses placed on either side of road called *Kulhi*. Every home has a spacious space in the front. This space is used during weddings and also to dry grains, firewood and other items. Houses are usually surrounded by fruit trees, furniture trees, firewood trees and bamboos. Santhal villages are usually present near forests, since they are fond of hunting and foraging.

Leadership and social organization

Every Santhal village is headed by a village headman called *Manjhi*. He is assisted by his assistant called *Jog Manjhi*. In addition, the *Manjhi* is also accompanied by another member called *Paranik* and his assistant called *Jog Paranik*. Every village has a fifth very important member who is the messenger called *Godet*. Whenever there is an issue the *Manjhi* calls for or summons a meeting. Every issue is made known to him who then asks for his members and the village members to assemble and discuss any issue and also to make decisions or resolutions for the benefit of the village. *Jog Manjhi* makes known weddings to the public and also when a boy brings a

girl, he is supposed to visit the girl's house to get known and acquire information. The *Manjhi's* right hand is the *Paranik*. He functions in the absence of the *Manjhi*. *Jog Paranik* accompanies the other members in all the activities and is the assistant of the *Paranik*. The *Godet* makes known any events of a meeting, discussion, death and any other discussion to every members of the village by visiting their homes personally. A silent member called *Bhogdo* is also present. He plays the role of the advisor and is usually a very senior member of the village. Every village has a priest called *Hapram* or *Naik*, who carries out religious activities in the village.

Music and dance

The Santhals have their own instruments and they are used during festivals, weddings and other occasions. Their songs are similar in tune to each other and there are different types of tunes called *Rar* namely, *Dasai*, *Don*, *Lagre*, *Sohrae*, *Gilwari*, *Danta* and *Baha*. Santhals love music and dancing, it is in their blood. Dance is one of the important parts of their fairs and festivals. They would relax themselves with light music and dance. They dance in a line sequence and sing along ^[2]. They have songs for every occasion, for example during a wedding, they would sing songs related to it and those songs would have some stories, called folklore. The women align themselves in a line sequence as they dance and sing and the men would all be in the center playing the instruments made by them. The Santhal tribes of India have a typical tribal lifestyle and they have a magnificent skill in making musical equipments.

They play music using *Tiria* (bamboo flute with seven holes), *Tumdak'*, a wooden frame instrument with leather on the lateral sides, *Tamak*, a wooden frame instrument with leather on the anterior side and the posterior side is hollow, *Dhatra*, a fretless stringed instrument with three or four strings, and *Kat banam* which is similar to a violin. Harmonium is a vital instrument in every dance and occasion. *Kortal* is a cymbal used during dances and festivals. It can be as wide as a plate or small as a cup.



Fig 1: Music instruments: a-Tamak, b-Tumdak', c-Tiria, d-Dhatra, e-Harmonium, f-Kortal

Festivals

The Santhals live in close association with nature and their festivals revolve around it. They celebrate *Baha porob* meaning flower festival. It is celebrated during February to March and is celebrated to rejoice the flowering or budding of plants. They do not pluck or cause damage to any trees or plants. The festival is celebrated with music and dance throughout the village. *Sohrae porob*, is a harvest festival and the most popular festivals. Rituals are performed in their fields and delicacies are prepared. It is celebrated with great pomp and enthusiasm. It is similar with other harvest festivals such as Bihu and Bwisawgu in Assam, Pongal in Tamil Nadu, and Baisakhi in Punjab. The Santhal festivals are always accompanied with traditional home-made rice beer. It is intoxicating and has a pungent smell and is a delicacy among this community. Festivals are accompanied with singing, dancing, music and eating comprised basically of meat.

Artifacts and Instruments

The Santhals are skilled in making several structures from bamboo, leaves and other naturally available resources. Every instrument in their household is made of wood, bamboo, leaves or grass. They are actively involved in hunting and fishing. Their hunting tools include the bow and arrow called as *Ak Apari* which is also used to protect them from enemies. A long structure made with pointed metals called *Khoca* or bamboo partly cut into segments with the tips sharpened is used to catch animals, kill snakes and remove soil while digging respectively. A traditionally made catapult is used to hunt birds and other animals.



