

# **A brief introduction of Santal life and culture and our approach to development**

**By Dr. Boro Baski**

## **Santals as a community**

We, the Santals are one of the largest homogeneous tribal communities of India, counting more than 10 million people. Apart from India, Santals live in neighboring countries, in Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. Despite this geographical distance, Santals share the same language, cultural tradition and values. Santals' social and religious system is very complex and complete in itself. Each village has five representatives who are selected by the village community through consensus to run the village. They are 'Manjhi baba' the headman, 'Jog Manjhi' the assistant-headman, Naike, the priest, Paranik the youth guide, and Godet, the convener. All kinds of disputes, including any family and personal problems, are discussed in the village meetings and are settled through common consent. Santals have some classical song-melodies and various music- and dance-forms that are sung and performed the same way wherever Santals live. They have oral traditions, songs, and ritual play an important role in cultural maintenance and transmission. Some music tunes have been slightly modified due to the cultural influence of the various population groups that live near Santal villages. However, the musical instruments and the basic rhythms are the same as they used to be ages ago.

Originally Santals were hunter-gatherers and known for clearing forests for agriculture. Presently they are mostly farmers. For centuries, Santals have been living as neighbors of other communities maintaining a cultural and social distance. The Santals are regarded as one of the economically poor communities of India. They are known to be simple, honest, peace-loving, jovial in character, fond of their rice-wine and ready to crack a joke. They are also regarded as slow and lethargic people, reluctant to accept new ideas and changes. They are said to suffer from an inferiority complex. These are some of the broad ethnographic impressions that are prevalent about the Santals.

## **The characteristic features of Santal Identity**

Modern education allows for interaction between communities and this is where we first encounter our cultural differences. Education poses different choices to the Santals – either to be engulfed in mainstream culture or to remain marginalized. In both cases we are less than

“complete” or ill equipped to take full advantage of educational opportunities. Government school education could play a greater role in harmonizing the different cultural transitions within Indian society. But education, to a large extent, failed to create enough awareness among the people about tribal life.

Education could help to make the cultural transition from tradition to modernity less painful and less destructive. This shift from tradition to modernity is the core issue by which one can understand the internal dynamics of the Santal culture and its complexity.

To understand the issue, I discuss some of the traditional values of Santal culture as opposed to modernity with the help of a chart:

Sl.no	Santal Cultural	Modernity
1	<p><b>Community life-</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Santals lead a community life which is cohesive and organic and unified.</li> <li>➤ Community interests come before any individual interest.</li> <li>➤ From birth to death, all ceremonies centre around the community, there is little scope for individual celebration.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ In modernity success depends on individuality.</li> <li>➤ Individual interests are prominently emphasized.</li> </ul>
2	<p><b>Sense of democracy</b></p> <p>In the community, decisions are taken through consensus and not through elections.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Majority’s decision prevails through elections.</li> <li>➤ Elections in India are often ruled by monetary and muscle power.</li> <li>➤ The democratic rights of the marginalized communities like the Santals are often influenced by these powers.</li> </ul>
3	<p><b>Non-competitive attitude</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Mostly rely on physical labour for a living.</li> <li>➤ Little interest in accumulating</li> </ul>	<p><b>Encourages competition</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Without a competitive spirit it is difficult to succeed in modern life.</li> <li>➤ In modernity labour is considered a</li> </ul>

	wealth. Santals love to live in the present.	device to gather capital and savings.
4	<p><b>Carefree life style</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Children grow up with few rules and prohibitions in the family.</li> <li>➤ Satisfied with limited requirements and comforts.</li> <li>➤ Santals remain happy with a minimum of things like food, clothing and shelter.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Success depends on a disciplined and formal life-style.</li> <li>➤ Encourages exploiting modern amenities.</li> </ul>
5	<p><b>Sense of cultural independence</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Santals openly take part in all the festivals of Hindus, Muslims, Christians and other faiths. Yet, they feel secure in their own culture.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Cultural assimilation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Schools teach cultural assimilation by organizing exclusive school programmes and activities.</li> </ul>
6	<p><b>Freedom of women</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Women can choose their husbands and they may leave their husbands in case of disagreements.</li> <li>➤ They are able to re-marry even after having children.</li> <li>➤ It is not uncommon that unmarried couples live together and raise children without any social stigma attached.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Traditionally, women of non-tribal communities in India have limited freedom. Modern city life, however, eases these limitations.</li> </ul>
7	<p><b>No caste and dowry system</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Not divided into castes or any form of social stratification.</li> <li>➤ No system of social discrimination.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Marriage within one's caste is still common.</li> <li>➤ Dowry is common among non-tribals which gives a lot of financial and social stress to the families of the bride.</li> </ul>

