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## **Santali Women: Under the Shadow of Long Silence**

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### **Abstract**

*Proto- Astraloid by origin with an Astro-Asiatic tongue, the Santal is the biggest homogenous tribe of India who has the history ancient to that of Aryan, Dravidian and Mongolian. The Santal is a wandering tribe and has a long history of migration. At present they have been scattered in the areas like Santal Pargana, Chattishgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Assam. The present study aims to explore her role in the Santal society. While discussing the position of women in the Santal society the most important thing to be noticed is their right to property. So an attempt would also be made to discuss the right of the Santal women to the property belonged to her family. The Santal community has well defined Traditional Self-Governance Institutions. The researcher, in this present study, would also try to present her position in the Tribal Self-Governance of the Santal Society.*

***Key Words: The Santals, Santali woman, role, right, position.***

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**1. Introduction:** The Santals are the descent of Proto-Astraloid origin with an Astro-Asiatic tongue who entered India prior to that of Aryan and Dravidian. They along with Ho, Munda, Bhil, Gond, Oraon, etc commence the ancient ethnic stratification of the country. They have been living in India for centuries in the deep forests and hills of Central India without formal contact with the people living in the so called civilized area of the plains. Only the British invaders brought them to notice while extending their military campaign to their hidden territory. But the Hindus of the neighbouring areas hardly ever tried to assimilate them into their caste systems. On the other hand, the strong sense of a tradition based culture prevented the Santals also exchange their folklife with the 'dekos' (non-Santals) next door.

As per the official record the first spell of the Santal people entered Assam after the discovery of Tea plant by Robert Bruce in the year 1823 A.D. the Tea Company had to face difficulties due to scarcity of local labourers. So they recruited the Santhal people and other Adivasis from other states of India as labourers. Sometimes they were forcefully sent to Assam against their will to work in the Tea gardens as coolie, the bonded labourers. In this way the Santal people and other Adivasis were brought from outside Assam to work in the tea gardens whose kith and kin are scattered all over Assam and became permanent settlers.

Also after the Santhal Rebellion of 1855 – 1857 in Damin-i-Koh of Bihar, Christian missionary of Benagaria, Bihar in consultation with the then British Government of Assam get settled thirty families comprising one hundred members in the District of Goalpara on 8<sup>th</sup> February 1881. From then these people are living there permanently whose population has increased in large numbers and the area is called as Santal Colony of Assam. Upto 1888 the total population of that colony

increased up to 600 and they cleared altogether 1886 hectares of land for cultivation and the total population of the colony amounted to 4,486 and the land for cultivation was 12,280 hector. <sup>(1)</sup>

Further the missionaries of Chota-Nagpur, the Santal Parganas, Orissa and various other missions of India encouraged and helped the poverty stricken Santal people to immigrate to Assam, where they might find lucrative and easy employment.” <sup>(2)</sup> The missionaries did not restrict their activities only to sending labourers to gardens. There is the example of a Mission, The Trust Association of Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Santhal Pargana, owning two tea gardens in Goalpara district of Assam in the 1890s and, at the same time, managing a zamindari in a recruiting district. The problem of labour recruitment in those gardens was settled by sending Christian people from that zamindari area. One of these gardens was Mornoi Tea Estate.

When they migrated to Assam they brought with them their prosperous art and culture, language and literature. In time they adopted local atmosphere and adjusted themselves. They embraced Assam as their own motherland and co-operated in the common eco-social life of Assam with their rich cultural heritage which have made them distinct from the socio-cultural life of the locality. As per the 2001 census the total Santal population in Assam is 2,42,886 living mostly in the districts of Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Chirang, Nalbari, Baska, Darrang, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh and Nagaon. Though they adopted local life style to cope up with the localities but they did not change their tradition and cultures and remained unaffected by the local atmosphere. At present they have scattered and live permanently in the areas like Dhabri and Hazaribagh district and Santhal Parganas in Bihar and Chattisgarh, Jharhand, almost all the districts of Assam, Dasar areas of Orissa state, Singhbhum and Manbhum district of Bihar and Gonda of Old Bihar, Birbhum and Chhotnagpur areas; Burdwan, Hugli, Medinipur, Bankura, and Purulia districts of West Bengal, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh <sup>(3)</sup>. The Santhals of Assam being mostly illiterate are living in the villages situated in remote jungle areas have cultivation as their traditional occupation.

