

# The Santals' Belief System: An indication to their deeper dimension

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**Abstract - The article deals with the belief system of the Santals in order to delve deep into the deeper dimension of their life. Though a primitive society, not only do they have a well knit societal order but also they have well programmed festivals coupled with a hierarchy of deities and spirits both benevolent and malevolent. One must pay a keen attention to delineate who are worshipped and who are merely appeased. Worship or appease the leitmotif behind is a harmonious coexistence with their deities, nature and the fellow Santals.**

**Key words - Worship, sacrifice, spirit (*bonga*) feasts, harmonious coexistence, priest (*naeke*).**

## Introduction

The Santals are tribals<sup>1</sup>. L. O'Mally writes, "This tribal community even today consists of one of the largest, most cohesive and resilient tribes in eastern India. They have certainly been the most written about in song and literature beginning from the days of the Raj"<sup>2</sup>. They understand the world in terms of relationship. They are convinced that the world and all that is in are made for use and not for abuse, for sustenance and not for dominance. Fraternal coexistence is preferred over fraternal quarrel and tension. Hence, N. Minz, a tribal himself, witnesses about them in these words, "Nature, human beings and spirits are dependent on each other as organisms. Land, forest, water and air are God-given with no ruler or national government having proprietary ownership of them. Human beings are custodians of everything around them and must relate with everything as a relative and friend, and live in harmony with them"<sup>3</sup>.

The Santals have a culture of their own which they have preserved unchanged from time immemorial. Until recently, the Santal society has not faced with any invasion- cultural or religious, etc., either from within or without. They have, so far, enjoyed both external and internal autonomy concerning their religiosity and world-view, which have remained unaltered and unquestioned. Their religious life and cultural festivals, mainly connected to nature and agriculture, are so attractive that many, both from the homeland and abroad, have written books and articles depicting various aspects of them in an attempt to understand and appreciate them better. No wonder why, until 1979, sixty-seven books and 259 articles are written exclusively on the Santals. Out of 67 books, the foreigners (British high officials and Christian missionaries) alone wrote 62 books and 97 articles before the independence of India on August 15, 1947. After the independence, until 1979, five books and all the rest of the articles have been written by Indian anthropologists and sociologists<sup>4</sup>. After 1979 until date, quite a few books and quite many articles have again been written on them.

<sup>1</sup> There is no exact definition of who a tribal is. Hence, there is a need to understand what a tribe is so as to fathom who a tribal will be. According to G. Marshall, the term tribe "usually denotes a social group bound together by kin and duty associated with a particular territory. Members of the tribe share the social cohesion associated with the family, together with the sense of political autonomy of a nation" (cf. G. MARSHALL, *Oxford dictionary of sociology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998, p. 674). R. C. Verma defines the tribes thus. "At present, the term tribe, according to western writers, generally means an ethnic group, geographically isolated or semi isolated, identified with one particular territory and having distinct social, economic and cultural traditions and practices. In the Indian context the term has undergone further change, particularly in post-independence period" (cf. R. C. VERMA, *Indian tribes through the ages*, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi 2002, p. 9). S. Hans offers a pertinent clarification from the point of view of Government as well as who tribals exactly are in a given region with their given profession as he argues, "The word *tribal* refers strictly speaking to those ethnic groups that are listed in the *Constitution of India* as *Scheduled Tribes* (ST). During several centuries however, other population groups, such as some Scheduled Caste groups, or backward communities have lived in symbiosis with the tribals, such are the *Mahatos* (vegetable growers), *Kumhars* (potters), the *Lohars* (blacksmiths), the *Turis* or *Mahalīs* (basket weavers). Culturally and racially, they form a *continuum* with the ST groups and are in the present document, considered as being a part of indigenous population of Chotanagpur, without being *tribals*" (cf. S. HANS, *Tribal culture and identity in Chotanagpur: challenge before higher education*, Jojohatu House, Ranchi 1986, p. 3). Dr. V. C. Sharma gives a splendid description of the 32 tribal groups of Jharkhand, their number, their characteristics; religions and the name of the Supreme Deity according to every tribe (cf. V. C. SHARMA, *Jharkhand ki janjatiyan*, Crown Publications, Ranchi 2006, pp. i-xxvi).

