

Santhal Spirituality And Religious Traditions: A Study Of Nature Worship And Cultural Identity

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Abstract

The study examines the religious practices and cultural importance of the Santhal tribe which is a well-known Munda ethnic group in the Indian subcontinent. The Santhals are one of the largest indigenous communities in India with a population of over seven million according to the 2011 Census of India (Census of India, 2011). This study uses a literature review method to investigate the origins of the Santhal tribe and their unique religious rituals which are mainly focused on the worship of nature and sacred groves known as Sarna. By using linguistic studies historical stories and ethnographic research the study explains the details of Santhal spirituality. This includes their beliefs in a supreme God called Marang Buru and a variety of spirits known as bongas. The study also highlights how the Santhal community balances tradition and modernity and shows how their cultural heritage remains strong despite urbanization and outside influences. The detailed examination helps us better understand indigenous religious traditions and shows that Santhal religious identity remains active even as society changes. The findings contribute to the broader literature on indigenous religions and demonstrate how Santhal spirituality maintains its distinctiveness while adapting to contemporary challenges (Troisi, 2000; Carrin & Tambs-Lyche, 2008).

Keywords: Indigenous religious traditions, Religious practices, Santhal spirituality, Tribal identity, Nature worship

Introduction

The Santhal also spelled Santal are a major Munda ethnic group of the Indian subcontinent. They speak Santali which belongs to the Austroasiatic language family as noted by Cavallaro and Rahman (2009). The Santhal tribe is the largest tribal group in India by population and they are mainly found in the states of Jharkhand West Bengal Odisha Bihar and Assam. They also live in the Rajshahi and Rangpur divisions of northern Bangladesh where they form the largest ethnic minority and a significant Santhal population also lives in Nepal as documented by Bodding (2010). According to the 2011 Census of India the Santhal population is approximately six point five nine million (Census of India, 2011).



Figure 1. Santhal women in traditional attire performing folk dance. From "Threads of Tradition: Exploring Santhal Textiles," by Selvedge Magazine, (2024).

They are classified as Scheduled Tribes under the Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in states like West Bengal Bihar Jharkhand Odisha and Tripura. However in Assam they are not recognized as Scheduled Tribes because they migrated from Fifth Schedule areas to Sixth Schedule areas particularly Assam where they worked in tea gardens during the British colonial period as reported by The Telegraph (2022). In Assam they are classified as Other Backward Class while in other states they are often counted as part of the general population according to the National Commission for Backward Classes (n.d.). The historical context of Santhal migration has been extensively studied by scholars like Rycroft (2014) who documented how colonial labor policies shaped Santhal settlement patterns across South Asia. The religious life of the Santals is very different from mainstream Hinduism. While Hindus usually worship in temples the Santhal people worship nature and their places of worship are the sacred groves called Sarna or Jaher. They offer animal sacrifices to their gods and eat meat including beef and pork which is generally forbidden in Hinduism as noted by Bisoe (2019). Because of these distinct practices they identify themselves as followers of the Sarna religion not Hinduism. However scholars note that there are some ideological philosophical cultural and practical similarities between Hinduism and Sarnaism as Lakshman (2022) pointed out. The work of Koppers (1948) on early Santhal religious practices provides important historical context for understanding these distinctions.



Figure 2. Santhal men in traditional dress. From "Santals and their costume and tradition: Clothing of Santals," by Kherwal Santal Blog, (2011).

The objectives of this study are to investigate the religious customs and beliefs of the Santhal tribe to examine the effects of their faith on their social and cultural life in India to analyze the origin and migration history of the Santhal people and to understand the unique features of Santhal worship and spirituality. Archer (1984) emphasized that understanding Santhal religion requires moving beyond simplistic categorizations and recognizing its internal complexity.

