

The poetry of the Santals in Sitakant Mahapatra's *The Awakened Wind*

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The Sacred Grove and the Bongos

The Santals are one among the major tribes of India, whose population is according to the 1971 census, a little more than four million. The santal pargana, Dhanbad, Hazaribag and Singhbhum districts of Bihar, Birbhum, Purulia, Bankura and Midnapur districts of West Bengal; and Mayurbhanj district of Odisha are richly populated with the Santals. They are too loyal, sobre and faithful like the kondhs and the Mundas. They are also fond of songs and dances who usually love fun and frolic, good food and good drink. It is the pleasure principle of the Santalas that they are now trying to adopt Modern social values and changes as their uniform character. To be adaptable to anykind of situation easily reflects them as the Santals. The Santals are also called Kolean who seem to celebrate in the well known *binti* songs. They believe that their earliest name wasnot santal but Kherwar. In an unpublished manuscript called *Hital*, Raghunath Murmu, the spiritual guru or Guru Gomke of the Santals traces the origin of the tribe. For sandals, the role of rice-beer or handia too ushers in their culture. Through a series of myths and legends, it is studied that the Santalas are innocent and industrious like other tribes. The Sandals seem to be very critical of the Modern Santal's love of ease, idleness, luxurious living and drinking habits.

Sal and Mahul trees, karam, papal, palas and lac-bearing kusum are the main flora of the region. The sal tree is alos a common symbol for a girl. The idea of feminine beauty is symbolized by the tall and slim sal tree. A sal tree in blossom is also a common symbol for a girl full of beauty and elegance.

The Santal village is generally neat and clean, with a road running between two rows of houses. The Santal house is a model of strength, elegance and beauty. Its mud walls are beautifully plastered with cow-dung and are so smooth and polished that they can be the envy of modern builders. They are painted with floral designs and geometrical patterns using four primary colours: white, black, red and yellow.

March and April are months of joy for the Santals. The Sal and Mahul trees are then in flower and the entire landscape becomes a riot of colour, with the palas and simul, the sal and Mahul in blossom. The santals have a language of their own, but, because of their physical distribution, they write in four different scripts-oriya, Bengali, and Devnagari.

The Santal polity is elaborately organized, starting with the village and going up to the pada and paragana. The village headman or Manjhi is helped by a jog-Manjhi, a godet, a naike and a paranik. The naike is the village priest and his special function is to propitiate the hillspirits. The godet, a messenger, is generally at the service of the village headman. The jog-Manjhi is number two to the Manjhi (headman) in ritual and social matters.

The paranik is an assistant headman who also has a number of social and ritual functions. Above the village are the inter-village council presided over by a desh pradhan. There are a number of ritual celebrations for occasions such as birth, attainment of puberty by a girl, marriage and death. These occasions are treated as rites of passage, as delink transitions in the life of an individual and, therefore, are marked by appropriate ritual ceremonies that give them social recognition. They have several forms of marriage, including orthodox marriage, forcible marriage and the ghar juania. The last form literally means “daughter with son.”

The Santal ojha occupies a much respected position in society as he expected to exorcise evil spirits and cure diseases by spiritual methods. Generally, it is women who are supposed to practice witchcraft and therefore many murders of women in this tribe take place every year.

The Santals also have a large variety of musical instruments-drums of various types and string instruments, and of course, the inevitable flute. There have been a fair number of collections of santal songs, both in original Santali and in English translation. Sometimes the

songs are essential parts of ceremonies. Such as the karam or the Baha which the Santals share with the Mundas. Apart from the binti (song describing santal cosmology and recited during a marriage), the bakhens (invocation songs) and the kudums (Santali riddles), a selection of Santali love songs, marriage songs, Baha songs and miscellaneous songs (comprising some songs on death and some associated with funeral rites and social customs) are prevalent now-a-days.

Bakhens: The Ritual Invocation Songs of the Santals

The world of the tribal supernatural is inhabited by Gods and Goddesses, both benevolent and Malevolent. This supernatural world is always in an intimate, yet ambivalent love-hate relationship with the world of the living. The blessings of the spirits are invoked by the community for personal and communal welfare such as for rich harvests, peace and plenty, for cows to yield sufficient milk.

The Upanishads have a large number of invocatory songs which seek to propitiate the Gods for the prosperity and well being of man in society. One of the songs prays for long life, luxuriant crops, thousands of head of cattle, sons and daughters, grandsons and grand daughters:

May He protect us both!
May He nourish us both!
May we both work together with great energy!
May our study be thorough and fruitful!
May we never hate each other!

