

Cultural Changes among the Santals of Eastern Nepal

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ABSTRACT: The Santals are popularly known as Satars in Nepal, but they prefer themselves to be called a Santal. The total population of Santals in Nepal is 42,698. Out of them, about 93% live in the districts of Jhapa (23,172 individuals) and Morang (16,387 individuals). The remaining population of Santals is distributed in Sunsari and other parts of the Eastern Tarai. In addition to Nepal they also live in India, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. The Santal society is basically egalitarian. Their social life is a shared, ordered and has a defined role of each family member which is based on their traditional village organization and political organization. The Santals of Nepal prefer to live in a nuclear family due to their economic instability, landlessness and poverty. Presently as they live in mixed society of new environment many traditional culture and customs have been diffused in the changing context. The present paper highlights the forces that have brought in changes to the traditions of the Santals in Nepal.

INTRODUCTION

Among the 125 ethnic/caste groups, Santal is one of the important ethnic groups (*Adivasi/Janjati*) of Nepal. The “Santals” are commonly called “Satars” in Nepal. However, they prefer to call themselves Santal not Satars. The total population of Santals in Nepal is 51,735. Out of them, about 99% (51,193 individuals) live in Tarai, of which 97.6% (50,510 individuals) live in Eastern Tarai as documented by Central Bureau of Statistics, Kathmandu, Nepal (CBS, 2011). Out of total population of Santals, a total of 49,999 Santals live in rural areas and 1,736 in urban areas (CBS, 2011). They live mainly in Jhapa, Morang and Sunsari districts of Eastern Tarai. The Santal ethnic organization “*Nepal Adivasi Santal Uttan Sangha*” requested to the Special Subject Committees of the first Constitutional Assembly of Nepal for correcting their ethnic name as ‘Santal’ instead of ‘Satar’. They requested that the word ‘Satar’ written

in many documents including even those issued by Government such as citizenship certificates, registration cards of land, etc., should be corrected as ‘Santal’. The main Santal inhabiting localities are Kakarvita, Dhulabari, Jaymirgadi, Dhaichan, Duhagadi, Anarmani, Garamani, Haldibari, Jalthal, Bhadrapur, Mahespur, Chandragadi, Saranamati, Kumarkhod, Tagandubha, Surunga, Satasi, Mahabhara, Sibganj, Rajgad, Ghailadubha and Charpane areas of Jhapa district and the adjoining areas of Morang district (Darbesha, Bayarban, Hokabari, Rangeli, Amardah, Jhurkiya, Sijuwa, etc.). In addition, a large population of Santals is located in India, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar border area.

It is considered that the Santals of Eastern Nepal migrated from the central and eastern part of India (Dumka district of the Santhal Paraganas of Jharkhand state and the Malda district of West Bengal), probably during the 19th century, when the Tarai region of Nepal was thinly populated and densely covered by sal forests. They were involved into clearing of the forests

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and to create cultivable land. They were employed by landowners to sow seeds, transplant, and cut or thresh the rice paddy during agricultural seasons. The rest of the year they used to sell firewood, some worked as labourers in construction of houses and building etc. During that period, the Tarai was considered as an area for exile or punishment due to high rate of infection by malaria.

The Santals have their own language known as Santali which belongs to the Munda family of languages (Ghurye, '32). The Santhali language occupies the fourth position in Jhapa district of Nepal, after Nepali, Rajbansi, and Limbu, where 3.30% speaks this language (District Development of Nepal, 2010/2011). The Santals did not have a written language until the 19th century. However, they developed a script called '*Ol Chiki*' in 1920 (www.jharkhand.org.in). Santals belong to the generic Munda family which is one of the pre-Dravidian tribes of the central India. Peter W. Schmidt has classified the Mundari language as sub-family of the Austro-Asiatic language group (Roy, '12). They have been classified by anthropologists as pre-Dravidians, Kolarians, Dravidians, Proto-Australoids, Nishadics and Austrics (Murmu, 2004). Physically, Santals are sturdy, straight limbed and strong and their height varies much but as a rule, it is little less than the Aryans (Murmu, 2004). The complexion of the Santals is dark-brown, eyes are of medium size and of black colour. Hair is generally coarse, black, and straight. They prefer to live in small and simple villages near forests and more interested to maintain their bows and arrows, spears and hunting weapons than their primitive agricultural implements (Bista, '67). They organize hunting expeditions occasionally for all villagers and kill tiger, jackal, deer, snakes and many other wild animals for food. Homemade rice beer (*handi*) is their popular drink in various feasts and festivals.

