

## Sorhae: Singing and Dancing, a Festivity of Unity

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*Sorhae* is the biggest festival of the Santhals. The Santhals of Malda, Murshidabad, Dinajpur, Birbhum, Bardhaman district, together with the Santhals of Jharkhand, Assam, Nepal, and Bangladesh, celebrate this festival with various rituals, singing and dancing towards the end of Bengali calendar month of *Poush* (i.e. between December and January according to the Gregorian Calendar). In earlier times, this festival used to be celebrated during *Kalipuja* in the month of *Ashwin-Karthik* (i.e. from the middle of September to the middle of November). It is presumed that once their habitat was around the region of Hazaribagh; according to the geographical conditions of the area, the cultivational calendar was different – paddy was harvested within the month of *Ashwin*, then the festival was celebrated. But towards the beginning of the nineteenth century, they settled in the fertile low land of Santhal Pargana; the nature of cultivation got changed – the *Poush* month entered even before harvesting the crop. After the 1855-Santhal Revolution, the inhabitants of Santhal Pargana were scattered all over, but they carried their cultural history with them. The Santhals of Bankura, Purulia, Midnapur and Odisha still follow the old tradition of celebrating *Sorhae* during *Kalipuja*.

The term '*Sorhae*' is derived from the root word '*Sarhao*' which means 'thanksgiving'. In this festival, thanksgiving is bestowed to the good spirits of the families and of the villages for having provided necessary food to keep them healthy throughout the whole year. The first day of the celebration is called '*Um Hilok*' i.e. the day of bathing or cleaning. All the villagers clean their houses in preparation of the festival. With the instruction of the *manjhi haram*, the headman of the village, the *godet*, the messenger of the village, along with the children collects a one-fourth kilogram of rice, a handful of pulses, four to five potatoes, some cooking oil, salt, chilly, firewood and a chick from every family of the village. A *got-tandi*, alter is built outside the village in the field. There the *naeke*, the village priest sacrifices those chicks in commemoration of the spirits of their forefathers and of the spirits of the village. After the sacrificial ceremony, all those gathered, make hotchpotch with the rice-pulses and have there itself. In the evening, the village priest, having kept an egg in the field, asks the cowherds to usher their herds over that egg. The owner of the cow that touches the egg with its leg, is supposed to provide an earthen pot of rice beer in the next feast of the month of *Magh*. Touching the egg with the cow's leg is considered as a sign of good omens to the family. Then all people enter into the village playing *tumdak*, drum behind the village priest.

The second day is the *Bongan Hilok*, a day of becoming spiritually infused with the good spirits. Members of the family spent most of the time among themselves. The head of the family fasts from the morning onwards and worships the family spirits with the best rice beer. Then he shares the rice beer with the family members and later with the neighbours. Meat and fish – a delicacy is prepared in every family. In the evening singing and dancing begin.

The third day is the *Khuntao*. It is the day dedicated to the domestic animals. Everybody from the morning itself clean their plough, spade, grubber, axe, sickle, etc with water and applies oil on them, and keeps them arranged in the courtyard. Cows-buffaloes are also cleaned and oiled, they are tied to the pegs on the sides of the village streets. They are garlanded with paddy *laddu*, sweet around their horns and necks, and the people sing and dance in their honour.

The fourth day is the *Jaley* i.e. a day of strengthening relationships. All the villagers keep on dancing and singing in union along the streets of the villages. While singing and dancing if they enter the house of any family they are received with rice beer. Such singing and dancing goes on throughout the day-night. Dancing and singing together eradicates all forms of stifles and misunderstanding among friends and neighbours. Generally a day is preserved for rest after the fourth day of celebration. It is called *Haku-Katkom* i.e. a day of enjoying crabs and fish.

The last day is the *Sakrat*. Those spirits who were worshipped and brought into the village on the first day, it is the day for keeping them back to their respective places. The priest, in the morning, leads the male members into the forest for hunting. While returning in the evening, all gather at the field near the village. There the wife of the village priest attaches three breads made up of rice flour on the pole of banana plant, and these are shot down with the arrows from a distance. This means, if any evil spirit who has entered the village, has been intimidated and chased away in such a manner. Then the pole is cut into a few pieces and the one who has first shot the bread down carries them over his shoulder and thereby he would be mounted on the shoulder of a bachelor to enter the village. During this time, the children of the village display their different kinds of acrobatic feats, skills, etc. then all go to the house of the village headman, priest and other elected members while singing; and having taken rice beer they return to their respective houses.

Seemingly it is just a feast of having rice beer and singing and dancing, but there is a glimpse of Santhal Philosophy found within it. This is the example of the cultural life of the community. The community life is the power that has helped them remain independently with their own cultural milieu amidst diversity of cultures for centuries.

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#### **Post published addition by the author after getting feedback from the readers:**

Another interpretation of the root word *Sorhae*: Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi, the first man and women had eight daughters and seven sons. One day when the boys went to *Khanderae* jungle for hunting and the girls to *Surukuc* jungle for collecting vegetables they got physically attracted to each other while playing under a banyan tree and paired themselves. Youngest sister paired up with her youngest brother and her elder sister with her elder brother and so on. At the end the eldest sister whose name was *Sorhae* had nobody to pair up with, so they decided to build her a house and promised to invite her to their home every year after the

harvesting of crop and celebrate the day with her. Till now before the festival begins the girls who are married off are invited to celebrate *Sorhae* in their parents' home with their kin. When *Sorhai* is about to come even now people say, *Marang dai e seteroh kana* which means *Elder sister is arriving*.

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