

# Santal and Professor

**A Conversation with Dr. Ivy Imogene Hansdak**  
Poet, Translator and Assistant Professor  
Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India

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## Introduction

*In this interview with Dr. Ivy Imogene Hansdak – first published in the Norwegian magazine, **Agenda 3:16**, 9/2018, [www.agenda316.no](http://www.agenda316.no) – Audun Nedrelid traces the life of a Santal woman who grew up in a mission setting in rural Jharkhand, attended a convent boarding school with Hindu girls and ended up as a university teacher in New Delhi.*

*The Santal people in India are often portrayed as poor farmers who inhabit the countryside of central and eastern India. Here, Ivy Hansdak gives us a more nuanced picture of their life.*

*In an urban residential area in New Delhi, we meet Ivy Hansdak. She lives at the top of an apartment complex near Jamia Millia Islamia Central University, where she is an Assistant professor in English. It's like coming to a library where walls and cabinets are filled with books. Here she lives alone among the books, the flowers on the balcony and a homeless cat she occasionally feeds.*

*Ivy serves lunch and eagerly talks about the lectures and seminars she has attended lately.*

– I have always been a good reader and enjoy reading, especially English books. I learned Santali as a child and also speak Hindi with my friends, but it is English I know best. This is what was used at school. Santali was only an oral language for me.

## The Academician

*Ivy grew up in the countryside of the state of Jharkhand, the youngest daughter of Dr. Stephen B. Hansdak. He was the first Santal Medical Superintendent of Mohulpahari Christian Hospital, in Dumka, Santal Parganas. As a six-year-*

*old, Ivy started at a Catholic boarding school with her two siblings (an elder sister named Eva and an elder brother named Christopher). Ten months of the year, they lived far away from their parents and were home only during the holidays.*

*In her class, only she and another girl were Adivasis or tribals (the other girl was from the Oraon tribe). It was tough in the beginning because she only spoke Santali. The other students in the boarding school spoke in Hindi while the teaching took place in English. But after the first term, she had learnt to speak fluently in Hindi and could understand some English. So she spoke Santali only when she was home during the holidays.*

*The boarding school had a large number of Hindus from upper class families. Ivy remembers the big differences existing between the Hansdak siblings and the others in the local community around the hospital at Mohulpahari.*

-When we were home on holiday, we knew nobody. Since my father was a very senior doctor, our family had great respect. There was, therefore, a distance between us and the others in the local community, and we had trouble communicating with the other children.

*Ivy and her siblings attended an elite school with children mainly from the upper class, most of whom were Hindus, while a few were Muslims. Thus, the Hansdak siblings received completely different impulses and impressions in comparison with the Santal children attending the local school in Mohulpahari.*

- They didn't understand what we were talking about and we didn't understand what they were talking about. We spoke Santali with an accent; we habitually used many Hindi and English words.

### **Higher Education**

*After Ivy finished school, she entered a Christian college in Ranchi for graduation. Later, she moved to Delhi and completed her doctorate. Today she works as a university teacher and Assistant Professor. When we asked about the problems faced by rural people growing up in the countryside who wish to enter higher education, and how it has turned out for those from the local community in Mohulpahari, she answers:*

- Many study at the local universities and those with good grades go to good universities. But as I remember, many became school teachers and nurses – like my cousins. I don't think any of them have studied further and taken a doctorate.

- Higher education is important in India if you want a good job. In India, education is subsidized, and basically everyone can start at the university. But it is still a long way to go for many.

*Ivy says that in the Hindu community, especially among the upper castes, women are married into rich families where they do not have to work.*

- In fact, many of my Hindu friends from boarding school got married very early. Many of them do not work and are housewives of very rich men who have good jobs. It seems that they have a very comfortable life. But they are fine people. I liked my Hindu friends and I still have contact with many of them. Here, in Delhi, we call each other and often have long conversations.