METHODOLOGY

The Jhapa and Morang districts (Latitude: 26°20'30" "26°53'30" N and Longitude: 87°16'30" "88°12'30" E) of the Eastern Tarai were selected as the study area. These two districts are located in the south-east flat low lands (below 300m) of Nepal, considered as Tarai which experiences a tropical climate. The annual rainfall

is about 2000 mm and annual mean temperature is 24°C. The Santal dominated Haldibari VDC (Village Development Committee) of Jhapa and Sijuwa VDC of Morang were selected as the study areas. Any knowledgeable Santals (elder persons, members of their traditional and contemporary social organizations, ethnic activists, elites, *ojhas*, etc) of the study area were considered as respondents. Both primary and secondary sources were recorded. Most of the data were gathered directly from the Santal people or organization of the study area as a primary source of information. The published materials (books, articles, reports, web sites, etc) relevant to the present study were used as secondary sources. Qualitative data collection techniques range from interviews, observational techniques such as participant and non-participant observations, focus group discussion, documents and researcher's impressions and reactions, for analysis and discussion has been utilized in the present study.

TRADITION AND CHANGE

The integrity and social identity of Santals is not only maintained by face to face interaction and participation, but by common cultural traditions, tribal sentiments and awareness of kind. Throughout the course of their social evolution, despite dispersion, crisis and impact of various political-cultural changes, the Santals have been able to preserve their homogenous identity by mobilizing their language, institutions of kinship, rituals and social organization (Murmu, 2004). The social life of the Santals is highly organized and is based on their traditional village organization and political organization which, they believe, were an identity of their ancestors. They respect all kinds of kinships whether it may be a consanguineous or affinal. A special kind of kinship i.e. a bond of flower friendship (fictive) also exists among Santals of Nepal. They feel proud as being descents of their original ancestors *Pilcu Haram* and *Pilcu Budhi* who are considered as the first human beings in the world. They believe that Thakur-Jiu (a supreme divine power) created their ancestors at Hihiri-Pipiri, (a mythological place still unknown geographically). As the mythological story continues, the first human pair were taught to brew rice-beer by Lita Haram, a disguise form of *Maran Buru*, who also

induced them to drink it, but before doing so they were to make libation of it to *Maran Buru* (literally, “great mountain”), one of the principal deities of the Santals. The Santal ancestors became drunk and had intercourse in this state. In the course of time, they had seven sons and seven daughters (Murmu, 2004). How much they were tenacious to their cultural identity could be gauged from a tradition reported by Colonel Dalton of an old fort in Cai (a historical area) occupied by Jaura (a Santal king) who destroyed himself and his family on hearing of the approach of a Muhammedan army under Syed Ibrahim Ali alias Malik Baya, a general of Mohammad Tuglak (Grierson, cited in Troisi, '79).

Clan and religion among the Santals

The tradition again enumerates that there are twelve patrilineal exogamous clans, each clan (*Paris*) - surname is known after some totem. The clans as documented by Murmu (2004) are as follows;

1. Hansdah
2. Murmu,
3. Kisku,
4. Hembrom,
5. Mardi,
6. Tudu,
7. Soren,
8. Baskey,
9. Besra,
10. Choudeya,
11. Poudia/Pawria,
12. Bediya

Shrestha (2021) reported eight clans of Santals from Jhapa district. These are Baske, Besra, Hasda, Hemram, Kisku, Murmu, Saren and Tudu (Bista, '67). Similar clans of Santals were also reported from India and Bangladesh (Mukerjee, '43; Biswas, '56). The last clan Bedia is no more reported elsewhere, and only eleven clans exist now, Pawria clan is also rare in the community (Murmu, 2004). Different authors have given different terms for the clans and the names of clans are also differed, Edward Garnet Man used the term 'Parishes', Dalton used 'Tribes' while Risley used the term 'Sept' (Biswas, '56). It is believed that clans

like Kisku, Murmu, Soren and Mardi are respectively the clans of king, priest, soldier and farmers. The Santals believe that the Hasda, Murmu, Kisku, Hemrom, Marandi, Soren and Tudu are descended from the first seven sons of their first parents and that the remaining five clans are branched out in the course of a later development (Biswas, '56; Murmu, 2004). The clans are further divided into sub-clans (*Khunts*). Most of the clans and sub-clans are named after the names of animals and plants. The principal function of the clan and sub-clan organization is to preserve and defend the traditional rule of clan exogamy. In other words, a man cannot marry a member of his own clan and sub-clan. However, the present Santal society does not consider the sub-clan as an impediment to marriage. The prohibition of inter-clan marriage is so extremely rigid that it prohibits a man from marrying a girl belonging to his mother's clan and the violation of this rule is punishable upto *bitlaha* (a mass punishment accompanied by ex-communication from the society). The rule of clan exogamy, in fact, preserves the memory of the tie of blood which connects the members of the clan and thus furnishes an additional security against unconscious incest (Murmu, 2004).