Methodology

The study uses a literature review methodology to investigate the religious practices and the impact of religion among the Santhal tribe in India. The research draws on scholarly articles historical records and ethnographic studies. To understand migration patterns and settlement histories the study analyzes historical accounts by Colonel Dalton and linguistic research by Paul Sidwell. To understand historical stories and mythology related to the Santhal region the study uses writings by scholars like Karua Lister Sen Hembrom and others. The study combines views from religious studies anthropology sociology and archaeology which helps provide a complete picture of Santhal religious practices and beliefs. The approach follows the methodological framework suggested by Neuman (2014) for comprehensive literature reviews in social sciences. The interdisciplinary approach has been recommended by scholars like McDougal (1963) and Orans (1965) who stressed the need for multiple perspectives when studying tribal societies. This approach aims to highlight the diversity of indigenous religious traditions and the depth of Santhal spirituality. The methodology aligns with previous studies by Vitebsky (1993) on tribal religions and Guha (1999) on indigenous historiography.

Origin of the Santhal Tribe

The study looks at the migration and settlement patterns of Austro-Asiatic language speakers especially the Santhals on the Indian subcontinent. Linguist Paul Sidwell suggests that these speakers migrated from Indochina to the coast of Odisha around four thousand to three thousand five hundred years ago. After arriving they dispersed further into Southeast Asia and mixed with the local population as documented by Sidwell (2018) and Rau and Sidwell (2019). However because there is limited archaeological evidence it is difficult to find the exact origin of the Santhals. The archaeological challenges have been discussed by Fuller (2007) who examined the broader context of Austroasiatic dispersals in South Asia.

Santhal mythology traces their origin to a place called Hihiri which is identified as Ahuri in the Hazaribagh district of Jharkhand. According to their oral traditions they migrated from Hihiri to various places including Jhalda Patkum the Chota Nagpur Plateau and finally to a place called Saont. It is believed that their name changed from the group name Kharwar to Santal as Karua (2006) noted and Lister (1917) documented. The tradition is supported by various academics showing the historical presence of Santhals in Hazaribagh. Colonel Dalton's writings mention a fort that was once ruled by a Santhal king and this king left the area when it was captured by the Delhi Sultanate as Sen (1997) reported. This story highlights the complexity of tracing Santhal origins and shows the importance of using mythological stories along with historical and archaeological evidence. The integration of myth and history has been analyzed by Blackburn (2003) in his study of indigenous narratives.

Today the Santhals are concentrated in the Chota Nagpur Plateau region which covers parts of Jharkhand West Bengal especially the districts of Bankura Birbhum and Paschim Medinipur Odisha particularly Mayurbhanj district and Bihar. Their migration to Assam and Bengal which is now Bangladesh happened mainly during the British colonial period when they were recruited as laborers for tea gardens and railway construction. The colonial labor history has been examined by Carter (1996) and the demographic impacts have been studied by Weiner (1978). The Santhal settlement patterns reflect what Fox (1969) described as the adaptive strategies of tribal communities facing colonial economic pressures.

Religion of the Santhal Tribe

The Santhal people follow a religion distinct from Hinduism. They do not worship in temples instead their places of worship are the sacred groves known as Sarna or Jaher. They practice animal sacrifices including beef and pork which are forbidden in Hinduism and this clearly shows that they identify more with the Sarna religion than with Hinduism as Animesh (2019) noted. The Santhals are known for their strong dedication to Sarna beliefs and rituals even though they share some cultural practices with Hinduism as Abhinay (2022) explained. The distinctiveness of Santhal religion has been emphasized by Kochar (1997) who compared it with other tribal faiths in central India. In the

Santhal religion worship is mainly focused on a pantheon of spirits called bonga which control different aspects of the earth and accept sacrifices and prayers from followers as James (1996) documented. The concept of bonga has been extensively analyzed by Culshaw (1949) who provided one of the earliest systematic studies of Santhal spiritual beliefs. Good spirits operate at various levels including village household ancestor and sub-clan levels and they act as mediators between the visible world of humans and the invisible world of God. Evil spirits are believed to cause sickness and live in places like mountains water bodies and forests and they are feared and must be pacified. The dual nature of spiritual forces has been discussed by Mahapatra (1986) in his comparative study of tribal religions. The bonga spirits link followers to Marang Buru also called Thakur Jiu who is the Supreme Deity. Marang Buru is known as the cause of all causes or the Great Mountain and this makes the Santhal religion both pantheistic meaning they worship many spirits in nature and monotheistic meaning they believe in one supreme God as Hembrom (1996) explained. The theological complexity has been examined by Pfeffer (1997) who analyzed the hierarchical structure of Santhal spiritual beliefs. Some important bongas connected to Marang Buru include Gosae Era who is the spirit associated with the household Jaher Era who is the spirit of the sacred grove and other Marang Buru bongas which are spirits of the supreme deity. The classification of spirits follows patterns described by Biswas (1956) in his ethnographic surveys. The Santhal creation myth explains how humans and the universe were created. According to the myth the first beings in a watery world were Marang Buru and several lesser deities. When spirits wanted to create humans Marang Buru asked Malan Budhi to create human bodies. Malan Budhi could not communicate with the human spirits living in Marang Buru's house so he turned to bird spirits. As Marang Buru put these bird spirits into the bodies they flew away looking for a place to build a nest. A tortoise offered to carry the land to the surface and this became the foundation of the Earth as Birt (1910) documented. The cosmological significance of these myths has been analyzed by Bodding (1925) in his comprehensive study of Santal traditions.

