The Religion of the Santals

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Introduction

The Santals, the largest homogenous tribe in India having a population of 4,260,842 (Singh, 1993: 12) are found in large numbers in the states of Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa and Assam. They are found in small numbers as migrant labourers all over the eastern part of the country. They speak Santali which belongs to the Munda group of languages. There is no known record of the Santals having come from anywhere outside India. They are regarded as autochthonous/indigenous to India. There is no evidence to suggest that the Santals had at any time a great tradition of literature, art, music or the sciences. Their traditions as we know today have been orally transmitted from one generation to another. They have an oral tradition. The written accounts of these people are available from the works of Christian missionaries, colonial district magistrates/collectors, anthropologists and a few educated Santals. Wherever Santali has been written it is in the Roman or locally used script. In fact, the educated Santals when writing in Santali use the same scripts as mentioned. However, some of the educated Santals have brought forward the so-called lost script of their language as an important identity marker, the script is called ol-ciki. The script is still in its formative years and the age of the script is highly suspect. The Christian missionaries who have meticulously recorded their gram-mar, written a near exhaustive dictionary, recorded their use of medicines as well as their folklores, poems and songs, have made no mention of ol-ciki. Later day researchers have also not been able to find much supportive evidence.

I am laying a bit more emphasis than necessary in stressing on their oral tradition and the absence of texts as comparable to those found in the great traditions like Hinduism and Islam or Christianity. Oral tradition is usually the tradition of the illiterate or rather "pre-literate" people but there is a large difference between people who can at any time refer back to their texts and those who have no texts whatsoever to either confirm their claims or refute the remarks that others may make about them. This in no way should suggest that the Santal tradition is in any way weak or that it fails to bind its people,

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in fact, it is remarkable to note that large areas of consistency in their accounts of themselves from one generation to another. The Santals’ encounters with great traditions include a vigorous, active one with Christianity and at more subtle levels with Hinduism and Islam. In their interactions with the former, i.e., Christianity, the Santals were a soft target for the missionaries who with their persistent, patient onslaught persuaded the people to leave some of their habits and life styles in the hope of a better life with Christianity. The missionaries concentrate their efforts on people living in remote places in relative isolation from other communities, rather on the tribals living amidst other communities. With the latter two great traditions, the relationship has remained on the fringes. The Santals have always occupied both geographically and socially, the fringes of Hindu settlements (Bhattacharya, 1991), having in most cases a master servant relationship. The Hindus have their own ways of absorption of tribal communities, assigning to them a position on the lower rungs of their social hierarchy (Risley, 1915: 75-76; Radhakrishnan, 1965: 29; Bose, 1953: 156-170, 1972: 12). Hinduized or sanskritised Santals can be found in large numbers among those who live around the Hindus. With the Muslims, the Santals share a similar kind of relationship though they are yet to be enfolded in Islam nor do they show any tendency to embrace Islam. It is noteworthy that at the time when mass conversion to Islam was going on among the lower backward Hindu castes, not a single instance can be found of a Muslim Santal. Hindu folklore as well as its universally known texts mention the relationship between the tribes and the mainstream Hindus since times immemorial, the affinity seems to be long established and it is reinforced further by the legends of long ago. The Christian Santal on the other hand is a distinct category and is responsible to a large extent for producing literate Santals who have adapted to mainstream life and its demands. There is also a perceptible increase of educated tribals due to the efforts of the government which has constitutionally marked out the tribals so that they can avail of the special provisions in the field of education and employment. The Santal identity that emerges now, no longer lives in the shadow of the Hindus or the Christians, rather, some educated and politically projected spokespersons are trying to establish a tribal identity as one who is prepared to retain the tribal identity and heritage and claim a geographical area of one’s own, as it used to be in the good old days or in the golden age. Thus there is much active interest in discovering the lost script, in going back to their roots as well as recreating for themselves the position that they once had as free
owners of lands of plenty. However, all these efforts are rather half hearted and seem more a result of political force rather than emerging out of the needs of the people for whom the issues raised may be quite beyond their range of awareness or interest.

