

## “Communitarian Aspects of Santal Tribe’s Village Life and Inner Meaning of Nature from their Point of View”

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### *Abstract*

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Santal tribe like other tribes of India has a specific characteristic. They are very ordinary people with unique customs, traditions and practices. They live mostly in rural belts, live a life of isolation in terms of geographical location in general. Tribes constitute 8.5% of the India’s population as per 2001 census, whereas, the Santal tribe is the third largest tribal community in India. The communitarian life of the Santal tribe is unique, and it is one of the essential characteristics of them. They are fully fused and captivated with nature. This study focuses on examining the communitarian living of the Santal tribe and their symbiotic relations with ‘nature’, their love and respect for nature and the way they connect and relate themselves with ‘nature’ seems mystical and spiritualistic.

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**Keywords:** Communitarian living, village life, village organizations, concepts of *Bonga* (spirit), rituals, festivals, totems, Santal medicines

### 1. Introduction

Santals’ communitarian living is one of the core aspects of the community. They give emphasis in each aspect of their lives. Generally, Santals’ life revolves around nature. Tribals are closely associated with nature. Nature becomes the heart and soul of the tribals who are living in and around the hills and forest, remote villages, and depending on the forest and other natural resources for their livelihood. Forest becomes one of the main resources for their subsistence. Santal tribe is one of the sole protectors of nature. Nature is the dearest aspect for Santals. Nature is closely tied up with the very living and life of Santals. Holistic approach of Santals’ towards nature is much distinguishable and appreciable. Let us trace how the ‘nature’ is related to the inner life of Santals and becomes one of the most adored one.

### 2. Foundation of Santal Village

Santals always live in villages, that is collectively; they are never found dwelling in isolation. [1] The Santals do not build houses for themselves away from the others; they build villages and there they live together in one place. To found a village three to four men will go with a leader and investigate a forest. When they, after having entered the forest, see any of the three kinds of quails flying, they say: some day in the future a village here will be deserted. But if they see these birds sitting quietly on their eggs, or they meet a tiger or see footmarks of a tiger, they say: some day in the future we shall become a very populous village and we shall be settled there. Thereupon, continuing to investigate, they select a place of this kind, viz., where there is dry ground, where there will be good high land and homestead fields, where rice fields can be prepared and where water is easily available.

Having investigated the forest, they ask the landowner for permission; formerly; before landowners made their appearance, there was nothing of this kind. Together with the leader now divide themselves the homestead fields. On their respective homestead fields, they each put up a hut for themselves and each a pen to keep their cattle in.

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Now all of them clear the jungle for homestead fields, and the trees they have cut down also serve them for house-timber. They build houses. [2] Running along the middle of the place they keep a village street, and at the end of this they arrange a sacred grove.

### 3. Village Organization

Santals give great value to the village organization in their social, economic and religious life. Nobody disobeys the rules of the village organization. If anybody breaks down social laws, he can be made an out caste. They call it '*Bitlaha*'. Each Santal village has its *Panchayat*. The *panchayat* fixes the date of festivals and rituals and maintains the law and order. The office bearers of a *Panchayat* are as follows: a) *Manjhi* - the village headman b) *Paranik'* - deputy village headman c) *Jog-Manjhi* - second assistant to village headman d) *Jog-Paranik'* - the assistant of *Jog-Paranik'* e) *Godef* - the messenger of *Manjhi* f) *Naeke* - village priest g) *Kudam Naeke* - assistant of the *Naeke*

*Panchayat* is formed just after the village is set up. The members of *Panchayat* enjoy their post for generations at times. Mostly, *Panchayat* meetings are held under a tree in the center of the village.[3] It is evident that Santals had a complete democratic society with an ideal administrative system.

### 4. Ownership of Land among Santals

The first aspect of Santal socialism is the public ownership of land. At the founding of a new village, each Santal receives land not by individual seizure but by village decision, and it is only when he brings his holding under cultivation, that he acquires a permanent right to remain in possession. If he desires to exchange his land with another Santal, he can only do so with village approval, and this must be ratified by the Subdivisional officer. He cannot otherwise transfer the land out of his family. He must pay his share of the communal village rent. If a Santal fails to pay his rent, the land is first held by the headmen until the arrears are cleared from its produce and then restored to him. If he dies without an heir or finally deserts the village, the land goes back to the village stock. A Santal cannot encroach on land reserved for communal use.[4]

### 5. The Division of Agricultural Land

When Santals have appointed the rulers of a new village, then they sit one day and divide the land and homestead fields. They make units. One unit of agricultural land is what is needed for one to plough. Having settled this they fix the rent, and at the same time set aside the land allotted to the offices of *Manjhi* (Village Headmen), *Paranik'* (Deputy Village Headmen), *Jog-Manjhi* (Headmen's second assistant), *Jog-Paranik'*, *Godef*, *Naeke*, and *Kudam-Naeke*. *Manjhi* (Village Headman) gets four portions, and the *Paranik'* (Deputy Village Headmen) gets three portions, *Jog-Manjhi* (Headmen's Second Assistant) gets two portions, and the others one portion each as office-land.[5] This they have use of without paying the rent. Now the situation is quite different from the earlier time as government regulations get priority even at the village administrative level.

