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## Structure of the Santal Society: A Discussion

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### ABSTRACT

Santal is one of the oldest inhabitants of ancient India. The third largest tribal population in India is the Santal community. They have their own customs, language, culture, literature, script and religion. Their social structure is one of the most important. The social structure of Santals is called 'Majhi Ari' or 'Majhi System'. They call the Majhi system among themselves 'Lita Ari or Lita Bad'. Some principles or etiquette are necessary to guide a family or society in the right direction. In Santal society, those etiquette or principles are traditional. In Santal society, Majhi Ari refers to the village administration. Without the Majhi system, a Santal village is baseless. In fact, the Santal social system has been an alternative form of a Panchayat system since time immemorial. Just as the parents are the guardians of the family, so is the Majhi Baba the guardian of the Santal village. Just as a child is helpless without his parents, so is the village society baseless without the Majhi Baba. Therefore, he is not only a Majhi, he is the respected Majhi Baba. In Santal society, the Majhi is the supreme authority. There are four more people to assist the Majhi Baba of the village, they are - Paranik Baba, Jogmajhi Baba, Godet Baba and Nayke Baba. They are also called 'Ato More Baba' or the village Panchajan. They provide immediate solutions to properly manage the village. In times of trouble and danger for the people of the village, they solve the problem under



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the leadership of Majhi Baba. Therefore, the Majhi system of the Santal social structure is 'Maaj or Pillar'.

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### **Introduction:**

Santal tribals are one of the various tribal groups in the world. In terms of population, they are the third largest tribal group in India. Among the states of eastern India, the Santal people are the largest tribal group in the states of Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal and Odisha. The Santal people live more or less in almost all the states of India. The Santals identify themselves as 'Hor' (Man).

In anthropological terms, the Santal tribals belong to the Proto-Austroloid gene. Their mother tongue is the Santali language belonging to the Kol-Munda or Kherwadi language family of the Austric language family. According to linguists, the Santali language is an older language than the Sanskrit language. The Santali language has its own script 'Olchiki' for the practice of literature, which was invented by Pandit Raghunath Murmu. The Santali language ranks thirteenth among the eighth scheduled languages of India.

The Santal tribal people are a very simple social race. The communist system and democratic system are their tradition. Their own customs, judicial system and social structure are the main pillars of their society. From birth to death, their activities are carried out according to their own customs. The Majhi system is their main foundation. They are worshipers of nature. Mountains, hills, rivers, seas, trees, stones are their gods and goddesses. The Santals are very hardworking. Their main profession is agriculture. Currently, some changes are being observed in their profession, such as - they are adopting the field of employment and business.

### **Identity of the Santal race:**

Santal tribals identify themselves as 'Hor' or 'Kherwal'. 'Hor' means human and 'Kherwal' means descendant of birds. According to the Jomsim Binti or Purana of Santal nation, the original parents of Santals are Pilchu Haram-Pilchu Burhi or Pilchu parents. Pilchu Haram Pilchu Burhi were created from the eggs of duck and swan birds. Again, duck and swan were created by Thakur-Thakran Dev Devi. That is why Santals identify themselves as 'Kherwal'. 'Kher' means bird, 'Wal' means lineage = 'Kherwal' means descendant of birds. On the other hand, children of God and Goddess. Therefore, they also identify themselves as 'Bonga Hopan' or Dev Vansh.



Pilchu Haram Pilchu Burhi had seven sons and seven daughters born in a place called Hihiri Pipiri. After that, their descendants spread to different places. From Hihiri Pipiri came Khoj Khaman, from Khoj Khaman came Harata and from Harata came Sasangbeda. Lars Olsen Skrefsrud and Jugia Haram recorded the Shruti Katha of Guru Kalyan Haram and published the book in 1887 called ‘Horkoren Mare Haparamko Reyak’ Katha’ or the story of the ancestors of the Santals. It is said there-

‘Hihiri Pipiri Rebon Janam Len,  
Khoj Khaman Rebon Khoj Len,  
Harata Reban Haralen,  
Sasangbeda Rebon Jat Ena Ho’.