Fig 2: Instruments: a-Khoca, b-Saira, c-Jhaka, d-Jhimri, e-Burum, f-Cabhi, g-Khalai (bulky), h-Khalai (long)

Fishing tools involve structures made with bamboo mainly. *Jhaka* is a triangular shaped structure closed on all sides except the front portion to allow fishes to enter. *Saira* is a long flat bamboo made structure that has an opening to let fishes enter and is placed in a bund through which water can flow and enter. *Burum* is a bulky structure that is placed on running water area and has a single small opening to allow fishes to only enter and not come out. *Jhimri* is a similar bulky structure having 2 to 3 inlets. Fishes are kept in a bamboo made basket called *Khalai*. Fishes are also caught by handmade fishing nets which are stitched and aligned by the men folk of the community. A conical structure made of net called as *Cabhi* is used to catch fishes as well.



Fig 3: Instruments: a-a Santhal boy in arrow and bow, b-Godo Sitap, c-Ak Apari, d-Khoca, e-Gorkha, f-Tusi, g-Khoca.

The Santhals are skilled hunters. They perform hunting along with their daily activities. During harvest, as the grains are cut, grain eating rodents are plenty in the fields. These are a delicacy among the Santhals. Traps made from bamboo called *Godo Sitap* and a long metal net made trap called *Tusi* is used to catch these rodents. They use an indigenous made catapult called as *Gorkha* to kill birds.

Household appliances

The Santhals make different structures to ease their household work. Rice is winnowed and cleaned by a bamboo made structure called *Hatak'*. A smaller version of *Hatak'* is called *Suptic*. The *Hatak'* that is round is called as *Dala hatak'*. Rice is sieved by a bamboo made sieve called *Chala*. The *Chala* holes are of different sizes to sieve different materials. The Santhals make baskets of several sizes with bamboo to keep different materials and they serve different purposes. *Dirmi* is the biggest basket about 3 metres in height and 1 to 2 metres in width. It is used to preserve grains obtained from harvest for future use. It is usually placed in the kitchen area. *Duhri Khaclak'* is the biggest basket that can be handled and is used to keep crop produce and other items and can contain about 20 kg rice grains. *Ad Khaclak'* is a little smaller and can contain about 10 kg rice grains. It is used to carry large

quantity of grains or other materials from one place to another. It can be used to keep food items and other materials. Next in size is *Dalic'*. It is smooth from the inside and used to carry gifts or grains when going to visit friends or relatives. It is used to give gifts during weddings and other occasions. *Ari* is smaller to *Dalic'* and is used as an instrument of measurement. It can contain 5 kg of rice grains. Rice grains are placed and it is held by the farmer from which grains are sowed during farming. *Phatiak'* is smaller to *Ari* and is used to distribute rice during festivals or weddings. The smallest is *Tuplak'* which is used to eat puffed rice which is a favourite food among the Santhals and is commonly served during any gatherings. The baskets are smeared with cowdung to close any openings present except for *Dalic'*.

The Santhals make their own mats from date palm leaves called *Patia*. Broom called *Serum Jonok'* is made from giant long grass to clean houses and their outdoor surroundings. The broom is unique in appearance and the mats are used in weddings where the bride and groom are made to sit on. They also make their own cots called *Parkom*. It is a wooden frame on which jute rope is woven in a uniform reticulate manner. It is easily movable and light, enabling them to rest or sleep wherever they like to especially under the trees and outside the homes. A smaller version of this *Parkom* is called *Maci* which accommodates only one person to sit only. A similar structure made of wood completely is known as *Gando*.

The Santhals love making their own food such as flattened rice, rice cake made from rice flour, dal and turmeric. To grind these, they have a structure called *Dhinki*, which is a long heavy wood placed horizontally in a stand and has a wood pointing vertically which can fit into a hole dug into the ground where materials to grind can be placed. On the posterior side, one can stamp on the wood which makes the wooden frame to rise and on releasing, the vertically pointed structure in the front can pound the material placed in the hole. *Akhaini* is a long bamboo having an extension at the anterior end to lift and throw hay to the desired place and is used after harvest.



