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SOCIAL SYSTEMS AND RELIGION OF SANTALS AT GODAGARI THANA IN THE DISTRICT OF RAJSHAHI

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Abstract: Religious philosophy of human being is a fundamental right. All of them being entitled to that freedom. This right is rooted in the inherent dignity of the human person. It is not in the fickle will of the country. In the wide area of folk religions in Bangladesh, Santals are a legendary and esteemed icon in the total consciousness of the people. They are known as tribal people, but there is no anthropological concept as such. The history of the Santals can be described as a history of oppression. The Santals are the most influential aboriginal tribe in Bangladesh. Most of them are migrated from Santals parganas and chotonagpur (Bessignet, 1960). The Santals are homogeneous. Their social identity and integrity is not maintained by face to face interaction and participation but by common cultural traditions, tribal sentiments and awareness of kinds (Kochar, 1970). The social systems and religion of Santals are highly organized and complete in itself.

Introduction

The Santals (also spelled as Santhal or Sonthal) are the biggest community in the Indian sub-continent. They live mainly in Bangladesh and there is also a significant Santal minority in neighboring west Bengal of India and Nepal. Santal community is an aboriginal tribe of Bengal. Their life cycle is very interesting. In the low-lands they are agriculturists, in the jungle they are hunters, bows and arrows being their chief weapons. Santals like peace and esteemed relationship. They are very clean. Their villages are neat and well built. Their face is round and blubbery; their nose broad and depressed, their cheek bone moderately straight, mouth large, hair straight, deep back and coarse and their lips full. Bangladesh is a small coastal country of south central Asia, covering an area of 55,598 sq. miles. There are sixty four districts in Bangladesh,

Rajshahi is one of them. Godagari Thana situated in Rajshahi district. Our study area is that Godagari Thana.

Methodology of the Study

The study consists of both the primary and the secondary data. The primary data are collected through face to face interview. The researcher prepared a set of open ended research questionnaire. The interview is conducted personally by the researcher. All sorts of measures are taken to record the opinions of the respondents. Forty people from various groups are taken as sample. The researcher presented the collected data in a descriptive manner. The secondary data also has collected from various books, articles etc. Although the sample size is small, it is representative the presented study.

Identity of Santals

From pre-historic times, Indian sub-continent has been the homeland of a large number of ethnic groups and cultures. These various ethnic groups, believed to be that earliest inhabitants of the country, are known by various names, the most popularly and extensively known term being "Adivasi". The Adivasi constitute the oldest and, often, original inhabitants of this land. Santals racial identity has a common opinion is that they possess very primitive components. As regards the name Santal, there are various opinions. According to W. B. Oldham (in Troisi, 1979) 'Santal' is an abbreviation of Samantawala which is derived from a Sanscrit word Samanta, another Saont. O'Mally (in Troisi, 1979) is of the opinion that Santal is an English form adopted from Hindi which corresponds with the form Saontar used by the Bengali Speaking peoples. It is very interesting to note that Sir Jhon Shore designated Santals as Soontars while Mcpherson mentioned the name as Saungtars (in Troisi, 1979).

Santals Language

The Santals have their own language known as Santali which belongs to the Munda family of languages. As the Santals belong to the Munda family of languages, they have been classified by Anthropologists as pre-dravidians, kolarians, Dravidians, proto-Australoids, Austrics & Nishadics. The Santali language is part of the Austro-Asiatic family, distantly related to Vietnamese, few of the Indian Anthropologists also believe that humans first came to India long long ago.

Santali Myth

Santal concept of life begins with animals. Therefore, clans' names are after the name of animals. Santal myth about the creation of world in

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different from myth associated with creation of world among the other indigenous peoples of Bangladesh and in many sense it is unique that it ascribe the creation of earth with the help of amphibian animals, specially the earthworm and tortoise. This is all about the story of creation of earth. They believe that primitive world was filled with only water and God had the problem in creating the land, where man can live. This land is normally considered opposite to water. He created all amphibian animals that can operate both land and water. For creating land, God invited the kings of various kinds of animals to solve, help him out. Every one was coming one by one; they all had not got any success. Last of all, earthworm came and succeeded to create land. The tortoise anchored himself on the both side firmly and brought up the earth and thus earth was shaped. That is why there is a belief among Santals that earthquakes are result of movement of tortoise. In other worlds, when tortoise moves or shakes, earthquakes occur in earth.