(‘Hardkoren Mare Haparamko Reya Katha’ - L.O. Skrefsrud & Jugiya Haram, Page-7.)

Geographically, the original habitat of the Santals was a place called ‘Hihiri Pipiri’ in New Zealand in the old days. Baidyanath Soren says in his book ‘The Kherwal’ (Ancient History of the Santals)- “The place name ‘Hihiri Pipiri’ is very common there. In supports of this connection following assertion by Champbell is reproduced below; Now Pipiri is a very common place name in New Zealand, i.e. Ahiri, Pipirika, Pipirioa, Pipaki. Piriaka, Pirinoa, Pirengia etc.” (‘The Kherwal’-Baidyanath Soren, Page-13.)

The identity of the Santal nation is a major feature. They are proud of themselves. They have maintained their own language, culture, religion and social organization or Majhi system over the ages. Which are very necessary for the survival of a nation.

### **Social Structure of the Santal:**

It is very difficult to say exactly when the Santal social structure was formed. For the concept of the Santal social structure, one has to depend on the Santal Binti or Purana. From the Jamsim Binti or Purana, we can know that the Santal social structure was formed while living alongside the Sasangbeda or the Red Sea. Since that time, for the sake of their own survival and to save others, they formed a village panchajan. That village panchajan is the ‘Majhi Ari’ system. The Majhi Ari system is the foundation or the main life of the Santal society. The village panchajan or Panchayat system has been in existence for the smooth management of the village. All the responsibilities of the village are entrusted to the specially appointed judges of the village. They are- 1) Majhi, 2) Paranik, 3) Jgmaji, 4) Godet and 5) Nayke.



Apart from the Ato Mareko or Gram Panchayat, the next levels are- (a) Pir or Panchayat level, (b) Muluk or Block level, (c) Tallat or Subdivision level, (d) Zilla or District level, (e) Panat or State level and (f) Dishom or National level.

**Pir ( Panchayat ) :-** At the Pir or Panchayat level there are (1) Pir Pargana Baba, (2) Pir Paranik Baba, (3) Jogo Pir Paranik Baba and (4) Pir Godet Baba.

**Muluk ( Block ) :-** At the Muluk or Block level, there are (1) Muluk Pargana Baba, (2) Muluk Paranik Baba, (3) Jogo Muluk Paranik Baba and (4) Godet Baba.

**Tollat ( Subdivision ) :-** At the Tollat or Subdivision Level, there are (1) Tollat Pargana Baba, (2) Tollat Paranik Baba, 3) Jogo Tollat Paranik Baba and 4) Tollat Godet Baba.

**District ( District ) :-** At the District or District Level, there are (1) Zilla Pargana Baba, (2) Zilla Paranik Baba, (3) Zilla Jogo Paranik Baba and (4) Zilla Godet Baba.

**Panat ( State ) :-** At the Ponot or State Level, there are (1) Ponot Pargana Baba, (2) Ponot Paranik Baba, (3) Ponot Jogo Paranik Baba and 4) Ponot Godet Baba.

**Dishom ( National ) :-** The Dishom or National Level consists of (1) Dishom Pargana Baba, (2) Dishom Paranik Baba and 3) Dishom Godet Baba. There are also several Dishom Susariya.

### **Santali Language, Literature and Script:**

The mother tongue of the Santali tribal people is Santali. Santali is one of the oldest languages. Santali belongs to the Kol-Munda or Kherwadi language of the Austro-Asiatic language family of Austric languages. Scholars believe that many words of the Santali variety have also influenced other Indian languages. Parimal Chandra Mitra believes that Santali is the base of many languages of the world.