Fig 4: Household appliances: a-Chulha with two vessel capacity, b-Chulha with one vessel capacity, c-Dirmi, d-Maci made with jute rope, e-Maci made with synthetic rope, f-Akaini, g-Serum Jonok', h-Gando, i-Tuplak', j-Dhinki.

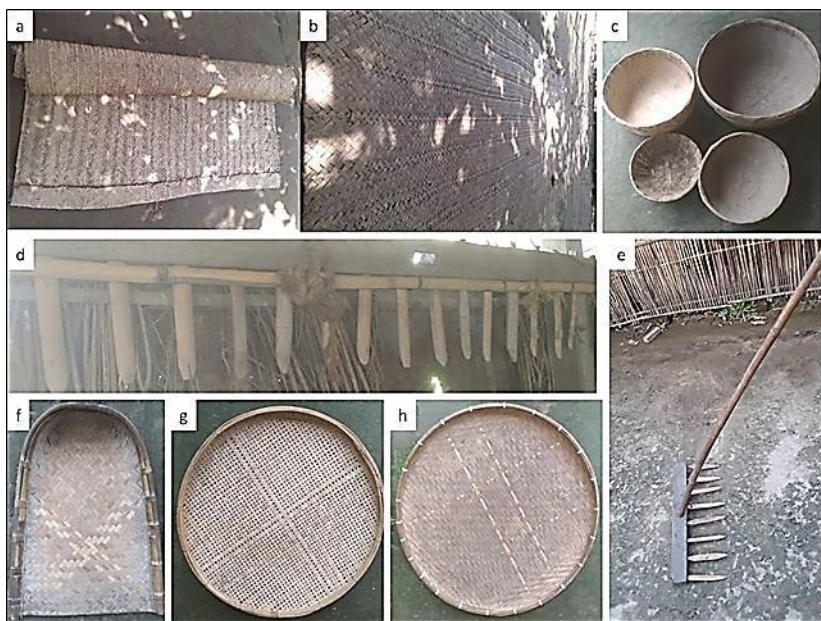


Fig 5: Household appliances: a, b-Patia, c-Dalic', Ad Khaclak', Ari, Phatiac' (in clockwise), d-Bidha, e-Kakri, f-Hatak', g-Chala, h-Dala Hatak'

House

The house of Santhals is usually made from bamboo walls cemented in clay or mud. The house usually consists of a long verandah, two to three bedrooms, a common room and a kitchen. Toilets are usually situated at a

distance from the house. Beautiful designs are painted in the walls using mud of different varieties which give different colours after application. Structures of animals, birds or other familiar figures are made on the walls. The kitchen is usually very spacious with an oven called *Chulha* made of clay where all the cooking is done. The *Chulha* is placed in a way where other members of the family can sit near it and get warmth during winters. It is also a place for small discussions or talk during winters. The roofs of the houses are made of long grass found in forests or straw. Although due to modernization, several homes now are made of tin.



Fig 6: House paintings on wall



Fig 7: House: a-Grass used to build roofs, b-House made of grass straw, c-Jute being harvested and dried to be used for making wall of homes, d-Jute wall, e-Surli, a pointed bamboo with a hole in the anterior portion, used to pass the rope from bottom to top to tie the straw while making homes

The walls are sometimes made from harvested jute stems plastered with either mud or cowdung. To make fire in the *Chulha*, cow dung is collected and made into thin cakes, dried in the sun and then used as fuel. Handmade *Serum Jonok'*, *Hatak'*, *Patia*, baskets and other items are usually kept in the kitchen. They have little need for heavy furniture and other luxury items and are content with the simple structures which they make themselves for their own use.