**2. Social status of Santali woman:** The key role in the economy of the Santal society is played by the women. Most of the domestic works are performed by them. They engage themselves in domestic works, collection of firewood, rearing of child and domestic livestock, selling and marketing for the family. They also always are busy with agricultural activities like sowing and reaping, fishing, gathering forest product along with performing wage labour as and when required. They are the head loaders. They pick leaves. Though the Santali women are worst hit by the effects of male alcoholism in their society one of the surprising things to be noticed is that the Santali women are predominantly engaged in the liquor trade. They brew handi and sell them as a mean of their tribal economy as limited resources are available for them for their survival. In the limited field of employment too they have to face the gender discrimination and wage difference. No special care regarding proper nutrition is taken even during the pregnancy.

One of the big concerns of a Santal couple after marriage is to have no child. A Santal man can divorce a woman for her infertility and the vice versa and this infertility can lead a man to have a second wife with prior consent from his former one. According to the traditional belief of the Santal community a human being is more prone to come into contact of a supernatural agency at the mother's womb and during the time of birth. As such numerous restrictions are imposed to a woman to safeguard her womb. She is prevented from taking any life and she will not be allowed to see or touch a human corpse. She cannot even weep or cry in case a death occurs. She will not be allowed to cross a half ploughed paddy field. Under any circumstances she will not be permitted to go near a river or stream where 'curins' (malevolent spirit) are believed to dwell. She is not allowed to lie down in the courtyard or in an open space because some malevolent Bonga (spirit) may have an evil eye on her womb or a bird called 'Puni cere' may fly over her which may cause harm to her womb.

She is not entitled to walk over the straw ropes usually used for binding *bandis* (a storage made of bamboo for storing grains). Other restrictions are also imposed to a pregnant woman. These restrictions are associated with some traditional belief. She is not allowed to put Jackfruit flower in her hair because her child in the womb may shrivel like a dried jackfruit flower. At the time of thunderstorm a pregnant woman should stay inside putting her fingers in her ears so that the child does not hear the sound otherwise the child would be born coward or deaf. If she makes '*pitha*' (bread) during her pregnancy it may wrinkle her child's ear. Fearing that her child in the womb may get an extra finger or the fingers may be forked she is prevented to plant or break turmeric root. The Santals living in the villages use leafcups for having *handi* (traditional beer) but a woman in the womb will not be allowed to make leafcup because if she does so her child may be born with split lip. Fearing that her child may get a very long tongue and large and flappy ears she is not allowed to gaze at an elephant.

The traditional Santal self-governing system neither generally support polygamy nor it is in favour of divorce and, in fact, divorce was very rare among them. But in unavoidable circumstances three justifying reasons were socially recognized for divorce in favour of the husband: 1) if the wife is engaged in adultery; 2) if she is suspected to be practising witchcraft and 3) if she is infertile. In addition to that the extravagant way of a wife and permanent illness may also sometime lead to divorce. On the other hand a woman is also entitled to seek divorce if her husband wants to have a second wife against her consent or cannot supply her with the necessities of life. As a general rule, the bride goes to reside with her husband after marriage, except in some cases in which the son-in-law goes to reside in his father-in-law's house. Like other patriarchal society in the Santal society also the father is, in general, the head of a family and all the decision making power is vested upon him. He is the owner and administrator of family property. As per the customary law the members of a family must obey him. In the absence of father the elder son enjoys the position of the deceased father. The children of a Santal family acquire the clan status of the father and only the male children have the right to enjoy family property. Due to the patriarchal family system, importance is given to the father, paternal grandfather and paternal uncle rather than to the mother, maternal grandfather and maternal uncle. Stereotyping male and female roles within the family is still prevalent. It is the duty of a husband to provide his family members food materials, shelter, clothing, health care, etc. On the other hand, a wife is responsible for the household activities. She also assists her husband in agricultural and fishing operations. The grown-up sons help their father, while the daughters help their mother in her household work. Although women are barred from certain religious and administrative functions, they have an important economic status in the family. It is evident from their place and role in the family that they enjoy certain amount of authority and independence within the family<sup>(4)</sup>.