8	<p><b>Joy of life</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ “Joy of life” is called <i>Raska</i>; it must be found even in the most routine work.</li> <li>➤ Unless <i>Raska</i> exists, Santals find little interest in their work.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ The uncontrolled freedom of joy and enjoyment goes against the ethos of ‘modern development’.</li> </ul>
9	<p><b>Santal world view</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Santals live more by intuition.</li> <li>➤ They consider the environment around them more sacred.</li> <li>➤ Their sense of time is vague and personal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Modernity depends on reason and rationality.</li> <li>➤ Indian state encourages secularism</li> <li>➤ In modernity life revolves around the time and punctuality.</li> </ul>
10	<p><b>Communion with nature</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ The Santal daily life and value system is deeply related to nature.</li> <li>➤ They believe that the nature, man and God are intimately linked.</li> <li>➤ The spirits who the Santals worship live in nature. They dwell in mountains, creeks, bushes and trees.</li> <li>➤ Their songs, folk tales and their histories are linked to the forests, rivers and mountains.</li> <li>➤ The people who have been evacuated from their own ancestral land have found it difficult to lead a meaningful life elsewhere.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Modern development often happens at the cost of exploiting nature.</li> </ul>

Beside these positive cultural values, there are number of features which I see as flaws and weaknesses of Santal. They obstruct their personal growth and development as a community:

- a. Alcoholism
- c. Restriction in ritual ceremonies
- d. Cruelty to men and animals
- e. Suspicion towards outsiders (*dikus*)
- f. Reluctant to accept new ideas
- g. Uncontrolled freedom of joy

### **Ghosaldanga-Bishnubati approach of development**

**Education in Our School:** Understanding the paradox of Santal culture and modern development, some of our senior educated Santals have realized that our children will not receive the education that is sympathetic to Santal life from the Government schools. In those schools, our children will gradually become culturally marginalized.

Therefore, we have started a Primary School, Hostels for our senior students and a Museum of Santal Culture. In our Primary School, we have introduced a curriculum which is pro-Santal-culture. The curriculum exposes our students to their own culture and tradition: to the history, folklore, the festivals, and the music of the Santal tribe. We have decided that in the first two school years we teach through our mother-tongue Santali. Later, the students gradually switch to the mainstream languages and subjects like Bengali, English, Science, and Mathematics. The schools and hostels are built in the village or within one kilometer radius of the village so that the students can visit their families to take part in the household work when necessary. This helps them to get exposure to the positive and negative aspects of Santal life besides absorbing modern education.

**The Museum of Santal Culture** is built at the end of the village in which more than 100 Santal ethnographic items like hunting materials, dresses and ornaments, musical instruments, house hold utensils and traditional medicines are exhibited. We believe that these items are not any old wooden or metal thing which our parents and grandparents once used. These objects tell us the history of our tribe and are a witness to the deep thought, intelligence and ingenious spirit of our forefathers. The role of the museum is to educate our children about the rich culture and tradition that our ancestors have given us. We also believe

that the strength of our cultural roots can give support to a Santal to man or women in order to consciously reach out to the modern world. In this way, a museum can be one element for the community to move forward towards modernity without abandoning its Santal mentality. Despite giving the exposure to the children from the beginning, it is however not so easy for young students and illiterate villagers to internalize the richness of Santal culture and heritage. To understand the cultural depth of Santal culture and its importance in daily life needs a higher level of education and maturity. It is through the conscious exposure to our culture and then by going out to the world to experience other cultures that we can realize the importance of our own culture. This helps us to find our own space in this multi-cultural society of India.

Therefore, we have groomed the educated youth in Santal dance, drama and music. Some of our groups have traveled to various parts of India and abroad to share our lives and culture with the outside world. Traveling in India, our students consciously witness the glittering and competitive city life-styles. However, they also experience the good work social service organizations do among the poor. This helps them to make a choice in their lives in a critical way and by this we connect our Santal culture with the outside world.

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