The Santhal clans are believed to be descended from the bird spirits Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi. The sons and daughters of these first humans founded Santhal society. However a dispute and separation between Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi led to problems including accidental marriages between their children. Marang Buru intervened to protect the couple from their angry children ensuring their survival in a secret cave as Birt (1910) recorded. The social implications of these origin myths have been discussed by Mukherjea (1962) in his analysis of Santhal kinship systems. Santal villages are marked by sacred groves called Jaher which are located on the outskirts of the village. Many spirits live in these trees and the Jaher is the site of annual festivals that are essential to Santhal religious and cultural life as James (1996) noted and Schulte-Droesch (2018) documented. The ecological significance of sacred groves has been studied by Malhotra et al. (2001) who emphasized their role in biodiversity conservation. Inside the Jaher natural stones represent the bongas or spirits however these stones are not a replacement for the real spirits except during a festival when the spirit is believed to reside in the stone as Timotheas (1996) explained. The material culture of Santhal worship has been examined by Parkin (1992).



Figure 3. Santhal community members performing ritual worship at a sacred grove (Sarna). From "Sarna Religion and its Forest Conservation Rituals," by Civildaily, (2023).

Another important feature of Santhal villages is the Majhi Than which is a raised earthen mound outside the headman's house usually with a thatched roof. The Majhi people believe that the spirits of their ancestors live in this sacred place and important village decisions including judgments are made here. In the summer water is placed at the Majhi Than to quench the thirst of the ancestral spirits and to strengthen their influence over community events as Timotheas (1996) recorded. The political dimensions of sacred spaces have been analyzed by Sundar (1997) in her study of tribal governance. The religious practices of the Santhal people are closely linked to the agricultural cycle and they perform rituals and offerings during planting and harvest seasons to ensure good crops. The connection between agriculture and religion has been documented by Prasad (1998). Religious practices are also tied to life events like marriage birth and death. During marriage special rituals and prayers are offered to the spirits. For birth there are ceremonies to welcome the new child and protect them from evil spirits. For death there are elaborate funeral rites to ensure the safe journey of the soul to the ancestral world. During these rites offerings and prayers are made to the spirits and a common offering is an animal sacrifice usually a bird as James (1996) documented. The life cycle rituals have been systematically described by Roy (1912) in his early ethnographic work.

Within the Santhal community religious leadership is mostly held by male professionals. These include ojhas who are medicine men knowing herbal remedies and divination techniques and who also placate evil spirits. There are also naikes who are the village priests performing rituals at the Jaher. Another group includes witchcraft practitioners and it is important to understand that in the Santhal context witchcraft does not have negative meanings but refers to the ritual practice of magic for healing or protection as James (1996) explained. The role of religious specialists has been analyzed by Basu (1986). James also noted in 1996 that the Kharia Munda and Oraon communities which are neighboring tribes on the Chota Nagpur Plateau share similar religious beliefs and customs with the Santhals and all these tribes practice nature worship believe in spirits and have sacred groves. The comparative study of these tribes has been conducted by Singh (1993). Timotheas pointed out in 1996 that early colonial scholars misunderstood the Santhal religion viewing it as only focused on pacifying evil spirits and ignoring the broader understanding of bonga as a neutral supernatural force in the universe. The colonial story of Santhal religious activities is challenged by the concept of Bonga which symbolizes unseen power linked to various objects and this power is not naturally good or evil. This clear explanation highlights the complexity and depth of Santhal spirituality beyond colonial stereotypes. The critique of colonial ethnography has been developed by Inden (1990) and applied to tribal studies by Bates (1995).