The Santal woman enjoys an inferior position to that of a man in the Santal society but she also enjoys some rights along with obligations as per the Santal customary law prevalent in their society. A Santal girl is the property of her father until her marriage and as such he is to provide safeguard to her modesty and is solely responsible for her conduct. If an unmarried girl commits an offence, her father is fined or temporarily outcasted 'for his property has gone astray'. Similarly, when a girl is married she becomes the property of her husband and he has to take care of her<sup>(5)</sup>. The labour is also divided between male and female but this arrangement is based not on inferiority but on convenience and propriety. Males are considered more fit than women for certain acts, while in others the performance by women would suggest a sexual deviation. Women, for example, are not allowed to plough. They cannot even thatch a roof or use a leveler. They are prevented from shooting arrows, using razor, chiseling holes, striking with an axe or fishing with line and hook.

They are not allowed to weave cloth or string a cot. They cannot wear male clothes or play male instruments. All these actions are performed by male. Likewise, women are not allowed to sacrifice animals as well as to witness sacrifice. The Santal women are prevented from using drums, going to the *Manjhithans* (sacred place) or accompanying a corpse to the burial ground because these activities can be the cause of suspicion in the mind of menfolk as only the women are believed to be the witches in the Santal society. An outside woman and a married daughter are not allowed to enter the *bhitar* or private shrine of a Santal household because of the common belief that the sex of women will contaminate the *bongas*. But some house hold activities including the collection of fuel and the daily drawing of water along with cooking are almost exclusively a woman's task.

**3. Santali women's right to property:** In the Santal society rights to property is primarily inherited by the male child but certain property rights are enjoyed by the women too and this property rights are more vested on the unmarried girls than that of the married ones.. Arjjumend <sup>(6)</sup> while dicussing the rights of the Santhal women, says that so long as she is unmarried the wages earned by her are the property of the head of the family. The wages on which she has absolute right are of six types.. First of these is the *er-arpa* or a bundle of harvested crop. Er-arpa is given in almost all well-off Santhal families. Second type of property consists of any animal that her maternal uncle may have given her as gift. There are again a number of customary presents on which an unmarried girl has absolute possession. If her grandfather or elder sister's husband come to the house, she washes their feet and they offer gifts, which are absolutely her property. At the wedding of her elder sister she acts as a leading girl or *ak vuric*, and receives various gifts. A fifth type of property which she may have inherited on the death of her father and mother. If her mother is already dead she gets her father's movable property on his death and retain it till her marriage. If she is a minor one, she can dispose of it as she likes, otherwise it will be kept for her by guardian until she is married or attains majority. If her mother dies, she will have no claim in her father's movable properties if there are brothers. Finally if there is a partition in the family before the girl is married she is given *danguahisa* in the form of cattle or a plot of land so that the expenses likely to be incurred in her marriage can be managed out of that plot of land or the cattles.. In principle, the girl has limited rights in the immovable property of the father. She cannot ask for a partition if her brothers separate, however, normally a piece of land is kept in reserve for financing her marriage. At the same time her right to maintenance continues if she is adult and can claim it from her father, brother or father's agnates. She can also claim sufficient land for maintenance till her marriage. Moreover, she can acquire land of her own out of the wages received in the form of *er-arpa* and out of other presents from her kindred. On such land she has absolute right. Similarly, in certain circumstances an unmarried daughter can inherit land of her father if there are neither brothers nor agnates. Unmarried girl also has certain rights over own person. If anyone violates her modesty the culprit has to pay five rupees or some other sum decided as *lajao marao*. This *lajao marao* money is her absolute property. All the utensils, articles, ornaments, cash or cattle possessed by her as an unmarried daughter remain her own. If after marriage she comes to her father to assist him in harvesting operations, she earns fresh gleanings and these are added to the original stock. If the *er-arpa* consists of fowls, pigs, goats, cattle or cash, it is usually kept at her father's house until she is finally settled in her new house after marriage. The settlement of the married daughter generally starts after the birth of the first child. A married daughter during her lifetime has full control of ownership in all types of movable or immovable property. In case of movables her property is not inherited by her husband, but is divided equally by her sons. While in case of land, the inheritance varies according to its characters. If the land has been acquired as *taben jom* (forever) the children of the married daughter inherit it. If there are sons they receive the land related property and if there