Santali literature was oral for thousands of years. The Santali ancestors believed that 'Puthi Khon Do Thutige Soresa', meaning that hearing is better than writing. In fact, in the early days of the Santal ancestors, when the Chai-Champa civilization existed, they had manuscripts, writing letters, everything. Those manuscripts were defeated and snatched away by the enemies in war. That is why they considered it better to keep them in their minds than to write them. An example of this is in the old Santali song-

‘Murmu Thakur Kodo Baba  
Puthi Baba Ko Padhao Aa,  
Badoli-Konyda Garte



Likhon Chalak' Aa'.  
(People of the Murmu clan  
create and recite poetry,  
The fragrance of that poetry  
is captivating  
Badoli-Konyda Garh.) - Santali folk song.

Another such song tells the story of the destruction of the ancient civilization of the Santals by the enemies of Chai Champa -

'Chai-Champa Garh Lilibichi,  
Badoli-Konyda Likhon Gorhon,  
Chai-Champa Badoli-Konyda,  
Dayage Garh Bnn Bagiyak' Do !'  
(The magnificent beauty of the Chai-Champa fort,  
Badoli-Konyda likhon Gorhon,  
Chai-Champa, Badoli-Konyda,  
I have lost it helplessly.)

However, although there is an indication of reading, listening or literary practice in old Santali folk music, it is very difficult to say exactly how old Santali practice is because there is no written evidence. As far as is known, Santali literary practice has been preserved orally by the people of the Santali folk society for thousands of years. The main reason is that they think that their literature will survive only if the Santal social structure survives. But if they create written literature or any wealth, their enemies can seize it at any time.

Santali written literature began in the middle of the nineteenth century with the help of Christian missionaries. Reverend Jeremiah published a valuable book called 'Santali Primer' in 1845. This is basically the first written literary book of Santali literature. Then he published a book called 'An Introduction to the Santali Language' in 1852. In this way, Reverend Lars Olsen Skrefsrud, Paul Olaf Bodding etc. Christian missionaries first started the practice of Santali literature.

The division of the era of Santali literature practice can be roughly divided into three parts. For example- (1) Audnaang or Har Avotar (Ancient Age) - from 1845 onwards, (2) Talanang or Kherwal Avotar (Middle Age) - from 1846 to 1946 and (3) Nahak' Nang or Santarh Avotar (Modern age) - from 1947 to till now.



**Olchiki** : – The script or writing system used for the study of Santali language and literature is called Olchiki. Pandit Raghunath Murmu, a resident of the state of Odisha, invented the ‘Olchiki’ script in 1925 AD/ CE. It is not known what the script for the study of Santali language and literature was in ancient times. Perhaps if it was possible to decipher the unreadable inscriptions of Mohenjodaro, it would have been known. For this, the famous poet, writer and script scientist of Santali literature, Sadhu Ramchand Murmu, invented the ‘Monjdander Aank’ script in 1923 AD/CE by imitating the inscriptions of Mohenjodaro preserved in the Kolkata Museum. Although later, the 'Olchiki' script invented by Pandit Raghunath Murmu was used as the scientific basis for the study of Santali language and literature.

Although there is no exact evidence of the script in which Santali literature was originally practiced, during the British rule, Christian missionaries began practicing Santali literature in the 'Roman' script. Then, Santali literature was practiced in local scripts in the Santali-dominated states of Bihar, Bengal, Orissa and Assam. Santali literature was practiced in the 'Devanagori script' in Bihar and Jharkhand, the 'Oriya' script in Orissa, the 'Bangla' script in West Bengal and the 'Assamese' script in Assam. But each language has its own characteristics. Keeping those characteristics in mind, script scholars discovered the scripts of the respective languages. Santali language is no exception. The distortion of the Santali language in other local scripts is inevitable in the practice of Santali literature. That is why the 'Olchiki' script invented by Pandit Raghunath Murmu is so relevant in the field of Santali language and literature.