The loyalty of the Santals to the solidarity of the tribe is expressed through various institutions. It is not easy to distinguish the institutions as legislative, judicial and administrative organs because they are intimately intermingled (Murmu, 2004). The Santal society is held together by kinship bonds and do not insist on hierarchical ordering. They tend to live with or closer to the other members of their groups, while the caste people prefer to live in a culturally heterogeneous population which includes not only other caste people but other ethnic groups as well. Consciously or unconsciously, the Santals have a very strong and deep feeling of “oneness”, i.e., the feeling of the 'unity of the tribe' or 'Santalness'.

It is observed that there has been created a sign of heterogeneous within their homogeneous society. Ideologically, they are egalitarian, although some divisions from their economic classes are observed. This divides them into rich and poor, and the ritual hierarchy, modeled after the caste hierarchy, which separate them into pure and impure categories (Ghimire, '89, '90). In native terms, these categories

are *Sapha Hod/Hor*, *Bidin Hod* and *Christian Hod*. The *Sapha Hod* and *Bidin Hod* define themselves as Hindus and perceive themselves to be different from *Christian Hod* (Christian Santals). They believe there are only two *jaats* (kinds of people) on the earth i.e. Hindu and Muslim. They consider Christian Santals as belonging to Muslim *Jaat* and are impure or untouchables (Ghimire, '90). The *Bidin Hod* do not consider themselves as a part of Hindus, they follow only the traditional Santal rituals and worships, and make offerings to *bongas* (deities). The *Sapha Hod* practice the rituals of both Santal and upper caste Hindus, although they do not consider themselves as a part of caste society. The *Sapha Hod* believes in and worship many Hindu deities such as Rama, Dhiva, Mahavira considering them as their own deities. They also participate in festivals of other deities considering as *Diku bongas* but do not worship them. The third category, *Christin Hod* practice Christian rituals and do not share the belief in *bongas*. They believe of being many *jaats* in the earth and Christian is one of them.

Marriage among the Santals

The Santals are conservative in marriage and have a unique rule of tribal endogamy to preserve and protect their ethnic solidarity and identity. Levirate, sororate, widow or widower marriage is possible in Santal society depending on the situation. A strong taboo lies between the husband's elder brother and younger brother's wife and marriage between them considered as strict *Bitlaha*. There is also the practice of the son-in-law staying in his in-law's house. As a rule, a Santal cannot marry a non-Santal and violation of this rule is abhorrence for the Santals and is considered a threat to their tribal unity and identity. *Bitlaha* (mass punishment by ex-communication) is also sanctioned for this offence. Santals use the word "*Bapla*" for marriage. Although eleven types of marriage of Santals have been listed from the study area, among them half a dozen of marriage is rare at present. Traditional arranged marriage (*Raibar or kirin bahu bapla*) is the most prestigious and regular form of marriage. The traditional form of this marriage is quite expensive and lengthy, may last one week to 15 days. One of the ceremonies is *Janmyu* ceremony which is arranged by the groom's party for the bride's

party. The usual practice in the *Janmyu* feast is 50 kg rice, 30 kg pork/meat and a pot of *Handi*. This practice is still found in Jhapa (Mr. Jairam Murmu, personal communication). However, the Santals of Morang felt it was a very expensive feast for the poor Santals. Hence, since last few years, the groom's father gives only Rs. 325/= instead of above amount of rice, meat and *Handi* to the bride's party. From this money, the bride's party arranges a *Janmyu* feast for the villagers. During this feast, they make merriment with jokes, songs, dances and music. Simultaneously they start to complete the marriage within a day. The *Bariati* goes to the bride house in the morning and performs the *Soyambar* with a flower garland, and many important steps of marriage like *Sindhurdan*. A happy feast is arranged by the bride's parents' and the groom returns to the groom's house at night (Mr. Lukhi Ram Hasda, personal communication). Divorce (*Sakam o'eh*) is not a common practice among the Santals, but it is possible if a husband or a wife wants to separate. The Santals informed that divorce among them was common in the past, but now, it is not so common.

Village among the Santals

Anthropologists have studied the village as an autonomous human institution from the point of view of political institutions and processes, social interactions, inter-personal and inter-family relationships and have come to the conclusion that the village, despite various influences and changes, has retained its particular traditional institution. The Santal village, being the most traditional and ancient institution, crystallized a whole system of social, political, and ritual structures (Murmu, 2004). Traditionally, the Santals lived in independent villages as a homogenous society. At present, they are highly scattered and live in heterogeneous society.