Social Life and Structure of Santals Society

An essential factor for a study of any community is a good knowledge and profound attention about its social life and social structure. The total social system of a community defines the forms in which people are grouped for a common goal as well as the socially recognized bonds reflected in the behavior pattern of individuals to one another and to the social groups. It also reflects the thought pattern, ideals and expectations of a society. The existing unity and uniformity of a society which always tend to persist are the result of interaction among the whole members. Santal social organization has many kinds of characteristics. It contains flexibility in rigidity. It, indeed, have wonderful and interesting features. Marriage is one of the important components in the dynamics of Santal society. Santals has beautiful socio-cultural mosaics also.

Santal Social Administration & Cultivation

The distinctive character of the Santals is that they have tribal endogamy and clan exogamy social system. The Santals tradition is unanimous in talking of twelve clans although the number of sub-clan differs. It is important and noteworthy that the clan system of the Santals regulates their behavior within the tribe and dealings with the spirits they believe in. The fundamental and primary feature of social organization is represented in every santal village. The presence of different clans in a village demonstrates obviously the democratic character of Santal society. The Santal, as a rule, stay in independent villages. Each village has well established political organization with a secular headman called *Manjhi*. He is a man of great prestige. The village council controls the

entire social system of the Santals. The village council (Atu Mone Hor) is consisted of:

- 1) Manjhi (Village Headman),
- 2) Jog Manjhi (Deputy Village Headman),
- 3) Paranik (Assistant to Village Headman),
- 4) Goddet (Secretary to Village Headman),
- 5) Jog paranik (Deputy Paranik),
- 6) Naeke (Village Head priest),
- 7) Kudam Naeke (Assistant to village priest).

All the members are member of the village council. Village council is the institution that settles all the disputes of the villages. Santal community as a whole maintains certain uniform customs and laws with relation to marriage, divorce, birth, etc. The Santals are believed to be the best land cultivators. About 95% Santals are involved in agricultural operations. The Santals depend mainly on paddy cultivation as their chief source of daily life. The Santals also cultivate maize, certain winter legumes, beans, different varieties of millet, pulses and vegetables. In agricultural operations, Ox and buffalo are employed. Collecting, hunting and fishing play a very important role in the Santal economy. The collection of wild plants, fruits, roots, young shoots, tubers, flowers, mushrooms, etc. The collection is mostly done by women in groups; participation of men is also not unknown. Swords and clubs bows and arrows, traps and nets are used for catching and also killing birds and animals.

At earlier stages, the majority of the Santals were land-owners, but an increase in the population, the exploitation of money lenders and landlords, harassment, illiteracy, etc., have made a large number of the Santals land-less, facing them to earn their livelihood as day laborers. At present, about 90% of the Santals are land-less. It is difficult for a Santal to conceive life without community relationship. This inseparable bond with the village community is the most important reason why the Santals have been able to preserve and maintain their cultural traditions and identity (Kochar, 1970). Almost all important events in the life-cycle of an individual are essentially community affairs; community awareness and community feeling also provide a great incentive and activity to most activities of the society.

Santal Family System

Santal society is patriarchal. Being a patriarchal society, the families are naturally patrilocal; the bride goes to reside with her husband either in her husband's father's family or in the neolocal family, except in some

cases in which the son-in-law goes to reside in his father-in-law's house. It is needless to say that family is a basic and primary unit of a society. Man's social, religious, economic, political and cultural interactions which are essential for human beings take place in the family. The father is normally the head of a family and all authority rests upon him; he is the owner and administrator of family property. All family members have the duty to obey and respect him. In the absence of father, the eldest son takes his position. That is why in a Santal family, an eldest son is looked upon as the representative of the father and his wife is regarded like a mother. Due to the patriarchal family system, importance is given to the father, paternal grand father and paternal uncle rather than to the mother, maternal grand father and maternal uncle. In a Santal family a wife is responsible for the household activities. The grown up sons help their father, while the daughters help their mother in their household works.