### **Santal Culture :**

Santal tribals have been observing various rituals from birth to death for ages. They observe thirteen festivals in twelve months. For example-

**Chatyar or Namakaran :-** After a child is born, the villagers adopt him through the 'Chotaur' ritual by following various rituals. From that day on, the villagers fulfill all the responsibilities of the child. There is a tradition of showing him direction in everything that is necessary for life and livelihood. On that day, the washerwoman or the maid recites a puja for all the villagers and says - 'Ma tehen khon do fanna do sendra karka / arak' sit, sakam hech eman teyak' kami kore du-dela aay pe, gate kay pe. Duk-suk muhim kore garaay pe, gate kay pe'. (From today, everyone will take Umuk with them in various tasks in search of life, take them with them or mix them in the tasks of life.) In this way, after the act of 'chatyar' is completed, the 'chatyar binti or Janma Puran' is performed. It is customary to perform various types of chatyar music along with it. In this way, the future of a child is wished for.



**Marriage :-** Marriage is a sacred culture of Santal society. Since ancient times, the tradition of forming a family or society through marriage between two men and women has been going on in Santal society. There are different types of marriages in Santal society according to the financial structure of the family. For example: (1) Sadai / duar bapla (marriage), (2) Kondel napam bapla (love marriage), (3) Tunki dipil bapla (low-class family marriage), (4) Orader bapla (demon marriage), (5) Ghardi jawanay bapla (marriage by house-husband), (6) Kirin jawanay bapla (purchase marriage), (7) Sangha bapla (widow marriage), (8) Chaudal bapla (illegal marriage), (9) Nirbolok' bapla (marriage by running away from the groom's house), (10) Golayati bapla, (11) Mbal bapla, (12) Baha saonha bapla.

**Telnahan :-** Telnahan or pre-Shraddha In the Santal society, when a person dies, the body of the deceased is first cremated or buried in the ground according to various rituals and through this Telnahan ritual, the impurities of the mourning family or lineage are purified.

**Bhandan :-** In the Santal society, the final ritual of death is Bhandan. Ninety percent of the ritual of death is done through Telnahan. That is, if the family or lineage of the deceased person is to be completely purified, Bhandan must be performed. Bhandan is a culture of the Santal society, if not done, the mourning family will remain incomplete. Through Telnahan or Bhandan ritual, the bones of the deceased person are immersed in the Damodar or Goya Ganga rivers. The deceased is united with the household deity of the family. Then the soul of the deceased is called Haparam Bonga. This custom is a traditional belief of the Santal society. All the relatives of the family are invited to the Bhandan ceremony.

Bhandan Sanskar is a very auspicious act in the Santal society. On the occasion of Bhandan, a feast is served to the relatives or villagers. Even Bhandan Binti is performed throughout the night. There is even a tradition of Bhandan Dong dance and songs with joy. It is their belief that only after the Bhandan ceremony is completed, the soul of the deceased merges with the household gods and becomes one. This consolation is a great debt of the Santal society.

### **Judicial system of the Santal Society :**

Self-government system is observed in the Santal society. There are good and bad in a society. Just as there is day and night, similarly, if everyone is good, there is also bad. Evil is a bad disease in the society. Therefore, there is a need for a fine analysis of judgment to remove evil. The judicial system has been in existence in the Santal society for a long time.

The judicial system in the Santal society is mainly divided into five types. Such as- (1) Orak' Bichar (Judiciary of the home), (2) Aato Bichar (Judiciary of the Village), (3) Purshi Bichar (Judiciary of the



Panchayat), (4) Muluk Bichar (Judiciary of the Block), (5) Tollat Bichar ( Judiciary of the Sub-division ), (6) Zila Bichar (Judiciary of the District ), (7) Ponot ( Judiciary of the State ), (8) Dishom ( Judiciary of the National ) and (9) Lo-Mohol Bichar ( Judiciary of the High Court/Supreme Court ). These judicial systems are discussed below-

**Orak' Bichar**:-If there is a domestic dispute in the family, the guardian of the house decides the problem. If there is a dispute between husband and wife and between brothers and sisters, the settlement or solution is called Orak' Bichar.