### 6. Association of Santal Culture with Nature

The Santals claim that the elements originated in phases. Water, Earth and Sky came first, and subsequently Air and Fire. Man appeared as a ritual being turned to nature. This is reflected in their categorical terms for space, time, object, person and action. These are deeply related as they give the first meaning to their life and culture.

#### 6.1. Space

The Santal conception of space is simple but perfect in terms of their own experience and intuitive discovery of the immediate environment. The cosmic space is the spirit space. *Marang-Buru* is the spirit who dwelt with the first Santal. *Sim Bonga* is the boundary spirit. *Orak-Bonga* is the house spirit. *Jaber-Era* is the spirit of the sacred grove.

#### 6.2. Time

While performing a ritual Santal experience the space-time continuum. *Bir-Sindra* is the time for seasonal hunting. *Mak-More* is the epidemic time. The ordering of the time is based on nature's signal: on the appearance of the moon, on the blossoming of plants, on the fruiting of trees. The principal festival is celebrated in the spring. It is called *Sarbul*, the 'Feast of Sal Blossom', also known as the 'Marriage of the Earth'. If circumstances demand, the time is determined by direct divination.

### 6.3. Object

A distinction is made between the natural object and the constructed object. But both are sacred. Earth, water, fire, trees, flowers and mountains are ritual objects. *Ranu*, a ferment made of roots and bark, and *Tumdaḳé*, the dancing drum are also sacred.

### 6.4. Person

The Santal view of a person is not limited to man. A distinction is made between the cosmic person and the physically manifest being. Among the cosmic persons are: *Thakur-Jiu*, the creator; *Bidhi*, the controller and allocator of soul and sex of male child; *Jom-Raja*, the king of the dead. The real cosmic person is *Bonga*, the spirit. There are *Bongas* of festivals; *Baba-Bonga*, the spirit of flower festival and so on. *Marang-Buru* and *Lita* are the greatest of all spirits. Among all beings known by physical presence, *Hor* (man) himself is a potential expression of cosmic power. *Naeke*, the village priest, derives the power from *Bonga*. *Ojba*, the medicine is also empowered by the *Bonga*. [6] Both spiritually and socially, *Hor* is related to plants, trees and animals.

## 7. Concepts of Land and Forest among Santals

Santals termed land as '*hasa*' or '*ol*'. They consider land to be the most crucial resource. The land as a whole was designated as part of community-owned land or village land (*Atu-tola*), which was collectively utilized. The village land was classified into four categories: a) agricultural land (*Chasok-ol*) b) barren land (*Banjhi-hasa*) c) grazing land (*Gupitandi*) d) forest land (*Gajar-tandi*). [7] Santals are emotionally and spiritually attached to their land.

The forest is the dearest place for the Santals. As they use the forest resource for their living, they become the sole protectors of the forest. The forest areas were classified into two groups, local forest and dense forest, based on the distribution of forest resources. Santals usually collect various forest resources (dry leaves, leafy vegetables, and non-timber forest products). While forest areas with a high concentration of trees were designated dense forests, these areas were rich sources of costly trees, ferocious animals, various medicinal plants, and high-protein edible mushrooms. The village forest committee imposed a special law to secure dense forest areas due to their high value; therefore, community people can only harvest mushrooms, dry leaves, twigs, and selected medicinal plants. [8] The village forest committee is the central authority to review those customary rules and can punish the community members if accused of breaching the customary rules.

## 8. Santals' Spirituality and Nature

The Santals see the world as being inhabited by invisible supernatural beings and powers. They are of various kinds. Santals believe that they are living, moving and having their being in this world of supernatural entities. In other words, "the Santals live not only in their tribal society but in a greater society consisting of supernatural beings as well. The religious belief of the Santals fundamentally revolves around '*Bongas*' -supernatural spirits. According to the belief of the Santals, this world is inhabited by numerous spiritual beings of different kind; Santals consider themselves as living and doing everything in close association with these spiritual beings. [9]

'*Thakur-Jiu*' is thought to be the creator and supreme God of Santals. The Elders sometimes remember '*Thakur Jiu*' by the name of '*Chando-Bonga*'. The most important deity of the Santals is '*Marang-Buru*' or '*Lita*'. In each festival they worship '*Marang-Buru*'. It was '*Lita*' who taught '*Pilchu-Haram*' and '*Pilchu-Budhi*' to prepare country liquor (rice bear) and told them to offer a little in the name of '*Marang-Buru*' before drinking.

