

Custom, Myth and Rituals of Santhals

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Abstract

The dark complexion, curly hair and muscular well-proportioned bodies are identity of Santhals/Satars. They inhabit small clusters among Hindus in Jhapa, Morang and Sunsari districts in Nepal. More than 9 million Santhal live in India Dashain and Tihar festivals become vibrant due to their songs and dances. The law and order within the community is maintained with the help of village council. They are divided into a number of exogamous clan units. The most important gods of them are Thakur, Moran Baru ang Moreko. Their incantations can cure the biting of poisonous snake. Like many other communities in Nepal, they believe in life after the death.

Keywords: Santhals, Nim, vermillion powder, Roman catholics, Dikkabal rite, Thakur Jiu

Background of Study

The Santhals of northeastern India are distributed politically throughout the states of Bihar, West Bengal and Orrisa, roughly an area of 550 kilometers. Beyond this region, they have spread widely throughout India as agricultural and industrial labourers. There are almost 90 lakh people in India, 2.12 lakh people in Bagaladesh, 60 thousand people in Nepal and 5.4 thousand people live in Bhutan. The native language of Santhal called Santhali, belongs to Austro-Asiatic language family. In the British Raj in India, a large number of Santhal populations were converted into Christianity. A large number of Santhal populations entered into Nepal from Bihar of India (CBS, 2001). In Nepal their settlements area mainly concentrated in the districts of Jhapa, Morang and Sunsari. They haven't yet given up the habit of continually moving both within the country and back and forth across the Nepal India border. Since many of them are landless. The Santhals are of the largest of tribal grouping in India (Culshaw, 1949). The president of India belongs to Santhal tribe, Dropafi Murmu at present.

The 'Santhal' has been derived possibly from 'Samantapal' or 'boarder guards', which was attributed to them by their neighbors. The Santhals call themselves Hor meaning 'man'. They have been living around the caste-dominated village in earlier times. In due course,

these groups were slowly absorbed or assimilated into the Greater Hindu Tradition in India (Bhouwmick, 1972).

Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this research article describes one of the ethnographic studies about terai indigenous ethnic people, Satars of Nepal briefly.

Methodology

In depth interview and participant observation are done as primary sources. Likewise, the print and online materials of Satars are reviewed critically as secondary sources.

Results and Discussions

Myth about their origin

In the beginning, there was only water. Then god, when they refer to as Thakur Jiu, first created aquatic animals, such as the crab, tortoise, earthworm etc. Next, he created a pair of men, and just as he was about to give life into them, the horse of the sun swooped down from the sky and destroyed them. Thakur Jiu was very disappointed; so, he decided to create a pair of birds instead. He molded them out of the flesh from his chest and breathed life into them. They were called them: Hans and Hansil. They flew around and came to settle on Thakur Jiu's hands. Just at that moment, the horse of the sun, which the Santals call Sin Sodom, came down to drink water. In the process, he emitted foam from his mouth which went afloat. This is said to be the origin of the foam that laces the sea water. Seeing this like a floating rafter Jiu directed the birds to settle on them and sail the seas. But the birds were faint with hunger. So Thakur Jiu ordered the crocodile to get soil from the bottom. But it failed, for the soils always got dissolved on the way. Every sea animal tried, but fared no better. Finally, the earthworm assured he could, if the tortoise would keep the water still. The tortoise stood with his legs chained and the earthworm gathered enough soil. On the surface, vegetation was planked. Now Hans and Hansil built their nest and laid two eggs. Out of them came a man and a woman who became the first ancestors of the Santals, and are known as Harem and Ayo, which are father and mother (Chattopadhyay, 1978).

Rituals: Birth, Marriage, and Death

Birth

Among Hindu people, they arrange naming ceremony on the eleventh day of the birth of the child. The pregnant woman becomes untouchable for eleven days before purification

rite. But among Satar of Nepal, they arrange naming ceremony as soon as she gives birth to a child. If there is delay for some reasons, the naming ceremony is performed another day. To purify the pregnant woman, they put leaves of Nim on the saucer of rice. After having the meal and leaves of Nim purification rite is over.

Marriage

The Satar community is divided into a number of exogamous clan units. They are as follows: Hasdak , Kisku, Murmu, Hembrum, Marandi, Saren, Tudu, Baske, Besara, Pauria, Chore, Bedea etc (Shrestha, 1999).

They are prohibited from marrying within the same clan. Anyone breaking marriage rules and committing other offences is made to pay a fine of over hundred rupees and a feast of one hundred meals of boiled rice, once the convicted person pays this fine, he is forgiven for his offence and is taken back into the community. This is symbolized by burying a stone under the ground which indicates that the damage is repaired and the offence has been buried forever (Bista, 1972).