**Atobichar** :-If there is a problem with someone in the village or if the problem goes beyond the limits in a family, the village chief or the villagers seek a solution to the problem. Majhi Baba is the head of the village. Although he is the supreme authority of the village, he solves the problem immediately with his associates.

**Purshi Bichar** :- If the village trial is not resolved immediately by the Majhi Baba, the next stage for solving the problem or trial is Purshi Bichar or Panchayat judgment. There, the Majhi Babas of ten/twelve to twenty/five villages along with their associates and the Pid Pargana Baba (head of the Panchayat level) or his associates conduct the judicial. The head of that judicial is the Pid Pargana Baba. The immediate resolution of the said judicial is done under his leadership.

**Muluk Bichar** :- If any judicial is not resolved at the Purshi or Panchayat level, the judicial is taken to the Muluk. The Muluk Pargana resides in the Muluk and his associates. The Pargana Babas of all the Pids or Panchayats at the Muluk or Block level, the Majhi Babas of all the villages in the Muluk area and the people present there seek a solution to that problem. In this way, the problem is solved in the court meeting under the leadership of the Muluk Pargana Baba.

**Tollat Bichar**:- If any problem is not solved at the Muluk or block level, it is discussed at the Tollat or sub-district level. There, under the leadership of the Tollat Pargana Baba, all the Pargana Babas of the Tollat area and everyone present in the meeting find a way to solve the problem.

**Zilla Bichar** :- The supreme authority of the district is the Zilla Pargana Baba. If any problem is not solved in the Tollat level judicial, a discussion is held in the District judicial. The Zilla Pargana Baba judges the said meeting.

**Desh or Panat Bichar** :- If any problem is not solved at the district level, a Desh Bichar is organized. The head of the Desh Bichar is the Desh Pargana Baba or Ponot Pargana Baba. He also gives the



opportunity to the District Pargana Babas, Panat Susuriyogans and the general public present in the said meeting to discuss in that judicial. In this way, he tries to solve the problem.

**Dishom Bichar :-** This judicial is basically organized if there is a dispute within a ponot or state within the country and if the solution to that problem is not resolved in the ponot judicial, the ponot judicial is organized. Any state is tried there. The supreme judge of the ponot judicial is the ponot pargana baba. He seeks a solution to any problem by excluding murder and corruption through the ponot parganas of different ponot or states, the ponot susauriyogans and well-informed people coming from different states and most of the problems are solved.

**Lo-Mohol bichar :-** In the Santal society, the Dishom judicial is the last judicial. If an exploited person or family does not feel that the right judgment has been given to him or them in the gram sobha judicial, panchayat judicial, muluk judicial, district judicial, ponot judicial, Dishom judicial, or if he is not satisfied, he can seek justice in the high court /supreme court or Lo-Mohol.

The Lo-Mohol judicial is the final court or Supreme Court of the Santal community. This judicial is usually held once a year. Because the Lo-Mohol is the place where the annual 'Sendra' culture is practiced for men only. 'Sendra' means searching or searching for something. Santal men from different states come to Ajodiyo Buru to search or search for various life-giving medicines, animals and the need for life. Ajodiyo Buru or Ajoddha Pahar is located in Purulia district of West Bengal. The root word of the Santali language is 'Ayodeya'. In Santali, Ayodeya means in the lap of the mother or in the care of the mother. Later Ayodeya>Ajodiya>Ayodhya. Only men go to this Sendra. After searching all the mountains and forests in that place, before darkness fell, all the Dishuwa, that is, the countrymen, arrived at a flat place on the slopes of the Ayodhya hill. There, after finishing their food and drink, a judicial meeting was held under the leadership of Lo-Mohol pargana baba / Dihri. If the Dishuwa, who came from different states and places, had any unresolved problems, they were called upon to give judgment under the leadership of Lo-Mohol pargana baba/ Dihri. In that meeting, the unresolved problems of all kinds of parganas and Dishuwa coming from different states or places were solved in any way impartially. The judicial meeting was held throughout the night. If any plaintiff or defendant in that judgment did not accept the solution of the Dishuwa, he was driven out of this country or expelled from society. In ancient times, if a person did not accept the solution of this Lo-Bir Baisi's problem, he was given the death penalty by piercing it with arrows. Nowadays, the trial of Lo-Bir Baisi has been relaxed a lot.