Another deity of the Santals is '*Sing-Bonga*' or the Sun God. He protects from all dangers. The deity of '*Jaber-Than*' (altar) is '*Jaber-Era*' (the spirit of the sacred grove). There is a Sal tree near '*Jaber-Than*' (alter) in her name and she resides there. Next deity to the *Jaber-Era* (the spirit of sacred grove) is the *Goshā-Era*. A *Mabua* tree is dedicated in the *Jaber-Than* (alter) where she resides. [10] Santals' relation with the divine is expressed through their closeness and connectedness with nature.

## 9. Santal Festivals and Nature

The Santals celebrate different festivals in different seasons in different ways. These festivals were created centering around their day-to-day life. They celebrate '*Eruké Sim*' festival while sowing the seeds and '*Harjar Sim*' after

the seed is sown. Again, in the time of reaping they celebrate 'Janthar' and 'Sorhai' at the time of the harvest. In this way most of the festivals are co-related with different incidents of their life.

They are greater worshippers of nature, because they are born and brought up in nature's lap. So, they cannot stay away when the earth is full with flowers and fruits at the advent of spring.[11] As the birds and beasts cheer up, they also rejoice.

'Baba-porob' the festival of flowers is the second largest festival of Santals being celebrated in the month of Phagun (February-March) after the full moon has been sighted. This is also the period when the 'Sarjom' (Sal) and 'Maikom' (Mahua) trees blossom. Before 'Baba-porob' (flower festival) no one is allowed to collect the 'Maikom-baba' (Mahua flower) which provides the Santals with food and drink. 'Baba-porob' is considered to be the beginning of the Santal year.[12].

### 10. Santals' Relation with Animals

The creation history of the Santals tell us how the Santals are deeply connected with the non-human beings, especially with the animals and birds. The twelve clans in Santal society have their respective totems. The names of different clans and their Totems are given below:

Clan	Totem
Hansda	Duck
Kisku	Seagull
Murmu	Nilgai
Mardi	Merda grass
Hembrom	Betelnut
Soren	Great Bear
Baskey	Fermented rice
Besra	Hawk
Chonre	Chameleon
Pauria	Pigeon

They show high esteem to their totems. The respect that the Santals show towards their totemic species helps them to sustain a well-balanced eco-system. There are also a number of Santal folk tales where the animals and birds have been attributed with the qualities of human beings. In religious festivals or rituals, when those are worshiped, they can realize that they belong to the same clan and carry the same blood. Those who have white colour as their totem do not wear shell bangles, do not use tobacco on their teeth, and do not sacrifice white hen.[13] Those who have a horse as their Totem do not touch a horse but bow down before a horse. A number of diverse totems can be found among the Santals.

### 11. Santals' Knowledge of Herbal Medicine

Traditional medicine is highly developed among the Santals and implies a surprising range of botanical and zoological knowledge; more than 300 species each of plants and of animals are identified and used in the pharmacopeia. There is even, in the organization of botanical knowledge, a hierarchization based on the morphology of plants.[14] Rev. P.O. Bodding in his book 'Studies in Santal Medicine and Connected Folklore' reveals the connection of Santal tribe with the unique attitude of the Santals towards various diseases and their treatment. This book also reflects the vast knowledge of Santals about the forest domain. It can be said that Santal knowledge of herbal medicine is because of their close connectivity and association with nature. At this point, for the Santals, modern medicine sometimes provides an alternative for healing without in any way replacing or superseding traditional medicine.

### Conclusion

The communitarian aspect of the Santal tribe is reflected in all spheres of their life, like in domestic activities, field works, hunting, singing, dancing and in their social life. Village founding to village administration and even in the distribution of land, in all these aspects, we find their connectedness with each other, and the community decision taken by them reflects their unity and togetherness. Santals help each other in times of difficulties.

A Santal by birth becomes a nature lover because of the surroundings where he/she is born, and the cultural values inherited from the parents, elders and village leaders. From womb to tomb a Santal is close with nature, the way he relates himself with celestial beings, with animals and the surroundings. He is very close to trees, forests and hills.

Santal rituals, celebrations and festivals exhibit their love and closeness with nature. Santals are nature worshippers, the animists. Practice of traditional medicine among the Santals is enormously widespread. In a nutshell it can be said that the Santal tribe is closely tied up with nature from the very founding of the village to all activities of their lives, in their lives itself.

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