**Elements of Santal Religion**

The religion of the Santals derives from stories of their origin as handed down from one generation to another with slight variation of the theme of there being a central couple with their offsprings created by the the almighty or *Thakur jiu* who acts through a big mountain or *Maran buru* (*Maran* = big, *buru* = mountain). There is some controversy about the actual location of their origin, though it is more or less accepted by the Santals that the Santal Parganas in Bihar is the homeland of the Santals. The geographical location and area of this place is controversial and there is a widespread belief that it is much reduced in size and that they have been deprived of much of their land. Apart from this ancient first couple and the supreme god there are many spirits or *bonga* who are categorized on the basis of the places they occupy and the range of influence they exert. Thus there are *disom bonga*, *ato bonga* and *orak’ bonga* - spirits of the whole land of the Santals apparently with the largest range of influence, spirits of the village and the home respectively. "The *bonga* are said to inhabit three distinct kingdoms. The first is largely an underground replica of the upper land ... The second ... is the realm of the dead, a region vaguely located in the sky above the village ... The third and the most significant territory is the village, its fields and homes, trees, hills rocks and air" (Archer, 1974: 26). The village spirits are to be found in the sacred grove of *sal* trees or the *jaher* as this place is called and in other parts of the village which are wooded. All the villagers including visitors come within their purview of influence. The spirits of the house restrict their influence to the household members. A Santal who dies qualifies to become a *bonga*, also called *hapram* or ancestor. Children who die very young do not attain this status. Every activity of the Santal is guided by and in accordance to the idea of pleasing or keeping the *bonga* happy who is liable to take offence at anything, anytime. However, the acts of propitiation are so simple and so much a part of their lives that no special efforts need to be made. Very simple household items are used which every household has. One way of keeping the *orak’ bonga* pleased is to make an offering of liquor each time they consume *handia* or rice beer, sometimes they even offer some food from their portions before commencing to eat. The
house spirits are polluted at the time of birth and death and their purification rites are the same as those for the householders. In fact the village spirits are polluted at the time of birth or death in the village. For the village spirits there are some rites and rituals performed in designated places by a designated person or persons at certain times of the year along with their annual cycle of festivals. The designated person, the naeke, kudum naike, jan guru, i.e., the priest performs these rites which are short and require little preparation. There is far greater energy that is spent in communal drinking, singing and dancing than on rites and rituals, in fact the latter are considered an integral part of the rites and rituals. Thus, when closely observed, the religious part of the propitiation is in no time and it is often difficult to identify the actual steps of the ritual. The time factor is very flexible as there are no fixed dates for festivals, only the relative times of the year when the festivals are to be observed are fixed. Various ceremonies are held at different times of the year in honour of the various forces of nature rather than in honour of various gods or spirits and during these times the spirits of the village and the house are propitiated (Archer, 1974; Troisi, 1979).

The concept of the bonga and their relationship with the Santals is imparted from a very early age and children become aware of their ferocity early. They rarely take the name of the bonga in vain, nor do the elders admonish them in the name of bonga, yet the fear of the bonga is as much a part of themselves as is their identity. Talking or discussing about the bonga may bring about ill-luck or misfortune, it is difficult for the people to rationalize the reasons except express their belief that a bonga when angry can create havoc. As mentioned earlier, propitiation of the bonga is simple and there is strong tendency to keep mention of them as little as possible.

Religion is not treated pragmatically or in abstraction, neither is it ritualized by strict codes (Troisi, 1979). It is embedded with magico-cultural elements, full of the sense of the unexpected and unpredictability. Religion is not the moral custodian as that power is vested in the village council which acts as the sole arbiter of social wrongs committed by its people. Religion is not synonymous with patterns of social behaviour, nor does it contain within itself any implication of social mores and customs. It is instead capricious and its effect sudden and drastic. The imminence of the mal-influence of the bonga is too close for it to be looked at from a distance it is best to avoid such danger arousing thoughts if a Santal is to lead a comfortable and peaceful life. Yet, the Santals seem to be quite free from obsession about the bonga or
religion, they exhibit no deep spiritual fervour, even during their festivals. Their religiosity works more at the unconscious level wherein they recognize the forces and they hope that some of their acts will keep the forces from unleashing their power, they do not think that they can control the power of the bonga by a series of mere acts - they only try. Their spirits as mentioned earlier, belong to very general categories delineated on the range of influence and the area they dwell in.

