

NOTES ON HINDUISM AND SANTAL RELIGION

I THE HINDUS AND THE SANTALS

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The Santals

There are almost 422 tribes and sub-tribes in different parts of the Indian sub-continent and constitute about 8% of its total population. The Santal is a large and homogeneous tribe in India, numbering about 4 millions, (34. 12% of the total population of the division as per 1981 census report).¹ They were nomadic or semi - nomadic tribal people. But now the Santals are mainly agrarian with a 'democratic-socialistic-moralistic' temperament. It is almost impossible to determine the exact origin of the Santals. They may be from the pre-Dravidian aborigines, Dravidian tribe, Proto-Australoid tribe etc.² The Santals, are distributed in West Bengal, Northern Orissa, Bihar, Assam and also in Bangladesh. They have been linguistically classified as Kolarians. 'Santal' is a distorted form of 'Saontar'. This name came as they sojourned for several generations in the Saont or Samantabhumi, (Modern Silda Pargana of Midnapore District in West Bengal), Simanta + al → Saontal. Previously, they were called Kharwars. Some Anthropologists suggest that Hihri Pipiri (a yet to be identified place) is the original abode of the tribe. Some say Santals had come to the Indian Peninsula, much before Indo-Aryans, under their leaders (many of whom were deified as personal gods like Abge Bongas and Orak Bongas).³

1. Lal Bahadur Singh, *Santal Youths: An Unseen Talent*, New Delhi: Wisdom Publications, 1988, p. v.
2. Lal Bahadur Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 4. A B Chaudhuri, *The Santals: Religion & Rituals*, New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1987, p. 15. And also A B Chaudhuri, *State formation among Tribals: A Quest for Santal Identity*, New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 1993, pp. 1ff.
3. A B Chaudhuri, *The Santals: op. cit.*, p. 15. And also A B Chaudhuri, *Santal Identity, op. cit.*, pp. 1ff. There are several other theories about the original wandering of the Santals and their final settlement in India. Cf. Lal Bahadur Singh. *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.

Religion of the Santals

The Santals do not have any written tradition. Their oral traditions and folk-lore open the world of the spirits (ghouls) and pantheon, the deities or Bongas, who are thought to be responsible for the welfare of the Santals. The religion of the Santals is centred around the worship and ceremonies of the gods, deities and spirits whom they propitiate on different occasions and festivals. Some of these deities are worshipped by the community in the public and others are household deities. The main deities are:

1. *Sing Bonga (Sing Chando)*: The Sun God, also identified as Thakur Jiu, is the supreme deity. He is the creator God. Every fifth year, the Santals do worship the Sing Bonga by offering sacrifices of goats for his grace and protection.

With the wane of power of the collectivity, religious individualism developed. Now all the families are having their family deities: a) the Ora Bongas are the household gods. About 10 Ora Bongas are there. b) Abge Bongas are secret family gods. About 20 Abge Bongas are identified.

When the sacrifices are offered to the Ora Bongas, the whole family partakes of the offerings. But in respect of Abge Bongas, only male members take the offerings. Women are forbidden to touch even the sacrifices to the Abge Bongas. The Santals hand down the names of Hongas to their eldest sons only.

2. *Marang Buru or the Great Mountain*: He is the guardian deity. Worshipped only by families as family God. Marang Buru is the one who brought the first man and woman together to form a couple and to effect procreation. Are Marang Buru and Siva identical?⁴

3. *Jaher Era is the Goddess*, There is no idol of Jaher Era. She is a benevolent spirit. She is worshipped for good crops and at the time of cattle epidemic. Is she the consort of Siva?

4. *Gossain Era*: Worshipped only by families as family Goddess. She is worshipped to recover from sores by sacrificing a white fowl.

4. A B Chaudhuri, *The Santals: op. cit.*, p. 25.

5. *Moreiko* and 6. *Turuiko*: They are not very important in the Santal pantheon.

7. *Pargana*, 8. *Manjhi Haram* and 9. *Manjhi Burhi*: They are of later origin. Manjhi Haram and Manjhi Burhi look after villages so that the Gods or spirits do not cause any harm. The ancestors are invoked before doing worship of the Manjhi Haram.

The Santal is very much concerned over ghosts and spirits who abound in the neighbourhood and tend to inflict mischiefs on the populace. Religion for the Santal does not revolve round sin and atonement; for, he is 'Sanat' or pure. The illness and misfortunes are the outcome of the wrath of the Bongas or spirits.

The Santals later began to worship Goddess Kali, Saraswati, etc. of the Hindu pantheon.⁵ This was due to the interactions (which was not totally tension free) between the Santals and Hindus.⁶ As the Santals came to the proximity of the Hindu villages, there occurred a gradual acculturation leading to the exchange of ideas and customs. The tribals were allowed by and large to follow their own beliefs and rituals, provided these beliefs and rituals did not go beyond the Hindu acceptance absolutely.⁷

Why the Hindu religion was tolerant towards Santal? Why was there no practice of conversion from Santals to Hinduism? Is it because of the similarity between the two religions that Hindus were tolerant towards Santals and they were not preoccupied with the conversion of the Santals? Asok K. Gosh and P.N. Hansda are trying to answer these questions by narrating the anthropological case study conducted by them among the Santals.

5. A B Chaudhuri, *The Santals: op. cit.*, pp. 15-41.

6. A B Chaudhuri, *Santal Identity, op. cit.*, pp. 14-46. And also Shri Pannalal Dasgupta, "Introduction," in *In the Midst of Santals*, by Dhanapati Bag, Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1987, pp. 1-6.

7. A B Chaudhuri, *Santal Identity, op. cit.*, pp. 14-46.