The Santals have a very elaborate system of invoking the blessings of the Gods and spirits. Their invocation songs bear the distinctive mark of their culture. As a matter of fact, the Santal tribes search for the Great Tradition which is inextricably linked to their minds with the antiquity and the sanctity of their ritual invocations. These invocation songs can be broadly categorized into two groups. The first (Nos 1 to 10) relate to different stages in the agricultural cycle and the rituals relevant to each such agricultural or allied activity, Magh Bonga, however, is not strictly an agricultural festival, but it is related to the seasonal cycle.

Therefore, it is one of their more important festivals. Similarly, the three invocations during the Sohrae festival are rare and unique. The three invocations during the Sohrae festival (Nos 8 and 9) are also related to agriculture since there is worshipping the cattle and the cattle-shed, which is a very important part of agricultural activity. The second group of invocatory songs (Nos 11 to 16) relates to the festivals of birth, marriage and death. Magh Bonga and Baha Bonga are always celebrated at the place for communal worship, the Jahera. The Jahera symbolizes to the remnants of the original village forest.

Three sal tress are dedicated to Maran Era (the God of the Great Mountain), Jaher Era (the Lady of the Holy Grove) and Maneka Turuiko (literally the Five-Six-Five brothers who married six sisters). In addition to these three, Dharam Devta (Supreme Deity who resides in the sky), Gramdevi (the village goddess), and Sima sale bonga (the God who protects the village from the intrusion of evil spirits) are also located within the Jaher Era.

They are invoked by ritual incantations, the spirits of the Gods and Goddesses enter the souls of the individuals concerned. Each of the Gods and Goddesses has their appropriate weapons or distinguishing marks. Gramdevi and Sima sale Bonga, it is believed, do not “possess” human beings. The symbolism that the Santal songs of invocation bears, identifies certain words and objects an evil thing is not to be uttered as the evil object itself may “Materialise” the moment the word is uttered. The worship the Santals perform is for a social and moral purpose, namely, the prosperity to the community. Each ritual also physically brings together the community in the celebration. Either subscription is raised for conducting the ceremonies or each family contributes in kind for the rituals by way of fowls, rice, handia etc.

Levi-strauss has pointed out that La Pensee Sauvage contains properties such as “homologies, oppositions, correlations and transformations which are also characteristic of sophisticated thinking.” The ritual functions and the symbolism surrounding them are vitally and integrally linked to the santalls value-system and his economic life. Agriculture being the main stream of their economy, the blessings of the Gods is sought for creating conditions for good crops! adequate rains and absence of weeds, diseases and depredation of wild animals.

The logical cognitive process ensures that the symbols used are linked to the realities of daily life.

Mythology does not dominate the Santal oral tradition and value-system to the same extent as it does those of the Kondhs and the Mundas. Sometimes it extends sex of the goats and the exact process of killing the birds and animals offered in worship. In the Santal rituals, each of the articles used for invocation and worship and even the gestures they show are both verbal and non-verbal.

The ritual connected with death has a special significance. Among the Santals, as among many other primitive groups, the period between death and final burial and the performance of the last ritual functions in connection with that death may be an extended one. Thus bhandan is a communal second funeral held once a year for all who have died since the last bhandan was held. The dead person is believed to leave the world of the living only after the second funeral has been completed.

The occurrence of a death brings about a serious disruption in the network of social relationships and inter-personal obligations. The ritual of death helps rehabilitate not only relations but also the stability of the entire group.

Evans – Pritchard refers to the relationship between religious rites and such important events as birth, marriage, sickness, death, hunting and animal husbandry etc. in the life of the community. Religion in any primitive society subsumes the polarity of the sacred and the profane. As Monica Wilson observed, “Rituals reveal values at their what moves them most, and since the form of expression is conventionalized and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed..... I see in the study of rituals the key to an understanding of the essential constitution of human societies.”

“Kuli Bida” is a poem in which the Santals pray to God: “Oh God gives us pleasure, happiness and joy forever.” “Gola Banga” for the Santals is the God of the cattle-shed. Their first drink and food is handia and rice. God has given them happiness, no headache, no stomachache, no evil eyes, no quarrelling nothing and given energy and strength in body and mind. Mahapatra composes the Santal songs in English.

Let them be happy to take your left-over food and drinks.

Let them have no headache or stomach-ache.

Let no evil eyes haunt them.

Have mercy on them and on us.

Let not our kinsmen quarrel with us.

Let them always be happy.

Let them and let us be strong in body and mind.