Most of the bonga do not have special names, nor are they vested with individual characteristics either of particular goodness or maleficence (except in the cases of witches) and thus involve no special propitiation. This is in direct contrast to the system of celestial beings that crowd the firmament of the Hindu skies, where there is a god for every occasion as well as every aspect of life. Even the hours of the day invoke the observance of some acts and the influence of some gods and goddesses. The almanac for the Hindus is a very special book of reference to be consulted not only for important events but for everyday journeyings and minor events.

Drinking, dancing and singing, manifestations of the sense of raska, or fun/joy, are characteristics of Santal festivals. The priest who performs the religious rites holds only a position of a priest but his life style is in no way different from the others. He has no hereditarily determined caste occupation or britti. In fact none in the society has any predesignated profession nor is there division of labour. There is no scope for the priest to become a specialist in the field or religion. In other words, there is no organic division of labour according to specialized professions in this segmentary society. It is interesting to note that the few important positions that are found in the village are not hereditary in the strict sense of the term, yet they are handed down from father to son, which is subject to the concurrence of all members of the village council. These positions have not evolved to become permanent sections in the society as can be seen in the other societies. The people holding the positions of power do so by the will of the people and are guided by the same laws and customs and are exposed to the same degree of influence by the spirits as are the rest. There is no provision for these office bearers to take on extra privileges by their service or receive benefits from their positions. There is no elite nor is there any laity, no one is equipped to wield extra power either in the sacred realm or in the secular life.

The priest while making the propitiation chants incantations which invoke the spirits to take a benevolent attitude towards the people and ensure
prosperity in agriculture and in the individual spheres of life in every form. These chants are handed down from one generation to another and in the process the original words are often transformed, lost and new words may have been interposed. However, there is a shared conviction that whatever the incantation, it serves the purpose. The priest when chanting adopts a style that is different from everyday speech with the words being pronounced not very clearly, may be for two reasons one, to maintain the magico-cultural element and two, to mask that fact that the words are really mumbo-jumbo. This is in direct contrast to Hindu and Islamic rites where each word is significant and important and there are texts in support of it. The Santals having an oral tradition, have no texts or special literature dealing with religious aspects of life, nor are there any texts of dos and don'ts. The volume of writings on various aspects of their life that is available today, has not substituted texts. In the light of the preceding discussion, it becomes clear that the concepts of dos and don'ts are not considered in the same light as they are in the other societies or religions. Among the Santals, everything that is done that does not hurt others is accepted as appropriate, without the acts having to be defined in a logical framework of rationale. There is practically no contradiction between the ideal and practised forms. The statements of the people, that everything that is done during ceremonies now is the same as it used to be in the past in a way defying the laws of change, provided strong support for the viewpoint of the lack of contradiction between the ideal and the real. Once again I wish to reiterate that the Santal oral tradition has succeeded in projecting itself as continuous and consistent in nature through generations of people. It also seems to retain its full flavour for its people.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have tried to understand and analyse the relationship between religion and the people among the Santal as well as the factors that contribute towards religion being as it is. Through an understanding of the factors that contribute towards religion being as it is among these people I have tried to explore that factors that have some bearing on emergence of fundamentalism in religion which is essentially being viewed as a divisive and disturbing force. I have tried to show that a classless and non-stratified society with an oral tradition has in its favour, in the battle against fundamentalism, the very forces of its homogeneity and absence of texts.
I have tried to avoid any elaborate form of comparison with the other religions that are present in the environment of which the Santals are a part, namely Hinduism and Islam and in recent years, though to a much lesser extent, Christianity. I have avoided comparison for the simple reason that there cannot be much grounds of comparison for the latter are more formalized from the standpoint of texts as well as rituals and the other codes of religious behaviour. Nevertheless, it is natural that such a comparison comes to mind, again because, each is a neighbour of the other. It is also important as it gives us a view of the Santals as members of a plural society. Comparison also serves another purpose, of making clear certain issues to ourselves, the non-tribal people who tend to take a view of the tribals as being primitive and less evolved culturally and therefore not worthy of contention. Santal personality cannot be understood apart from their religion. "So intimate is the relationship between a Santal and these supernatural beings and powers that one cannot fully analyse the Santal social structure unless one understands their religious universe" (Troisi, 1979: 71). The relationship between religion and the people is close knit and natural by which I mean that it is not being constantly forced upon them by any agent or agents with the aid of special implements of textual nature. They become aware of their religion and its practices through the process of socialization. The Santals have a non-inhibitive socialization where children are controlled not so much by the imposition of force or pressure as made aware of socially accepted and unacceptable behaviours in a subtle way without being forced tremendously to follow them. The relationship between religion and the people is independent of specialized people who seem to be distinguished from the others by being equipped or able to perform the rites and rituals. The priests in the Santal society may follow a line of heredity but only with the consensus of the villagers or the institution of the kulhi durup, a sitting of the men of the village, each representing the households in the village. This institution of kulhi durup, is of outmost importance as it is the final judge of disputes and is capable of meting justice, maintenance of children on divorce, etc. Thus the priest, one of the few positions of power or leadership in any Santal village does not take on the role of a moral guardian of the society, in him repose the technicalities of religion. During one of their most important festivals, the Sohrae, the other persons having power, viz. naeke, kudum naeke and the jog manjhi have equally important roles to perform, the former two perform the religious part while the latter looks after the social aspects. The communal festivity starts from the courtyard of the jog manjhi.
who starts the day with a word of advice to the parents to give their young daughters and sons a certain amount of leeway in their interactions with each other and not to take a strict moralistic view of the breaches of conduct, on the other hand the young people are warned not to cross the codes of clan taboos in their amorous adventures. The naeke and the kudum naeke rarely take on the role of a religious preacher though they are considered to be a kind of technical person in the field of religion. There seems no need for a complex media between the gods and the spirits and the people.