On the other hand, when the Dishuwas come out to the plains after searching the jungle, they are in the heat of the sun, their body and mind are suffering from hunger and thirst for water. At that time, right before the start of the 'La-Bir Baisir', a gathering called 'Gipitich Tandi' is held. 'Gipiticha Tandi' is basically a sex education gathering. It is conducted under the leadership of 'Banam Don Kunrya' gurus for men only. In several groups, Kunrya gurus and their associates wear peacock feathers on their heads and dance and sing songs with obscene words and gestures, accompanied by turbans, tiryau, banam, jhomor, lipur, paygon and kapilgai chanwar . Here, the one who attracts the most people to him by making more gestures is the first to be awarded the 'Palla' on his shoulders. It is said that in ancient times, many Kunrya gurus were skilled in magic spells or chants. Every year, they would show their skill in performing rituals in the Gipitich Tandi. For example, they would play with poisonous snakes, set fire to the peacock feathers on their heads with magic spells, etc., and try to collect people and win prizes. In this way, the Dishuwas who came to explore the Ayodhya hills once a year, their minds polluted by hunger and thirst for water, would get refreshed by listening to the dance songs of the Kunrya gurus in the Gipitich Tandi.

**Conclusion:-** The Santal social structure is much like the Panchayat system. 'Majhi Ari' is their main foundation. 'Majhi and Ari' means 'Majhi' means head, the strong part of something, the central part, the main part, the main pillar. 'Ari' means rules, principles, ideals, formulas or constitution. Santal society is a communistic social system that has been around for ages. The village panchayats consider any problem of an individual or family in the village as a problem of the entire village. To solve that problem, Majhi Baba, his associates and all the villagers together find a way to find an immediate solution. Santal villages are run by 'Ato Moreko' or village Panchayat. The self-government structures of Santal tribals are just like the steps of a staircase. For example- 1. Ato Mapaji (Village Panchayat ), 2. Purshi ( Gram panchayat), 3. Mulul (Block Samity), 4. Tallat (Subdivision), 5. Zila (district), 6. Panat (state) and 7. Dishom (country). The head of the village is 'Majhi Baba', the head of the Panchayat is 'Pir Pargana Baba', the head of the Block Samity is 'Muluk Pargana Baba', the head of the Subdivision is 'Tallat Pargana Baba', the head of the district is 'Zila Pargana Baba', the head of the State is 'Panat Pargana Baba' and head of the Country is Dishom Pargana Baba. The Santal tribals are worshippers of nature, their religious place is 'Jaher Than'. The main deities are Thakur, Thakrn, Marangburu, Jaher Ayo, Dhorom, Moreko-Turuiko, Borma Bonga, Sin Chando etc.

In the Santal social system, from the pre-independence period, when Christian missionaries came to India and started the work of spreading Christianity, the tribals were attracted to Christianity. The main reason for this was that at that time the tribals were burdened by the local landlords, moneylenders and the



British rule and became helpless. At that time, the situation of the Santals affected their social structure in various ways. For them, the situation was such that many people abandoned their own religion and culture and converted to Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. In this way, many tribals lost their identity and merged into different religions. Although there were some mixed effects on the Santal social structure, they could not harm their social culture, Majhi Aari system. This is a great blessing for them.

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