Santal Marriage and Divorce

The Santali language for marriage is called Bapla. In their society, marriage is one of the sacred event of life and marriage adds up considerable respect in society. Through marriage the bride loses her paternal legal identity and acquires the identity of the groom's family. As to the origin of marriage the Santals firmly hold the belief that marriage is established by the creator Himself. Sex is not the sole aim of marriage for the Santals. Besides serving sexual needs, a Santal marriage has also other purposes, such as companionship, procreation of heirs to make family, economic security, co-operation in the family enterprise, social and psychological security, etc. It is strictly forbidden for any Santal to marry within his or her own sept (parish). He/She can marry into any septs or sub-septs to which his/her mother belonged. In Santal marriage, there is no restriction of age. The bride may be younger, older or of equal age with bridegroom. There are various forms of marriage among Santals. That are Raibar Bapla, Sanga Bapla, Kudam Bapla, Kiring Jawae, Ghardi Jawae, Tunki Dipil bapla, Itut Bapla, Nirbolok Bapla, etc. Divorce is a common practice to Santal marriage and it is granted at the wish or will of either husband and wife. The husband can demand the divorce of his wife is proved to a witch, or she is sexually immoral and she does not obey him or she lives always in her father's home. The wife also claims divorce, if her husband cannot supply enough amounts of foods, clothing, ornaments, etc. In case husband seeks the divorce, he cannot claim the bride price and he has to pay

certain amount of money as fine. If wife demands the divorce, her father has to refund the bride price. The divorce is affected in the presence of the honorable and general villagers.

Santali Culture

Santali culture is very attractive and interesting. This culture attracted many researchers and scholars. The Santal people love music and dance very much. Santal music differs from many other classical music in significant ways. Traditionally many of their dances with two drums: the 'Tamak' and the 'Tiriao' was considered the most important Santal traditional instrument. Santal dance and music traditionally revolved around their religion. The names of many Santal tunes are derived from traditional ritual which they were once associated. Santali culture is depicted in the paintings and art-works in the walls of their houses. They also include the stories of their ancestor's Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Burhi. They write on their houses wall, such as:

*Hihiri pipirirebon janamlen,
Khoj kamanrebon khojlen,
Haratarebon haralen,
Sasan Bedarebon jatena ho.*

There are a series of their culture which mark the different stage of the agricultural year. Their main cultural festivals with Agricultural operations shows following:

Name of the festival	Month	Rites
Baha	Feb-March (Phagun)	The naeke and the judam naeke offer sacrifices of lowls at sacred grove in honor of Maran Buru Jaher Era and Moreko-Turuiko.
Hariar Sim	Jul-Aug (San)	The naeke sacrifices fowls to the village bongas, namely Maran Buru, Jaher Era, Gosae Era, Moreko-Turuiko, Pargana bonga, Manjhi bonga and Sima bongas for a heavy growth of paddy.
Janthar	Nov-Dec. (Aghar)	The kudam naeke offers sacrifice of goat or ram to the pargana bonga along with the first years of paddy to protect from stomach disease, to multiply the paddy and also to protect their grains from every harm.

The Santal community is devoid of any caste system and there is no discrimination about birth & descent among them.

Santali Traditions

The Santals have various kinds of traditions. Some very detailed, describing and identity of their ancestors and their wanderings. The first parents of the Santals who were created by Thakur-Jiu and were settled at Hihiri-Pipiri, a place still unknown. Their traditions tell how all mankind, except one couple, were destroyed by the creator due to their moral degradation. Santals believe that all present human being are the descendants of saved couple. The tradition again enumerates that there are twelve patrilineal exogamous clans, but only eleven are known to exist now. They believe that the first seven clans are descended from the first seven sons of their first parents and that the last five clans are branched out in the course of a later development. They believe that the clans like Kisku, Murmu, Soren and Mardi are respectively the clans of king, priest, soldier and farmers. Each clan is divided again into a number of sub-clans mainly for religious functions.

Religious Spirits and Beliefs in Supernatural Powers

Santals believe in ancestral spirits and supernatural beings. Santali rituals offerings and invocations to their spirits or bongas. Santals have separate religion and it is called "Sarna". The Santals believe that the world as being inhabited by invisible supernatural beings and powers. They also believe that they are living, moving and having their being in the world of supernatural entities.