The Santals of Nepal live in small villages which usually consists of 5-20 small houses. The village may be a Santal cluster or mixed with other communities. They built their houses in the middle of agricultural land and on either side of village road near the streams. Usually they have a small house made of mud occupying an area of approx. 100-150 sq m. Their huts have well raised plinths and spacious verandas and are neat and well-polished by clay mixed

with charcoal dust. The huts are roofed with hay straws of paddy and *Kansh* grass (*Saccharum* sp.) and frame materials consist of sal, bamboos and jute fibers. The house are usually surrounded by a small courtyard (*racha*) while piggery, poultry and cattle sheds (if any) as well as dhiki (rice huskar), bullock cart, jute thread cot, etc., are located. The Santal house itself is a symbolic identity of Santals. The small, neat and clean mud house with dark grey shining wall and raised plinth having a small and low door without window are the characteristic features of the Santal house. However, some rich Santals have been built cemented or wooden houses (Siwakoti and Sapkota, 2013).

The traditional agrarian economy of Santal society supports to live in joint to extended families. However, during the field study, it was observed that many Santals of Nepal lived in a nuclear family. The economic instability, landlessness and poverty of Santals favour a small family. As a tradition, the cultural rule of Santals provides the residence for a newly married couple to reside with the groom's parents' family or in a neolocal family except some cases in which the son-in-law resides in the father-in-law's household. If father-in-law has no son then the son-in-law resides permanently in the father-in-law's house, and he is called *Ghar jawai*. Based on patrilocal norms of Santal family, the new bride becomes a member of her husband's family.

Property and religion among the Santals

Traditionally, the property is inherited only through the male line. The Santals have also practice to adopt a male child if they have no children. The adopted son has a right to acquire the parental property. If they have a daughter only then they have practice of *ghar jawai*. In this case, the property is inherited by their male child, the daughter gets only nominal property if it is self-acquired property by her father. Otherwise, the ancestor property goes to the father's brother's line. However, now a day in many families the parental property goes to the daughter if they have no male child.

The Santals have their own religion known as *Sarna* or animism. It is also described as a tribal religion, and it means belief in spiritual beings. They believe in nature and its law, and worship the

superpower of nature, which is considered as a *Sarna* religion or culture that is derived from the ancient holy world of *Adivasis* (Soren, 2010). For them, all spots and places such as fields, houses, men and women seem to constitute a Santal village and are sacred abode of spirits. They believe that in apart from it, the world has been inhabited by several invisible supernatural beings and powers. The supernatural beings are often known as spirits and are called them with the generic name of *bonga(s)*. The Santals have no temples and idols for worshipping purposes. They believe that the *bongas* are benevolent at times but must often malevolent bring trouble and misery at times and always try to appease them by sacrifices and libations for ensuring the protection and prosperity of the benevolent *bongas* and controlling the harmful influence of the malevolent *bongas*. However they adopted a Hindu religion over a very remote time (Biswas, '56; Ray *et al.*, '82). They believe in evil spirits, witch-craft, taboos, magic and totems and the fact that the misunderstandings between families and natural calamities, occur due to imbalance of good and evil spirits (Shashi, 2004). Usually on the outskirts of the village, along the cluster of sal trees (*Shorea robusta*), a sacred grove (*Jaherthan*) is found for community worship. It is a sacred place of worship where the *Jaher bongas* or the village spirits reside, namely the *Maran Buru* (literally, "great mountain"), the *Moreko-Turuiko* (literally, "five-six"), the *Jaher Era* (the presiding goddess of the Santals), the *Gosae Era* (the benevolent spirit) and the *Pargana bonga* (the spirit of the Pargana). The Santals worship by sacrificial offerings during the principal festivals like *Sohrae* (harvest festival), *Baha* (flower festival), *Erok' Sim* (sowing festival), *Hariar Sim* (sprouting festival) and *Janthar* (first fruit festival). Similarly, an another important traditional institution called the *Manjhithan* has been built for the spirit of *Manjhi* facing the manjhi's house. It is believed that the *Manjhi bonga* resides there which is represented by a stone at the foot of its central wooden post. The headman worships there, also used by the village council to settle the community disputes (Biswas, '56; Ghimire, '89).

