
UNIT 3 SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF TRIBALS

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

- To study the social organization of tribals in general and Santals in particular;
- To see some of the unique and sustainable social set up of the tribals; and
- To note the democratic and participative nature of tribal social organization, which has made them successful.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The tribals have an organic and well-organised social structure that is both function and self-sustaining. Since the social organisation vary immensely depending on the particular tribe, in this unit, we study the social organisation of the Santals, the largest Indian tribe, which could act as a sample for the other tribes also. Many of the general features are true, with few exceptions, for other tribes.

3.2 THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF SANTALS

Traditionally, the Santals possess a well structured social organisation to ensure discipline in the whole community and harmony among themselves. The people based governance is more than an idea; it is also a concept that needs to be practised at different levels. The tribal world view of democracy is a broad concept that includes the symbolic triad of human beings, animals and forest. The functioning of a vibrant democracy demands not only a proper ecological balance but also due respect for one another. A holistic view of the

tribal lifestyle, customs and culture underscores the critical role played by natural resources in establishing a thriving democracy which begins at the village level.

In a village the head person is called *manjhi* (headman). A number of villages form part of one local administrative unit, administered locally by a *Parganait*. He is the custodian of all social functions of these villages. Kinship is the tie that binds human beings together. A society is organised in such a way in order to perform functions necessary for the well-being and maintenance of the society. Santal social organisation is characterised by a lack of the caste cleavages so prominent in Hindu society, a patrilineal kinship system, and a relatively low level of political integration. The basic family unit is the extended patrilocal (relating to residence with a husband's kin group or clan) family. Each village is usually composed of a number of lineages as the ancestors are very important for the family and village (Singh 2003).

It is important to note that the concept of family in the tribal community goes beyond the circle of one's own household and encompasses the entire village. Further the surrounding forest, water, land, animals, river and so on constitute an inseparable part of the village community. Although the term "democracy" is not part of tribal vocabulary, they very much practice the spirit of democracy. Unfortunately over the years, this relationship has considerably weakened due to external influences (Kumar 2002).

3.3 THE VILLAGE SET-UP

The basic unit of the Santal communal system was the village. For the efficient running of the village administration they elected a village headman and his assistants from among the leading members of the group. A full-fledged village council consisted of seven village officials, namely *manjhi* (village headman), *paranik* (assistant headman), *naeke* (village priest), *kudam naeke* (the priest worshipping local spirits), *jog manjhi* (guardian of morals), *jog paranik* (assistant of the *paranik*), and *godet* (messenger of the village). Succession to these posts was hereditary. However any official could be removed for incompetency by the people of the village (Kumar 2002).

Ordinarily the social authority in the villages is exercised by the headman, *manjhi*, with the help of the above-mentioned village officials. He conducts meetings in the village and makes decisions. Problems are brought to the meetings and at times a fine may be imposed depending on the case and the *manjhi* has to give the final decision on the case. *jog manjhi* has an interesting office. He is responsible for arranging feasts and acts as a censor of village morals. He has to instruct the people sometimes. *Godet* is actually to help the *manjhi* to announce to the villagers the forth-coming events (Mukherjee 1980). Although these functionaries have distinct responsibilities, decisions could be taken only through the collective consensus of the community in a *kulhi durup* or village meeting in which all the adult members of the village participate. Most decisions on social, cultural and political issues are taken at the village level (Choudhury 1999).

The social authority in the villages is exercised ordinarily by the headman, *manjhi*, with a batch of village officials to assist him. He collects rents from the people (to be paid to the government). All abandoned holdings and waste land are in his charge. He is the custodian of the village property – the

communal wells, streets and grazing grounds. He has to maintain the *manjhithan* (founder's shrine) and the *jaherthan* (sacred grove). He has to also see to it that the yearly festivals are duly held and every householder contributes for the feasts. He requests all the people of the village to participate in the ceremonies of birth, marriage and death. If a sickness breaks out in the village, he must summon a meeting and arrange for special sacrifices. His position is that of a disciplinarian and a communal custodian. Because of his role in the village, he commands respect. The Santals regard him as the father of the village (Archer 1985).

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) Who is a headman in Santal village and what is his role?

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- 2) How does a village function in a tribal setup?