are no sons, the daughters, married or unmarried, will get the property. Her husband or his agnates will not, however, have any claim, for the land was never there. If the woman does not have any children the land will be returned to her father, brothers, mother or male agnates.

**4. Participation of women in their self-Governing institutions :** The Santals have been strictly maintaining a well defined traditional judicial self-governing system. In the judicial system of the Santal community, three positions are generally reserved for women known as *budhi hadam*. The word *Budhi* means ‘elder’, not the old. These are the ex-officio posts reserved for *Manjhi budhi*, *Jogmanjhi budhi* and *Naeki budhi*, the wives of *Manjhi*, *Jogmanjhi* and *Naeki* respectively. But in reality these female officials play their vital role mostly in the social and cultural functions celebrated in the different occasions of the Santal life cycle along with various festivals and have nothing to do in the traditional governance system of the tribes. The women are not allowed to sacrifice and perform any task in the religious functions. Women also accept this conviction. As the *Manjhi* is the supremo of their traditional self governing system and this self governing system is intermixed with religion and faith, so entire community has faith in the post of the *Manjhi*. As such women normally are not accepted at the post of *Manjhi*. Accepting the woman *Manjhi* may cause inconvenience because the Santal women particularly are accustomed to the traditional governance system in the villages and do not dare to voice anything against the socio-religious system.

Belief and practice of witchcraft among the Santals is very strong even today among the Santals. As per their belief most dreaded magical effects and incurable diseases are believed to be resulting from the practices of witchcraft. The Santals have always been obsessed by the fear of witchcraft. They believe that practice of witchcraft may destabilize society, cause harm to the life of human being and can be the cause of death. Kolean Haram remarks “The greatest trouble for us Santal is witches. Because of them we are enemies of each other. If there were no witches we would have lived happily”<sup>(7)</sup>. So a suspicion is always present that witches may be at work when a sick person cannot recover. Among the Santhals only women are believed to practice witchcraft in contrast to that of Mundas, Oraons, Bhils and other tribes in which both a man or a woman can practice witchcraft.. It is a deep rooted belief among the Santals that witchcraft empowers a women to cause harm in a society. A woman of any age can acquire the magic power of witchcraft. They believe that the witches force girls to become their disciple so that the legacy continues after their death also. Their training is said to be done on very dark nights in a forest or an open plain, and it consists in the teaching of *mantars*, charms and songs. She is introduced to the *bongas* (*malevolent spirit*) only after a girl master over these things whose names she must learn. She is then married to a *bonga* from whom she learns the art of “killing”. At the end of her training, she is commanded by her witch tutor to practice what she learnt upon one of her own relatives. If she refuses she is said to become mad and die. That’s why women are always looked upon with a sense of suspicion.

**5. Conclusion:** The Santal women are still under the shadow of darkness. Though the influence of Christianity and awareness towards education has contributed a lot to educate the Santal women and to engage them chiefly in educational and medical field as teachers and nurses but still miles to go to empower them to reach a dignified status in their tribal society.

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