Still they continue to have strong superstitions over witches but sometimes local politics also works to blame the witches. One example can be taken from

the Rajgad VDC of Jhapa, Mr. Jairam Murmu informed that a few months ago, a Santal girl became sick and the wife of the *Manjhi Haram* visited the house of the sick girl to see her. Unfortunately the sick girl died in the next day and the family of girl blamed to the wife of Manjhi Haram for the death of the girl due to her sorcery. The family believed that the wife had thrown some grains of mustard seeds over the sick girl by a sorcery practice. The father of the demised girl also filed an application in the local police station. During the interview, it is found that many Santals whether they believed on witchcraft or not, said they have a belief on witchcraft and witches (Siwakoti, 2015). The Christian followers were least believers of witchcraft.

Every festival they celebrated with a great rejoicing, singing, dancing, eating and drinking. They believed that the art of dancing and singing were taught by their ancestors by the Gods and have been passed orally and by imitation to them from one generation to the other. During dancing they put on decorations of ornaments, garlands and peacock feathers. They dance holding the hands by making two lines separately for males and females and make special steps with the music of drums and harmonium and usually sing accompanied by flutes. Their songs are based on legend, myth, folk tales etc. Presently very few dances are found in the village, because young generation is not very interested in the traditional dances, the reason may be domination of television and Hindi film culture. They also informed that they have no money for buying the musical instruments and dance does not happen without music. *Sohrae* is the largest and merriest festival. The festival is usually celebrated for five days or sometimes 6 days or three days only, in the Nepali month of *Push* to *Magh* (December-February) after harvesting the winter paddy. The festival is celebrated by all the Santals except Christian Santals. The Christian Santals enjoy the festival on the name of *Paska* but they do not perform any religious rites. The last day of *Sohrae*, they celebrate the festival by hunting wild animals (*Sendra*). All the materials related to hunting like site and time is decided by the *Dihri* (hunting priest). In the past, they visited the forest for many days and hunted the wild animals, but nowadays, forest is depleted as well as hunting of wild animals is also

restricted by the Government of Nepal. They go to nearby areas for hunting only for few hours and it may be forests, streams or open fields. They now hunt small animals (rats, rabbits, mongoose, birds, etc.) or whatever they find. They hunt the animals by using bows and arrows. They return the village at the middle of the day and assemble at the *Manjhi Haram's* house to distribute the meat of the prey. Some families also buy the meat from markets. Traditionally, it indicates that the hunters go to fight with death where tigers and big beasts lived. Their returning back home signifies their victory over the death. All family members enjoy the food with rice beer (Siwakoti, 2015, 2017).

Political organization among the Santals

The most fundamental and traditional judicial or political institution in Santal group is the village council who deals all community problems of the village. Every village is governed by its village council headed by *Manjhi Hadam* (*Manjhi Haram*) or *Manjhi*, who preside the traditional village council or panchayat and gives decision on all important matters and disputes, and levies penalties against defaulters, acts as a guide and keeper of traditional norms and values, also the spokesman for all villagers in dealing with outside authorities, the village council head is assisted five or some more assistants. The highest judicial organ is called *lo bir baisi* (forest council). It is an informal court which could sanction a *bitlaha* a mass punishment for major tribal offences (Mukherje '43, Murmu, 2004). During field survey it was found that almost all problems and disputes occurring within the community have been settled down by their traditional village council. However, if any dispute is not settled by the village council then it is discussed among the *Manjhi Harams* of nearby areas (Lukhi Ram Hasda, *per.com.*). However, they usually never disclose their communal matters and the decisions made by the village council to outsiders. If the problems and disputes occurred outside their community then they take the help of police. They informed that in the past, if any Santal migrates from one place to another then the *Manjhi Haram* of the previous place introduces the migrated Santal to the *Manjhi Ha'am* of the new place, but presently this practice was not observed. Nowadays, Santals of

Nepal started to organize under the umbrella of *Nepal Adivasi Santals Uttan Sangha* (Nepal Indigenous Santals Progressive Organization) to search their ethnic identity in contemporary Nepal's socio-political contexts. The Sangha is a member of Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) and International Santals Council.

DISCUSSION

The Santals are considered as highly marginalized ethnic group of Nepal. They are proud of their traditions and culture. They have strong belief on superstitions, due to low percentage of education and high level of poverty. They have some traditional social organizations, such as *Manjhi Ha'am* system which constitutes a village council (*Mone Ho*), headed by village headman (*Majhi Ha'am*). Through this institution, they have been maintaining certain traditions and customs with relation to marriage, divorce, birth, etc. However, culture and society are always in the process of becoming, shaped through the activity of conscious human agents who both reproduce and transform the cultural systems and social structures they inherit at birth. The modernization and assimilation processes are also making a huge pressure for changing their traditions and culture. However, the tribal people never swallowed up by any cultural or religious adoption/incorporation.

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