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3.4 THE COUNCIL OF FIVE PEOPLE (*MONE HOR*)

Social authority in the village is exercised by the headman but always in consultation with the *mone hor* (five people council: *manjhi* (headman), *paranik* (assistant headman), *jog manjhi* (overseer of morals), *godet* (announcer), *naeke* (priest) and *kudam naeke* (assistant priest)). Though there are six people or at times seven people it is called *mone hor* because five people are important. All the villagers are members of the village council. Village council is the institution that settles all the disputes of the villages. Santal community as a whole maintains certain uniform customs and laws with relation to marriage, divorce, birth etc. *Manjhi* presides over the village council meetings when they are held to discuss matters related to village. In the event of disputes with other villages he acts as the representative of the village. *Paranik* is the principal assistant to *manjhi* and representative of *manjhi*. If *manjhi* dies without any male issues or brothers, then *paranik* will get the office. No public sacrifice, no festival, no ceremony such as marriage can be done without *manjhi* taking initiative. *Jog manjhi* serves as the supernatant of the youth of the village and he is the link between younger generations and older generations. Equally important is the religious headman called *naeke* and his assistant *kudam naeke* (Choudhury 1999).

3.5 THE PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY (*DISOM HOR*)

The highest authority in Santal society is known as Disom Hor or assembly of the people of the region. Even the *pargana* or *parganait* and the assembly do not exercise final authority. This is vested in the people of a number of villages. The final authority is exercised once every year through the medium of the *lo bir* or hunt council. If there is an inter-village dispute, the matter is taken up with the *parganait* and not with the *manjhi*. He is expected to settle the problem. In case he fails to come to a decision, the matter is taken up by the hunt council (*lo bir*). In such a case the head of the group is the hunt priest (*dihri*). In this case usually the people themselves make the decision and the hunt priest and other officials are only to assist in making the decision. Punishment for serious breaches of discipline may be as serious as *bitlaha* (excommunication) which may be decided by the hunt council. It is the administration of the people, conducted by the people, for the benefit of the people. There is no appeal against this judgement.

The assembly meets during the annual hunt (*lo bir sindra*). In the *lo bir* all Santals, with or without an official position, have equal status. Any matter may be raised by anyone and is fully discussed. As the highest court of appeal, the decisions of the *lo bir* are binding to all. The decision about excommunicating (*bitlaha*) a person from Santal society can be taken and executed only by *lo bir*. *Bitlaha* or social ostracism is the most severe form of punishment known to the Santal and is imposed for a violation of the rules of sib exogamy (Santals having the same surname/clan cannot get married) and tribal endogamy (marriage is not allowed outside the Santal tribe). Social ostracism has two forms, temporary and permanent. Temporary *bitlaha*, because of the violation of the rule of sib exogamy, can be lifted by the performance of *jamjati*, which is an expensive ceremony (because of the expenses to be paid for it is more than an ordinary Santal can afford). Permanent *bitlaha*, deals with grave cases like serious break down of morals and beliefs, murder and so on. Such punishment is also given to a woman who indulges in sexual relation to any *diku* (non tribal) or accepts herself to be a concubine. It consists in formally expelling him or her from the tribe for good (Datta-Majumdar 1956).

[The student is not expected to learn the technical terms by heart. Only the important notions are to be remembered. What is expected is a general acquaintance.]

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) How is social authority exercised in the village?

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2) Who exercises the highest authority in a village?

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3.6 THE CODE OF BEHAVIOUR AND TABOOS

There are no written laws and patterns of behaviour codes. Ethical principles have guided social behaviour for centuries. There are many traditions and customs that have come down through oral tradition and they are strictly followed. There are several taboos and prohibitions which regulate and control behaviour.

Santal code of behaviour is rooted in early tradition, based in their religion. The Santals have respect for their elders. They are generally a very hospitable people. Though the parents generally do not punish the children, they are expected to follow the norms and practices of daily life. Children are told not to steal, quarrel and mix with *dikus* (non-tribal). The idea of personal sin as understood in Christianity does not exist. But the idea of sin does exist and so does the idea of punishment. When a person commits a sin the whole community is affected and the Supreme Being may punish the whole community. That is to say that any breach of discipline is against the community and against God. Disobedience to God's law can lead to punishment as it had happened in the primordial punishment of the rain fire.

All Santals are expected to observe certain restrictions in daily life. These restrictions are to preserve the society in good stead as they believe. Through these taboos the spirits remain pleased. The *manjhithan* (founder's shrine) and *jaherthan* (sacred grove) are considered sacred. Therefore all should respect these places. No one should plough this area or cut the trees from here. Women must never climb the trees in this area nor cut their branches. The village street (*kulhi*) is also considered sacred as it is the abode of the *manjhithan* and meetings are held on the street. No one should plough this area. It is also the place where village meetings are held. The priest has to abstain from sexual relation on the eve of offering sacrifices to the spirits (Troisi 1978).

Santal women must avoid a number of actions which men are permitted or even expected to do. Women are barred from ploughing the field; it is even inauspicious for a Santal woman to touch a plough. They are not supposed to thatch the roof of a house, strike with an axe, shoot an arrow, play a flute or even to wear male clothes. They are not expected to go for the hunt. A pregnant woman must not sit on the narrow ledge surrounding the house with her legs dangling or her hair loose or any portion of her clothing hanging loosely from her body. She may not look upon a dead body. She must not weep when a death occurs. If there is an eclipse of the moon she should remain inside the house; she should not look at it. Such breaches would be regarded as symbolic perversions by the *bongas* (spirits) and at the same time safeguard the mother so that the child is born well.