### **The Role of Santal Women**

*In comparison with Ivy's Hindu friends, the women of the Santal community have a very different life. There are many women who work. For those with higher education, it is often easier to get a job as a teacher or a nurse. At Mohulpahari, where there is also a nursing school, the local men who have little education get married to female nurses. Men often do not get a job, so it is the woman who becomes the main source of income for the family.*

- But I am now talking about a group of women who have been given the opportunity to get an education. There are probably many other girls in the villages, who do not get the chance to study. A female Santal writer I have worked with, named Nirmala Putul, got married very early. For various reasons, she was divorced from her

husband and could then continue to study. Today she is a well-known poet. She is in the group that has struggled to get an education.

*Is there any discrimination between boys and girls when it comes to who should get education?*

– In our culture, the woman after getting married, should move to the man's house, and it is up to the parents whether they want the daughters to get a good education. I think many parents think about why they should invest a lot of money on someone who later moves away from the family. But this is changing now. I don't think there is as much discrimination among Santals as there can be in other communities in India.

### **The Santali Language**

*Ivy says that Santali is an oral language for her that is only spoken at home and that she speaks mainly Hindi and English. She is not alone in this. More and more Santals are attending English language schools, and in order to get a good job, such children usually have to be able to speak in Hindi and English.*

*– Are you afraid that the Santali language will disappear?*

– I don't think so, but you never know. When you look at schools and universities in urban areas, children do not learn Santali. They are told that they must learn English and Hindi because these are the languages that will give them success in life. When I talk to friends about this, we usually agree that it is the poor villagers who will keep the Santali language alive. They are the ones who speak the language. It is not the script that keeps a language alive – it is the act of speaking. I am a person who knows several languages and use them all in different contexts, but for the villagers, Santali is the only language they can speak.

### **The Legacy of Bodding**

*Ivy goes to the bookshelf and takes down some thick books, from which she wipes off the dust.*

– I think the Santals have a very characteristic culture. Although we do not have our own script yet we have our own language that has been there for centuries. It is a complex language where you can be very expressive. We also have music and dance, and we have our own customs.

*The cover of the books she has found has the name of P.O. Bodding – or Paul Olaf Bodding (1865–1938) – a well-known name in mission circles in Norway. But he is even more famous abroad and especially in the Santal community. The books she shows are Bodding's Santal dictionary which consists of five volumes. In addition to being a missionary in India at the beginning of the twentieth century, he was also a well-known linguist. He introduced the Latin alphabet for the language of the Santals, which is still used by the majority of the population. In addition to translating the Bible into Santali, he published dictionaries as well as ethnographic collections. But not all the Santals use the Latin alphabet.*

### **The Santal Creation Story and the Book of Genesis**

*Ivy mentions the Santal creation story (or creation myth) in connection with a course being taught next year at the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi. For this MA course titled "Writings from the Margins", she had compiled study material on the folklore and myths of the Santals, documented by the missionaries. Rev. Lars Olsen Skrefsrud (1840–1910) had documented the Santal creation story around 1880, and this was later translated by Rev. P.O. Bodding from Santali into English in 1942. Many similarities are found in the Santal creation story and the Biblical creation story about Adam and Eve, Ivy thinks.*

*Although, according to her, the missionaries partly wrote with western eyes, she believes they did a thorough job of preserving the language and culture of the Santals. She compares this to the work that missionaries have done in African countries.*

– Among African indigenous tribes, you can see that their culture and language have been destroyed since the missionaries did not try to preserve it. This very aggressive approach is not found among the missionaries

working among the Santals. I would say that Bodding was a person who showed a great deal of respect for the culture of the Santals. He knew the language and he wrote a dictionary. Many of us Santals look up to Bodding.