There is no organic division of labour in this segmentary society and this has contributed to a society where everybody is more or less equal and has the same range of knowledge. The lack of texts or even knowledge that there is a lot written about them is another factor that contributes to the failure of the emergence of an "elite". Even in situations where there emerged "elite" in the persons of Bir Singh, Sidhu and Kanu of Santal Rebellion fame (1857, 1862), it is seen that the elements of their religion were not enough to arouse the people to revolt. It was necessary to blend Hindu ways with means of communication for the degree of success that the rebellion had. "... it appears that the model before these traditional tribal leaders was a pure form of Hinduism and their primary purpose was to sanskritise the way of life of their followers" (Vidyarthi, 1972 :443). Christianity is another important factor in the creation of the new elite who take on the reins of leadership (Sinha, 1972, : 419). The lack of texts, absence of organic division of labour, presence of homogeneity and over and above all this, the absence of discrepancy between the ideal and the practised, as whatever is practised is not considered to be a deviation from the ideal, contributes to a religion that appears largely to be free from fundamentalist forces which seem to stultify religion as can be seen in our present scenario. Fundamentalism brings with it division of society assuming alarming proportions in a plural society. Religion steeped in fundamentalism assumes a life of its own with its powers of creating disturbances in the social fabric and it remains no longer a part of the life of the people. It also opens its doors to politicians playing on communal feelings and creating vote banks for their own ends.

Homogeneity means a classless and non-stratified society. A society which is divided into hierarchical classes has the distinct feature where the higher classes require to overdo in their zealously/zealotry by way of elaboration in rituals and the other social practices to maintain their supremacy. The higher classes also force aspects of both secular and sacred life upon the lower or poorer classes which are unattainable and unaffordable for them.
Oral tradition, as mentioned in various parts of this paper, is a tradition wherein no text is available. The presence of texts creates a section of people who has access to such texts as well as interest in the ramifications of the texts, and the sections that do not. To maintain that dichotomy the section that has access and interest, would like to extend that control over the texts as well as their interpretation and thereby maintaining an indirect control over the others.

In the light of the above, homogeneity and oral tradition creates an atmosphere in which every individual is equal to all others in all spheres of life and each performs his/her role according to opportunities to perform assigned duties.

The Santals are a pleasure loving, uninhibited people and their practice of religion too is imbued with pleasure. It is evidenced in their show of merriment in their drinking, dancing and singing which accompany any event in their lives. Their religious festivals and social events merge into each other in one joyous celebration without the spectre of fundamentalism.
REFERENCES