(Giditara)

Binti: The Song of Creation Myth

Binti is the Santal Song of cosmology and is recited by a group of three or more singers at the time of the marriage ceremony after the members of the bridegroom's party arrive at the bride's house. The song is in both question and answer form. The entire song is meant to put the particular occasion in a wider context, the universal context of society and tradition. Marriage as an institution takes the tribe back to the beginning of human creation and in larger context; one can also imagine the creation of the world, the down of human civilization, in other words, the emergence of the Santal community. In every village, there are some professional singers who learn the Binti from their forefathers and recite it from memory. It is true that there are occasional additions or modifications, which is common to all oral tradition.

Maran Buru literally "Great Hill" who is considered as the creator for the Santal planted a Karam tree on the earth and the two birds lived in the Karam tree. They built a nest in the tree and laid two eggs. Out of the two eggs the first humans were born—a male and a female. The moment they were born, they started crying and the whole sky was absorbed with their cries.

The Gods built a dwelling house for Pilchu Kala and Pilchu Kuli where they lived. Gradually they grew up and from childhood and passed into youth. So long they were living naked and did not know what shame was. In the meantime, the Gods consulted Maran Buru as to how it could be arranged that mankind would multiply. Maran Buru advised Pilchu Kala and Pilchu Kuli to cook rice with Sagah grass seeds and to soak it with water and three

powdered ranu (a substance used for fermentation) They felt the stirrings of sex and fell in love. With love came feelings of shame, sin, good and evil.

In the forests, the seven sons and seven daughters of Pilchu Kala and Pilchu Kuli fell in love in pairs. Maran Buru again advised Pilchu Kala and Pilchu Kuli that there was no sin in this even though they were brothers and sisters, but later marriage would have to be according to the prescribed laws of gotras. Gradually mankind increased in numbers with the birth of children to these seven parents, the sons and daughters of Pilchu Kala and Pilchu Kuli. They assembled in the shade of three trees in the forest, namely, lepejreel (the kendu tree), khad Matkom (Mahul tree) and ladeya bale (banian tree) and discussed where to establish their settlement.

Kudum: The Santali Riddles

The riddles are presented in two categories; those which paint a still like, symbolize an object and work out a static or frozen gesture, and secondly, those which symbolize an activity, the dynamics of a movement, a fluent gesture. To the first category belong the picture of fruits and vegetables (Nor 1 to 4), fishes, frog and tortoise (Nor 20,26-28). In the second category we find images of dried-up fruits bursting and scattering the seeds (Nor 13 and 15). Here the poet compares titihisi flowers and cows tails. Both are looking alike what Sitakant Mahapatra harps on:

The titihisi flowers blossom on the hill

The titihisi flowers look like the tails of cows.

(Love Songs)

The love songs of the Santalis are quite ornamental. The lover finds his beloved's lips blossoming like lotus flower. We further learn girls are meant for their husband's houses and boy friends have their wives now. Thus oral poetry of the Santalis is very often metaphorical. The flowers have withered on the trees and leaves have fallen and windblown all are referred to ageing years and death and "I" refers to the age-old spectator and the singer who has been sitting alone. Thus lives the oral poetry of the Santalis what Mahapatra writes:

All my girl companions have gone to their husbands's houses

All my boy friends now have wives

The flowers have withered on the trees
The leaves have fallen
And have been blown away by the restless wind
And now I sit alone.

(Love Songs. 17)

Similarly, the marriage songs of the Santalis delineate that a girl is meant for another house. What they sing in their poem that girl is born for another family whom the parents cannot keep forever. As the oral poetry is traditional and flowing from the ancestors, they have a faith the God has created all these poems:

A girl is meant for another house
Parents cannot keep her forever.

(Marriage Songs. 5)

Beyond love and marriage songs, there are Miscellaneous Santali Poems too. They sing of their history, creation and migration. "Hihidi Pipidi" is a mythological place in the history of Santal Migration. The song is a dig at the male sex.

In Hihidi Pipidi * the cattle were born
At Nalam* the men were born.

(Miscellaneous Songs - 1)

The Santals also sing songs about the love and affection of parents whose love for children is like sugarcane and the love of a step mother is like bitter neem leaves. The poet writes:

Sweet is the Sugarcane
And the love of the parents
Bitter the neem leaves
Bitter its Flower
And yet more bitter a co-wife in the house

(Miscellaneous Songs)

The Santali song also depicts that there is an end of a life. In the life time the santalis have conquered east, west, north and south. It means life for them has passed in the four

directions of their village particularly in the vast forests all around them. Now it is time for death what they consider, a time and call of maran Buru, the creator the God of life and death:

I have looked East, West, North and South
No witch, no Magic killed me
My life ended, my allotted time was over
Maran Buru wanted me to return.

(Miscellaneous Songs 12)

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