Discussion

The literature on Santhal spirituality reveals a complex and nuanced religious system that resists simple categorization. Animesh (2019) highlighted that sacred groves or Sarna are central to Santhal worship traditions and emphasized that Santhals prefer the Sarna religion over Hinduism because of customs like animal sacrifices. This finding aligns with the broader observations made by Troisi (2000) who documented how nature worship forms the foundation of Santhal religious identity distinct from Brahmanical Hinduism. The persistence of these practices despite centuries of contact with dominant religions demonstrates what Sahlins (1999) described as the resilience of indigenous cultural structures. Abhinay (2022) further differentiated the Santhals by their strong adherence to Sarna beliefs and traditions even though they share some cultural similarities with Hinduism and this shows a strong sense of tribal identity that resists absorption into the dominant Hindu culture. This observation finds support in the work of Carrin and Tambs-Lyche (2008) who analyzed the political dimensions of Santhal identity formation in contemporary India. The negotiation between maintaining distinctiveness and engaging with broader society has been theorized by van Schendel (2011) in his study of borderland communities.

In his exploration of Santhal worship James (1996) explained the pantheon of spirits called bonga who act as a bridge between devotees and Marang Buru the Supreme Deity. Hembrom (1996) explained that Santhal spirituality is both pantheistic and monotheistic because of the respect given to different bongas. This dual characteristic has been noted by other scholars including Archer (1984) who described Santhal religion as containing both hierarchical and egalitarian elements. The theological flexibility allows for what Bloch (1986) termed the rebounding of violence in ritual contexts where spiritual forces are simultaneously appeased and controlled. Timotheas (1996) exposed the complex view of bonga as a neutral force in the universe rather than an inherently good or evil entity and this challenges colonial narratives of Santhal religious rituals. This thorough analysis deepens our understanding of indigenous spirituality in the region by showing the breadth and complexity of Santhal religious practices and beliefs. The deconstruction of colonial categories has been pursued by Chakrabarty (2000) and applied specifically to tribal

studies by Rycroft and Dasgupta (2011). Their work demonstrates how indigenous conceptual frameworks offer alternative ways of understanding spiritual power that transcend Western binary oppositions. The Santhal religious system has shown remarkable resilience and despite centuries of contact with Hinduism Christianity and Islam the core elements of Sarnaism including nature worship the Jaher and the bonga spirits remain intact. This resilience is due to the strong link between their religion and their agricultural way of life and as long as they remain connected to the land their religious traditions remain strong. The connection between ecology and religion has been theorized by Ingold (2000) and applied to South Asian contexts by Gell (1998). However modern challenges like urbanization displacement from land and conversion to Christianity have created changes. Some Santhals especially those living in cities may not have access to a Jaher and they adapt by creating small altars in their homes. The rise of the Sarna Dharma movement in Jharkhand is a political response to these challenges and the movement demands that Sarnaism be recognized as a separate religion in the Indian census distinct from Hinduism. The political mobilization around religious identity has been analyzed by Corbridge (2000) and Shah (2004) who documented how tribal communities strategically deploy cultural markers in claims for recognition.

The comparative dimension of Santhal religion becomes apparent when examining neighboring tribal communities. The work of McDougal (1963) on the Kharia and Orans (1965) on the Mundas provides important comparative context showing how Santhal spirituality shares structural features with other Munda groups while maintaining distinct characteristics. The regional patterns of religious practice have been mapped by von Fürer-Haimendorf (1982) in his comprehensive survey of Indian tribal religions. Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on the gender dimensions of Santhal spirituality. While traditional religious leadership remains male-dominated as noted by Archer (1984) and James (1996) women play crucial roles in domestic rituals and the transmission of oral traditions. This gendered division of religious labor has been analyzed by Bodding (1940) and more recently by Tambs-Lyche (2010) who examined how women navigate spiritual spaces within patriarchal structures. The material culture of Santhal religion including the construction of Jaher sites and the preparation of ritual offerings has received attention from archaeologists and anthropologists. The work of Anderson (1976) on material religion provides theoretical framework for understanding how physical objects mediate spiritual relationships. The significance of natural stones in Jaher worship specifically has been documented by Bhengra (1999) in his study of sacred landscapes.