Traditions

The Santhals have a strong connection with tradition and treat guests with ultimate honour. The feet of guests are usually washed with water and oil is applied to their feet before they are fed or made to enter the house. They greet friends and relatives in a very peculiar way. Younger boys close the fist of their right hands and place it on their forehead and the left hand is made to hold the right hand. In this position, the boy gently bows before his elders. A young girl brings her palms facing downwards together and bends down before her elders. Elder people usually, stretch out their hands and place it above the heads of the younger ones. Elder women usually bring their palms together facing upwards and lift it towards their forehead as a sign of accepting the greetings. In-laws have a different way of greeting each other which is called *Balaya Johar*. When a male and a female member of the in-laws meet, they bend to the right and place their hands on their forehead and peep at each other. When a male and another male member from the in-laws meet, they join hands, each pulls one of the hands alternately towards them for four times and then raise and lower both the hands simultaneously twice. When two female members of the in-laws meet, they raise their joined palms facing upwards in a wavy manner upwards thrice, then they hold hands and bend towards their right once and then left and then repeat the first step again. These traditions have existed since ancient times and are very unique. These are not found in any other community worldwide. These make them maintain peace among themselves. These salutations increase their bond of togetherness and brotherhood.

Weddings are conducted with great excitement and music. Persons sharing the surname cannot get married, and their marriage is regarded as incest. In case of such events, the members of the village jump and excrete in the houses of the family where this event has happened. They are also ostracized and expelled from the village and no one is allowed to visit them. They are considered as outcasts. They are prohibited from fetching water even from public places. Weddings are represented by hanging a broken *Jhaka* or *Hatak'* or a broken umbrella. These symbolically represents that a

wedding is happening. After the wedding, the bride washes the feet of her husband's brothers and sisters both younger and older to him. However, this is the last time she touches her husband's elder brothers or sisters physically. They do not even make their shadows touch. During the washing of feet, the bride washes the feet of her husband first and during this she can hold the ankle of the ones she is washing including her husband's siblings and ask for money which they have to give her. The bride cannot even utter the name of her husband's elder siblings. The bride leaves her family and goes to the husband's house. However, she retains her surname and although she is married, it remains, unlike other marriages where the wife gets the husband's surname. A married woman does not leave her hair in public places. She is also not supposed to sit on a bed or a *Maci* nor is she expected to release her hair in the presence of her husband's elder brothers.



Fig 8: The people: a, b-Dance of the Santhals, c-Greeting when relatives or friends meet, d-washing of leg of guests at a wedding

When a child is born, the Santhal midwife called *Dargin* cuts the umbilical cord of the child with an arrow and buries it near the door. After five days, the midwife calls all the village members for a meal at the birth place. She also gives oil to everyone who comes as a sign of welcome which the receiver applies on his/her head and the midwife announces the name of the child. The child is named on the day of the birth or on any odd numbered day following birth. The firstborn son is given the name of his grandfather; he is also given another name for calling. Rice is boiled with neem leaves

making it bitter to taste. This is usually fed to every member who comes to see the child to remove the uncleanness of the mother. During these five days, the mother is not allowed to touch any household items. After this event she is suitable to perform household chores or touch household items. After the function, the midwife is thanked and rewarded and then sent off to her home.

Dress and Ornaments

The Santhals have their own traditional attire. Women wear a cloth to cover the lower portion called *Parhan*. It is worn wrapped around the waist. A long cloth is wrapped in an X fashion to cover the top with a blouse. Men wear a half shirt type of attire to cover the top and the same material the women use to cover their top is worn by men to cover their bottom portion in a very systematic manner. A piece of cloth is usually tied around the head and is has multipurpose usages.

Women are fond of silver jewellery. They wear necklaces, bangles, earring, nose rings, and a unique hair clip having a fish placed in a frame that moves when one walks called *Sulak*. Leg anklets are called as *Khaga*, elbow straps called *Phudna* and toe rings called *Batri* are worn by women. *Phudna* are worn by men as well. Women also wear a waist strap made of silver called *Harhari*.