It is taboo to marry outside the tribe or inside one's own clan. Having sexual relations with them is also taboo. Adultery and homosexuality are also prohibited. Such breaches are believed to incur the wrath of the spirits and to bring immediate punishment. The relation between a Santal and his younger brother's wife is marked by taboo. They are not supposed to have any physical contact; they cannot be alone in the same room or in a courtyard; they must never sit near each other. They are also expected not to mention the names of these persons. When they have to be referred to, they are referred to in terms of their children.

We can say that taboos are pragmatic moral principles. They derive their validity from their efficacy. They are observed because they work, because they yield solutions and provide results. They disappear or are transformed when no longer useful. If it's taboo, maybe we shouldn't discuss it. But we find the world over, each culture having its own particular version of taboos. Although some taboos can be traced to evident risks to health and safety, there is no generally accepted explanation of most others. I may say that they tend to relate to objects and actions that are significant for the maintenance of social order (Vadappuram 2009).

Bitlaha (Ostracism)

As already mentioned *bitlaha* is imposed on someone in a very grave situation. Clan and kin incest, intercourse with *diku* (non-tribal), eating with forbidden relatives, are some of the reasons for being ostracised. The village *bongas* (spirits) are deemed to be polluted and in many cases the offenders are liable to full and immediate out casting followed by the ceremony known as *bitlaha*. On rare occasions an offence may be punished with a fine; that is when the crime is not as serious as incest (Archer 1946).

The first step for holding a *bitlaha* is to obtain regional approval. The village headman must first inform the local *pargana*. He has to tell him of the village decision and ask him to consult the headmen from the nearby villages. These village headmen should approve of the case and confirm the village decision. Once they have confirmed a date is fixed for the *bitlaha*.

If the *bitlaha* is declared it is announced in the market place a few days before the actual date of the event. On the day of *bitlaha*, the male members from the nearby villages including the village of the culprit, with flutes and drums, bows and arrows meet in the street where the culprit lives. Drumming is kept high so that it can be heard from a long distance. When most of the people have reached the village, they tie a short charred bit of firewood, a worn out broom and some used leaf plates on a bamboo pole and fix at the entrance of the courtyard. Then the room of the culprit is desecrated by throwing away the things from the house. He or she is not allowed to take food with the others and they cannot give or take children in marriage within the Santal community. Thus he or she is cast away from the village and Santal society (Biswas 1956).

Jamjati (Re-admittance)

By performing *jamjati*, an out-casted Santal is accepted back into the society. It is done in the following manner. However if the crime is serious as mentioned above there is no re-admittance possible. When both the parties are ready to

pay the necessary amount of money for the performance of the ceremony they inform the headman. The headman in turn has to inform the *parganait* and the neighbouring villages as it had been done earlier in the case of *bitlaha*. Then they fix a day to perform the ceremony. The person who is to be re-admitted has to prepare a big feast. On that day the out-casted man and woman go to the village street with twisted cloth around their necks and water in a small pot. Before the headman and his assistants, the offenders acknowledge their offence and agree to pay the fine for it. Then they wash their faces with water from the pot and give the water to the leading men who will repeat the same. After this ceremony, the feet of the headman and other leaders are washed by the female culprit. Once this is over they all sit down to eat and on the plate of the *parganait* some money is kept. The other headmen also receive some money though not a big amount.

Significance and Problems of *Bitlaha*

Usually when an incident of *bitlaha* takes place a huge crowd gathers. If the number of people is very small then the effect of *bitlaha* is also less significant; the Santals say like wise. That is the reason why so many nearby villages are informed to show the seriousness and enormity of the problem. A *bitlaha* is considered like a hunt in which the offenders are like the prey. 'They must be tracked and hunted down'. For this reason the men carry the sticks of hunters and a hunt-master presides. They dance, beat drums and play flutes, all similar to the annual hunt (Archer 1946).

A *bitlaha* demonstrates the beast like behaviour of the culprits. The headman says on this occasion, "We have made them like cattle. They have acted like the early ancestors whose conduct ruined the world. They have rutted like buffaloes." For this reason also the songs dwell constantly on bestiality. It conveys the meaning that such behaviour is not becoming of the tribe.

In the mocking song here we see how abominable such behaviour of the culprit is.

Across the river, Barsa, you are always at a sheep.

I shall tell your father, but my father goes to girls.