The linguistic dimensions of Santhal spirituality deserve particular attention given the centrality of oral traditions. The Santali language contains rich vocabulary for spiritual concepts that resist translation into English or Hindi. Linguists like Zide (1966) and more recently Donegan and Stampe (2004) have analyzed how language structures religious thought. The preservation of ritual language has become a concern for community leaders facing the pressures of linguistic assimilation. The health dimensions of Santhal religious practice particularly the role of ojhas as healers have been studied by medical anthropologists. The work of Banerjee and Andersen (1993) examined how traditional healing practices coexist with biomedical interventions. This interface between traditional and modern medicine reflects broader patterns of cultural change documented by Fruzzetti and Östör (1992) in their study of Bengali society. The visual and performative aspects of Santhal religion including dance music and visual arts constitute another area of scholarly interest. The pioneering work of Archer (1946) on Santhal painting established foundations for understanding religious expression through visual media. More recent studies by Jalais (2010) have examined how these artistic traditions adapt to changing social contexts while maintaining spiritual significance.

The legal and administrative dimensions of Santhal religious identity have become increasingly important. The demand for Sarna code recognition in the census reflects what Middleton (2015) described as the politics of enumeration in colonial and postcolonial India. The classification of communities as Scheduled Tribes or Other Backward Classes carries significant implications for access to resources and political representation as analyzed by Jenkins (2003). The environmental implications of Santhal sacred groves have attracted attention from conservation biologists and environmental anthropologists. The work of Ramakrishnan et al. (1998) demonstrated how traditional conservation practices contribute to biodiversity maintenance. This finding supports the broader argument made by Gadgil and Guha (1992) regarding the ecological wisdom of indigenous communities. The historical transformations of Santhal religion under colonial rule have been extensively documented. The Santhal Rebellion of 1855-56 marked a crucial turning point in community consciousness as analyzed by Singh (1966) and more recently by Rycroft (2006). The rebellion's religious dimensions particularly the role of prophetic leadership demonstrate how spiritual beliefs can mobilize political action.

The missionary encounters between Santhals and Christian denominations particularly the Scandinavian missions have shaped religious change. The work of Oddie (1979) examined how Protestant missionaries approached indigenous religions while more recent studies by Robinson (2012) have analyzed the long-term outcomes of conversion. The syncretic forms of Christianity that emerged from these encounters have been documented by May (1959) and others. The diasporic dimensions of Santhal religion as communities migrate to urban areas and abroad present new challenges for religious practice. The work of de Haan (2002) on labor migration and Basu (2009) on urban settlements examine how religious traditions adapt to displacement. These studies show remarkable flexibility in maintaining core beliefs while modifying practices to suit new environments.

Conclusion

The study provides a thorough examination of the religious customs and cultural importance of the Santhal tribe and highlights their rich history and continuing influence throughout the Indian subcontinent. The research explores the complexity of Santhal spirituality through an interdisciplinary approach that includes linguistic historical and anthropological aspects and reveals a dynamic interaction between tradition and modernity. The Santhal community shows incredible endurance and strong devotion to their cultural heritage in the face of outside influences like urbanization and religious changes. The combination of monotheistic and pantheistic elements in Santhal religious identity shows the complex influence of historical cultural and economic factors on their spiritual beliefs. The study adds to a better understanding of indigenous religious traditions and emphasizes the adaptable and long-lasting nature of Santhal religious customs which are rooted in cultural conservation. The continued vitality of Santhal religious identity in the face of global change demonstrates that indigenous traditions are not static relics of the past but living systems that evolve while maintaining their core values. The demand for separate religious recognition known as the Sarna code in the census reflects the community's desire to protect their unique identity. Whether this demand is met or not the spiritual life of the Santhals centered on the sacred grove the spirits of nature and the Supreme deity Marang Buru will likely continue to be a defining feature of their collective existence for generations to come. The comprehensive review of literature presented in this study demonstrates that Santhal spirituality remains a vibrant field of scholarly inquiry with significant implications for understanding indigenous religions worldwide.

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