Satars don't practice early marriage. Usually the ages of the bride and groom are beyond twenty years. The young people enjoy absolute freedom in premarital sexual activities. In the case of progeny before marriage, the lover is expected to marry the mother of his baby or at least it is his responsibility to find a husband for the girl, which isn't very difficult. But in such cases he is also expected to pay compensation against the delivery expenses of the girl. Most marriages are arranged by young people themselves. Even in the case of an arranged marriage, the young couples are given enough opportunity to know each other beforehand. Once the young couple agrees to be married, the boy's parents have to pay certain money for the girl's family on the wedding day, the grooms party spends the whole day at the bride's parent's house (opa.cit.35).

There is also a custom of marriage by force among the Satars. Either a boy or a girl can force a partner to marry. When a boy insists that the girl marry him, he puts vermilion powder on the parting of her hair which automatically makes her his wife by tradition and popular belief. The boy risks a severe beating at the hands of girl's people. In the same way, a girl can force the boy of her choice to marry her by forcibly entering his home and staying there. She may be persuaded to leave. However, if she remains adamant, the boy must marry her.

They celebrate marriage ritual grandly. The bridegroom leads his marriage procession to bride's house. On the way, many questions are asked on the way by elders of the village, they are barricaded by them. But the village wise man comes and reconciles them and allows

going to bride's house. When the marriage procession arrives at the yard, the bridegroom's father offers present to bride's father. Then according to Dikkabala rite, the marriage is done. The bride groom's put vermilion on the parted hair on the doorstep and they sing songs.

Death Rites

After the death of a person, the dead body is either buried or cremated. For the cremation, they take dead body to the bank of the river onto their own field. The dead body of small infants is buried. The Christian Satar observed death rite according to Roman Catholic tradition. After the death of family member, they inform their relative with telephone or send people to inform. The members of the family bemoan on the death. They make a coffin and pray and sing a funeral song in the church with a father. Prior to the burial, they take the dead body to the yard and bathe the corpse with soap and rub oil on the body. The dead body is wrapped with white cloth and coffin is also covered with white cloth. If he has a tract of land, his dead body is burned there. The deceased's wife and children don't eat any meat or fish, on the performance of purification rite. The sons shave their hair and unmarried daughter also take part on this occasion. They arrange feast for the people who participate in the death's funeral. They offer flowers and incense sticks on the 15th day on the grave on the purification day. The relatives also assist the family members with 1 kg, 3 kg or 5 kg rice as they can offer to gift the bereaved family.

Religion and Deities

In every village, the bunyan, the pipal, the tamarind and neem trees which have weathered the storm are worshipped and respected for their antiquity. Thakur Jyu with Sing Bonga, the sun god, is worshipped only once every decade by the Santals. While they worship ancestors on special occasions, they also propitiate them at other festivals. There are other spirits, male and female, essentially mischievous to whom special offerings have to be made to please them, gifts consisting of grass hopper, frogs, worms, burnt clay, sun dried rice etc.

There is the family house deity, Orak Bonga and Abge Bonga, the secret god. No Santal will ever disclose the names of these deities to anyone, except the eldest son who is said to guard this even from their wives, lest these spirits possess them and turn into witches. Orak Bonga is invoked for the welfare of the household during the winter harvest, flower festival and sowing rites. The Abge Bonga has to be worshipped near ant-hills. The Santals fill their hills with spirits called Pats. The chief hill spirit is Berha Pat, worshipped for protection during hunting and for journey (ChattoPadhyay, 1978).

Conclusion

The Santhal tribe tends to preserve their own beliefs, values, and separate identity. Most of them (86.55%) are Hindus and few of them (7%) are Christians. Tribal culture among the Santhal is quickly changing under the impact of external influences such as globalization, industrialization, new communication links, tribal welfare schemes, intercultural mixing and modern cultural trends and community projects. They have corrected their much orthodox and unscientific tradition. Thus, they are now on the vortex of change. Their dressing patterns have been changed. Most of the Santhal population depends on farming for survival. They supplemented their meager agricultural earnings with hunting and gathering in the past. Nowadays, they also engage in foreign employment and non-agricultural sector. Both men and women work to bring home adequate income for their families.

In a nutshell, Santhals are very much friendly and peaceful tribe. They are completely natural, honest, and simple. They know how to be joyous and content in the harsh economic situation. Thakur Jiu is their ancient god. They also practice spirit appeasement, sorcery, and sun worship. Today, their supreme god is the sun god. However, they have also adopted the Hindu deities in addition to tribal gods and goddess. They observe many Hindu festivals. They do have a firm belief in an almighty creator and also in mother earth.

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