### **Santal Folklore**

*During the 1920s, P.O. Bodding published three volumes of folklore of the Santals. These are stories that have been told in the Santal countryside for generations. They may be compared to the Norwegian folk tales of Asbjørnsen and Moe, collected in the mid-eighteen century.*

– *Is there still interest in folklore in Santal society?*

– There is probably some interest, but now we live in a world of rapid development in the media. We cannot let our culture and society stop. Folklore was what we had, but we have also evolved. We live in a world where we all use mobile phones and Facebook. We are spread across much of India like Assam, Bengal, Jharkhand and Odisha as well as Bangladesh and Nepal. Everyone has different influences from where they live and change in different directions. The Santals in Assam are very different from, for example, me and the Santals in Odisha are struggling to use a new form of writing while others use the Latin alphabet. We are all also influenced by different politicians, and with political influence we go in many different directions.

### **Shaped like a Cross**

*Ivy goes back to her bookshelf and fetches more books. These are books containing stories that she has helped translate from Santali into English. She is the co-editor of a publication called Anthology of Tribal Literature<sup>[iii]</sup> and has a team involved in the translations. Everything is done on a voluntary basis since there is no place to apply for support. If something is to be released, it must be done with her own funds or private support.*

*She presents a book by the author, Sunder Manoj Hembrom. He is from Dumka, but works in Kolkata. He has written a story about an old man's funeral after converting to Christianity. According to the traditions of the Santals, the dead are to be buried in the north-south direction, while in Christian tradition the burial is in the east-west direction. Thus, there is a conflict in the village where one group says he should follow the traditions of the Santals, while the other group says he has converted, so he must follow the Christian tradition. Both groups end up digging a grave, which is then shaped like a cross.*

– The story has an open ending, but this is a very interesting story about how a conversion can divide a village and create conflict, says Ivy.

*They plan to publish around seven stories with Sunder Manoj Hembrom and other writers such as Basudeo Besra, Durbin Soren and Bijoy Tudu. The stories often reflect social problems within the Santal community.*

### **Many Plans and Ideas**

*Ivy takes out her cell phone and browses some pictures.*

– Here are some photos from the Santal Fashion Show at Jagwar Seminar in October 2017. And here's a photo of me when I interviewed Sir Mark Tully, BBC's India correspondent, at the Jharkhand Literary Meet in Ranchi in December 2017. Here from the Santal Literary Meet in Dumka where I was the organizer.

*The color and pride of her own culture strike us when Ivy shows pictures from the various seminars – with important and relevant themes – that she has attended in recent years. Her commitment to further the Santals' cultural history is great.*

– The most fun thing here was the fashion show where both men and women showed off the traditional Santal attire, says Ivy Hansdak, who has many plans and ideas.

*In the spring of 2018, she was in the United States and gave a lecture at a conference in the University of Berkeley, California, and in October, she will attend a seminar in the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, where the theme is Bodding's collection of Santal cultural heritage.[iii] In this connection, she also hopes to visit friends in Oslo.*

– This is a big adventure for me. I really want to visit Norway, she says.

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#### Notes

[i] In the Indian Census Reports, the Santal people are placed under the category of Scheduled Tribes (ST). They are also known as *Adivasis* ('first-dwellers') and claim to be one of the indigenous peoples of India.

[ii] The anthology was later cancelled and instead Ivy decided to start an open-access online journal. This is *The Johar Journal* on <https://joharjournal.org/>

[iii] She visited both Denmark and Norway in October 2018. At the International Seminar-cum-Workshop on "Transnational Custodianship of Cultural Heritage in the 21st Century", University of Copenhagen, Denmark, 8 – 11 October 2018, she presented a paper on "Cultural Heritage in the Classroom: Teaching L.O. Skrefsrud's "The Ancestor's Story" and P.O. Bodding's "The Money-Lender and the Debtor"".

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#### About the Interviewer



**Audun Nedreliid** is a Norwegian writer, artist, musician and filmmaker, who works freelance mainly with organizations in Norway and abroad. He has directed and participated in a number of short films, animations and documentaries, as well as writing articles for various magazines. In 2013, he was the keyboard player on the band *Alvik* during its tour of Czech Republic. See more at [www.coaxfilm.no](http://www.coaxfilm.no)