

Sohrae Porob

By Boro Baski

The Santals of northern and middle Bengal, Jharkhand, Assam, Bangladesh and Nepal celebrate their biggest cultural festival 'Sohrae' from 25th Pous of Bangla Calendar. In earlier times, this festival used to be celebrated during Kalipuja in the month of Aświn-Kartik (i.e. from the middle of September to the middle of November). It is presumed that once their habitat was around the region of Sir and Sikar disom presently in Chotanagpur. Since the geographical conditions of the area was different the paddy was harvested within the month of Aświn, then the festival was celebrated. But towards the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Santals migrated to the fertile low lands of the Santal Parganas; the nature of cultivation got changed – the Pous month entered even before harvesting the crop. After the 1855 - the great Santal Hul, a significant section of the inhabitants of the Santal Parganas were scattered all over the north, but they carried along their cultural history with them. The Santals of Bankura, Purulia, Medinipur and Odisha still follow the old tradition of celebrating Sohrae during the Kalipuja.

One of the folk interpretations of the root word Sohrae is, Pilcu Hařam and Pilcu Buđhi, the first man and woman had eight daughters and seven sons. One day when the boys went to the Khanderae jungle for hunting, and the girls to the Surukuć jungle for collecting leafy greens, they got physically attracted to each other while playing under the Capakiã Baře, a mythical banyan tree, and paired among themselves according to their natal order. 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 Sohrae 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 Sohrae in their parents' home with their kin. When Sorhae is about to come, even now people say, 'Marañ Ðaie seřerok kana', which means - Elder sister is arriving.



In the five day festival, gratitude is bestowed to the benevolent spirits of the various clans 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 ritual bathing or ablution. All the villagers clean their houses in preparation of the festival. With the instruction of the Mañjhi, the headman of the village, the Gođet, the messenger of the village, along with the children collects about one-fourth kilogram of rice, a handful of pulses, four to five potatoes, some cooking oil, salt, chilly, firewood and a hen from every family of the village. A gođ-tađi, altar is built outside the village in the field. There the Naeke, the village priest sacrifices those chickens in commemoration of the spirits of their ancestors and of the abiding spirits of the village. After the sacrificial ceremony, all the menfolk gathered there, prepare a Surā, a kind of hotchpotch with the rice-pulses and have it there itself.



In the evening, the village priest, having placed 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 a jarfull of rice beer in the next feast of the month of Magh. Touching the egg with the cow's leg is considered as a good omen to the owning family. Then all people enter into the village playing tumdak, a Santal drum following the village priest. With this ritual the villagers welcome the spirits of the village peripheries to the village for the festival who they bestowed them while founding the village.

The second day is the 'Bongan Hilok', a day of becoming spiritually infused with the benevolent spirits. Members of the family spent most of the time among themselves. The head of the family fasts from the dawn onwards and libates to the family spirits with the choicest rice beer. Then he shares the rice beer with the family members and later with the neighbours. Meat and fish are prepared in every family. In the evening singing and dancing begins.

The third day is the 'Khunṭau'. 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 bathed and oiled, they are tied to the pegs on the sides of the village streets. They are garlanded with paddy ḷadu, a sweet around their horns and necks, and the people sing and dance in their honour.

The fourth day is the 'Jale' i.e. a day of strengthening relationships. All the villagers keep on dancing and singing in union along the main street of the villages. While proceeding singing and dancing from one house to the next, when they enter the house of any family, they are welcomed 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 set aside after the fourth day of the celebration. The headman ask the villagers to take care of their children, elderly people of the families and domestic animals who may have been neglected during the festival days.

The fifth and final day of the Sorhae prob is called 'Hako-Kaṭkom' i.e. a day of enjoying crabs and fish.



In the past there used to be interval of two to three months to celebrate another Santal festival 'Sakrat'. In the present time with the change in cultivation of rice the Sakrat is celebrated just after the Sorhae festival in this region. Those spirits who were worshipped and invited into the village on the first day of Sorhae, it is the day for seeing them off back to their respective abodes. 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 pancakes made up of rice flour on a pole made of the trunk of a 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 pancake 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 village council members while singing; and having received 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 Santal Philosophy found within it. This is the example of the cultural life of the community. The community life is the power of cohesiveness that has helped them remain independently with their own cultural milieu amidst diversity of cultures for centuries.