Fig 9: Silver ornaments: a-Sulak, b-bangles, necklaces and phudna c-sulak and necklace, d-sulak

The people

Santhal women usually tattoo their hands and neck with decorative designs, although the practice is not followed much in recent times. Men and

women are totally dependent on agriculture for their survival. Male members plough with oxen whereas female members are involved in plantation and cooking during plantation seasons. During rains a long structure made of bamboo called *Dhaplang* is used to protect from rain. A structure that looks like a giant comb called *Kakri* is used to clear up the field of weeds. Another similar structure which is wider called *Bidha* is used to scatter the seeds evenly after sowing by dragging it along by oxen.



Fig 10: The people: a-Santhal dance, b-Santhal men playing the harmonium and flute, c-Santhal men making a house, d-a Santhal lady making rope from betel nut flower cover, e-a Santhal man making a fishing net

Religion

Santhals have no temples of their own, nor do they even worship any idols. They follow the *Sarna Dhorom*, meaning Religion of the “Holy Woods”. The God and Goddess of the Santhals are *Marang Buru*, *Jaherera*, and *Manjhi than*. They worship numerous Gods, Deities and Spirits such as *Kal Sing*, *Lakchera* and *Beudarang*. They have numerous *Bongas* (spirits) or male violent supernatural beings found everywhere. According to beliefs, these reside in hills, forests, rivers, ponds and other places. They also believe that these supernatural beings have a great capacity for doing harm to mankind. Hence, they are feared and sacrifices are offered to ward off any evil or harm.



Fig 11: The people: a-a Santhal lady showing her tattooed hand, b-a Santhal lady showing the tattoos in her neck, c-A Santhal family bringing harvest from the fields, d-a Santhal lady mending her Parkom, e-a Santhal lady cleaning jute stems to make the walls of her home, f-a Santhal man cleaning jute stems to be used for making house

The Santhals know and have a strong faith and knowledge in magical formulae. Religious leaders are male specialists in medical cures who practice divination and witchcraft. The medicine men are also called *Ojha*. Women folk also expertise in such craft and they possess certain charms which can cause disease and death to a person. Hence witches are regarded as dangerous and anti-social elements and are called as *Dan*. The Santhal religious system is characterized by animism and animatism.



Fig 12: Santhal way of greeting: a-Father in-law and mother in-law, b-Elder lady and young lady, c-Elder man and a young man, d-e-Between two mother in-laws

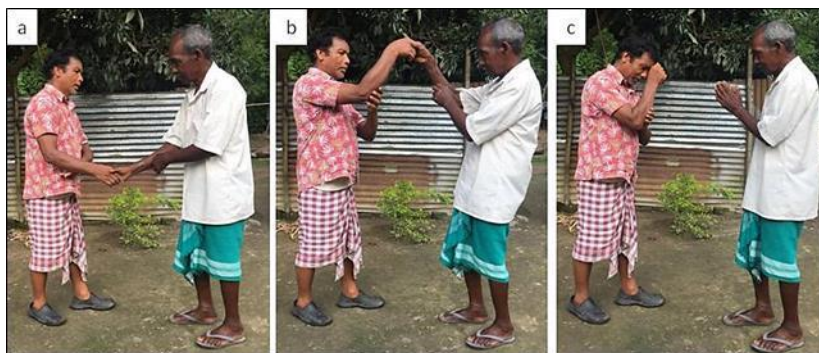


Fig 13: Santal greeting between two father-in-laws

Conclusion

Documentation refers to an act or instance of authenticating with documents. It is a process of ensuring conformity to historical facts ^[7]. 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. We also get to see that the social organization is very complete. As mentioned in this study, the Santals are divided into exogamous septs originally twelve in number. Their social observances are complex, for example some relations treat each other with the great respect. Looking at them through their creativity, also gives us certain ideas about the tribe. Knowledge obtained from experience gained over time has played an important role in the daily lives of the majority of people globally. It is also considered to be an essential part of cultural identities ^[8].

Documenting or recording traditional customs is a wealth of a nation. They help reflect or study what the ancestors' lifestyle was. Since most customs and traditions are orally passed, it is necessary to document them. Before any tradition or custom is extinct, workers must record or document as much as possible to keep them alive.

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