The Santals had been worshipping only the Thakur-Jiu. Then they worshipping the Maran Buru and at campa they adopted the Moreko-Turuiko. Among the Santals, the term "Bonga" is used for various categories of supernatural beings. Belief in supernatural beings and powers and the ways of entering into relations with them constitute their religion. To the Santals, Thakur-Jiu is the creator and sustainer of the universe and a benevolent spirit; they worship him every 5th or 10th year with a sacrifice of goats. A total 12 clans is found among the Santals. Each of the names of clans are derived from either from the plants or animals species. Hansdak clan members claim to be of the highest status as they have derived from the name of their clan from first ancestors. Initially the chonres did not marry with Besras and Tudus. But presently this restriction is no longer followed and the marriages take place between all clan members. They believe that apart from Thakur-Jiu, there are some principal spirits or bongas in their "pantheon" who are regarded as the spirits of the village community. The main are the following:

- a) **Pargana Bonga:** It is believed that the pargana bonga has a special power over the witches and the witches worship him to great training and proficiency in the art or witchcraft. According to common belief, bongas is the chief and the master of all witches. The pargana bonga is represented in the sacred grove by one of the sarjom trees and whenever there is a general disease in the village, this spirit is propitiated by the ojha who implores the spirit to rid the village of all malady and misfortune (Kochar, 1966).
- b) **Sima Bongas:** The Sima bongas are the village boundary spirits who are propitiated by the kudam naeke at definite occasions. However, if they are revealed in the oil divinations of the ojha as a source of trouble for a family or the total village. Village people offer sacrifices to the Sima bongas through the ojha. The ritual of performing sacrifice, which is accompanied by proper incantations, is to place Sun-dried rice on a Sarjom leaf soaked with blood dedicated to the sima bongas in front of the particular tree.
- c) **Jaher Era:** The Moreko-Turuiko is said to be the sister of the Jaher Era. Jaher Era is the goddess of the sacred grove which is preserved inviolate in every village as the abode of the village bongas. The Santals regard her as a good-natured spirit who never does any harm but is mainly concerned with their bodily needs. She is usually worshiped at all festivals for the general welfare of the village, especially for obtaining good crops and for the health of the villagers and their cattle (Troisi, 1979).
- d) **Manjhi Bonga:** The Manjhi bonga is regarded as a benevolent spirit and is specially connected with the general village welfare. After all, he is responsible for the welfare of the headman and his family. The Manjhi bonga is supposed to be particularly active in rest raising other spirits doing harm to men; he is the second in command to pargana bonga. The manjhi bonga resides in the manjhithan which is represented by a stone at the foot of the central wooden post. It is believed that this spirit acts as the adviser of the village headman and the spirits of the earlier headman are a kind of tutelary spirits for the present headman who derives validation of his office from the rituals communication with in deceased predecessors. The Santals believe that when a person dies, his social personality is not annihilated but rather transformed. Some of the expressions used to denote the death of a person indicate that the soul, after leaving the body, becomes a bonga joining the abode of its deceased ancestor.

The belief in the soul of a person becoming bonga and joining the abode of his ancestors is explicitly evident in all the rituals and ceremonies connected with death.

Christian Influence to the Santals

The study of social Systems and Religion of Santals would be incomplete without discuss about the influence of Christian among them. There are many Christian missionaries at Godagari Thana in Rajshahi district of Bangladesh. The agents of this missionary's activity began to flourish slowly among the Santals. The evangelizing activity remarkably in North Bengal among the Santals after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. In North Bengal show that 29,769 santals have already embraced Christianity. There is a clear possibility of mass conversion among the santals. There are a good number of reasons which can help to explain the cause of the santals to Christianity. Educational and philanthropic activities, a feeling of security in the midst of oppression and massive injustice medical care, economic and social welfare, fraternal love and care, political security, respect, etc. are the most influential factors.

Conclusion

Man is born within religion and dies in religion. Religion has had over the lives of human beings for thousand of years. Owing to the migratory habits, the origin of the Santals is peculiarly difficult to determine. The Santals have no recorded history. They depend on their verbal traditions. At present, these innocent, backward, unprivileged and desperately poor people are still struggling for their daily affairs. Their very deep sense of spirituality entire and whole, surges up from the depth at certain moments of human living-birth, marriage, initiation, pain and death while the world is busy with technological upheavals; these marginalized people are going through an identity crisis. They are badly caught between the mythological past of glorious traditions and the present with its degradation and desperate poverty. The Santals are no exception. This significant social, political, economic and cultural transformation challenges the ritual-based cultural matrix of Santal society and its tradition dominated socio-political structure. A common body of traditional practices, common language and folklore, common religious beliefs and practices, traditions and institutions including myths and conformation to the same pattern of social relationships can be identified as the dominant binding factors of the Santals. Throughout our study we have seen that the Santals are still strongly resisting the change of their traditional values and cultural self-image. They are highly ritualistic people, also.

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