Bitlaha is considered as an "*ato bapla*" (wedding of the village). The crowd is a wedding party. But they say that the family did not marry them but the individuals did. The village puts the two offenders together, exposes their secret relationship and broadcasts it over the area. Another song that shows the crime,

The Street is filling, with men from the country

What a wrong you did me, but you flirted, Sonodi (name of a girl)

You flirted with me, and we are both to blame.

Bitlaha is a tribal (Santal) punishment. In a Santal society the sole wish of individuals is to remain anonymous to lead their lives quietly, not to attract the attention of others. *Bitlaha* reverses all this and makes the offender public which he/she most dislikes. It pulls him out of the obscure settings and dangles him before the whole region. This is to create shame for the deed. It also reveals the tribe's sense of defilement. Even the use of the worn out broom

implies the degradation of the act and the burnt piece of wood suggests the sexual ruin which the wilful breach of rule has caused (Vadappuram 2009).

What is unacceptable today during *bitlaha* is some of these cases land in courts and then there are unending problems not only for one family but several of them. At times the Santals are so infuriated that they commit *bitlaha* on non-Santals. But Santal customary law suggests that the non-Santals are beyond their jurisdiction. However when they are passionately angry nothing can control their anger. The problem comes later because the others may go to court and file petitions against the Santals. Such cases are prevalent today (Mukherjee 1980).

In the next section we take up a social evil that is prevalent in the Santal culture, against which we need to work.

3.7 SOCIAL EVILS: MAGIC AND WITCHCRAFT

Witchcraft as sorcery has existed since humans first banded together in groups. Prehistoric art depicts magical rites to ensure successful hunting. Western beliefs about witchcraft such as sorcery grew out of the mythologies and folklore of ancient peoples, especially the Greeks and Romans. Roman law made distinctions between good magic and harmful magic, and harmful magic was punishable by law. When Christianity began to spread, the distinctions vanished. Witchcraft came to be linked with worship of Devil. Today, most historians agree that all the victims of witchcraft were falsely accused. In many tribal societies the practice of witchcraft is very prevalent. Magical practices and witchcraft are very prevalent among the Santals. It has been considered as a cultural/religious practice (Orans 1965).

The Witch-Finder

The Santal village is organised to secure the greatest possible degree of co-operation not only in temporal affairs but also in dealing with the spirit world. A good relationship is established between Santal society and the spirit world. A representative called *naeke* (village priest) maintains the right relationship with the tribal spirits. He is a man apart and is conscious of his separation from his people. He is not appointed by the fellow villagers but by the *bonga*, the spirits that are worshipped. Investing of a new priest occurs after the death of his predecessor. The spirits take possession of the individual and so establish the identity of the priest. The process takes place in the following manner (Culshaw 1949).

“The marks of possession, the result of the process known to the Santals as *rum*, are quiet familiar. *Rum* is the regular method by which the spirits reveal their wishes, convey comfort or warning, and assure the warning, and assure the living of their fellowship with the spirits of the tribe and with their ancestors. The behaviour of a person possessed is similar to that of one who has suffered a sudden onslaught of insanity, and he speaks in the character of the spirit who has for the time being taken possession of his personality.”

For practical reasons it is normal that the eldest son of the *naeke* assumes office after his death. Failing him they may appoint a brother of the deceased. The son is expected to know the activities, rules and regulations of the *naeke*. Secondly when the distribution of land was made, the first *naeke* received a

portion of the land by his profession. This land is not expected to pass out of the possession of the particular clan (Vadappuram 2009).

Santals believe that apart from the various benevolent spirits there are also malevolent spirits which have to be scared away through exorcism or magic. The Santals have to cope with a number of inexplicable supra-natural phenomena. For this reason there are also magicians (*ojhas* or medicine men) as they are known, to protect Santal society. Many of these *ojhas* are non-Santals. There are also Santals now among them. *Ojhas* are needed because diseases are seen as something unnatural, ascribing to the agency of evil spirits, witches and evil eye. Natural medicines are used by people or medicines given by *ojhas* are also used; but when they fail they need to call upon a *Jan Guru* or witch finder.

Once the witch is found out she is severely beaten, the household may be fined for keeping a witch, and she may be ostracised or even killed. Unfortunately the woman is not consulted or interrogated; she is simply judged. She has no opportunity to speak of her innocence (Vadappuram 2009).

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) How are ethical laws maintained in the village?

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2) Briefly mention witchcraft in Santal village?

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3.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have studied the social structure and organisation of the Santal tribals, with its self-sustaining village set up and well-managed organisational setup for the smooth functioning of the village set up. We also saw the prevalence of tabu and witchcraft in the villages.

3.9 KEY WORDS

Bitlaha : A tribal concept used as a social punishment for violating the norms of exogamy and endogamy.

Dhiku : An outsider or non-tribal.

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