<sup>2</sup> L. S. O'MALLY, *Bengal district gazetteers: Santal Parganas*, Logos Press, New Delhi 1910, see the left flap.

<sup>3</sup> N. MINZ, "Tribal theologies", in V. FABELLA (ed.), *Dictionary of third world theologies*, Orbis Books, New York 2000, p. 229.

<sup>4</sup> J. TROISI, "Introduction", in J. TROISI (ed.), *The Santals: readings in tribal life*, vol. X, Indian Social Institute, New Delhi 1979, pp. x-xiii.

Every society, “advanced” or “primitive”, has an anthropological, sociological, political, theological or other dimension to it. There are authors who have closely followed and narrated relating and pertaining to their social, anthropological and political characteristics but not many have attempted to decipher the deeper dimension of the Santals. This article will, therefore, make a humble attempt to peep into their inner cravings and search for meaning. To do so, one must enter into the world view of the Santals: their conception of the world and its origin, their anthropology, their sociology and their eschatology. At the outset itself it may be made clear that this article will deal mainly with the faith aspects of the Santals, what they believe in, what are their convictions through which they operate and pursue their life journey. To get in touch with their deeper dimension of life, one must depend on the social and anthropological dimension of the Santals on which quite a few books have been written. To begin with, this article will unfold itself in discovering the Santals as the theological people. Their understanding of the world and its courses will manifest their deep-seated desire to seek union with God, unity among themselves and harmony with the nature.

### 1.1 Santals' Belief System

There is a certain type of dualism in man. On the one hand, he experiences his self as a rational, free and social animal: a unity of body and mind, freedom and will but at the same time, bound to a socio-historical and cultural context. On the other hand, he is also aware that he transcends the empiric: he is to himself a mystery veiled in a beyond. The individual apprehends himself as a person, but the value of his personality is determined by a relationship to an Other<sup>5</sup>. A Santal too conceives his self at two levels of being. He finds his empiric self as a unity of body and *jiu* (spirit or life or vital principle) and feels that his deeper self transcends the empiric and extends into the world of spirits. Hence, one will discover that for a Santal the world is slightly different from that of the modern cosmological world one is familiar with in that it includes the visible and invisible members of the society. They believe that the life once created and given by *Thakur Jiu* never ceases to exist. With physical death the bodily presence of the person may come to an end but the *jiu* (spirit) of the person continues to remain with them and influence them in many ways in their life journey. Hence, the living have the meaningful existence only insofar as they maintain a healthy relationship with the ‘members’ of the invisible world. Thus, there are some norms and beliefs within the Santal society how to maintain a healthy relationship with them. Their present and future is ‘almost dependent’ on the spirits. Hence, every care is taken in order not to offend them in anyway, lest they lose the peace and prosperity of the family, the clan, the village and the entire Santal tribe. It tantamount to say then, that their understanding of community comprises both the living and the dead. The dead are never considered out of community. Instead, they are commemorated with much reverence with the hope of uniting with them at the end of their life journey<sup>6</sup>.

There is a very close link between the social structure and the religious universe of the Santals. Unless one understands their religious universe, one will not be able to analyze the Santal societal structure for, “The Santals live not only in their human tribal society but in a greater society consisting of supernatural beings as well”<sup>7</sup>. Naturally, their whole mindset and religiosity is shaped by their experience of them in their life journey. The Santals believe that, “The world is a vast arena in which man/woman, spirits and impersonal powers are constantly in touch with each other. The entire world is referred to as ‘*Towadare*’, milk tree. Every household, clan, sub-clan and village community must ensure its integrity and maintain the harmony”<sup>8</sup>.

#### 1.1.1 Origin and the place of *bongas*<sup>9</sup> in the life of the Santals

The Santals believe that the world in which they live is inhabited by a large number of spiritual beings of various kinds whom they call *bongas* which literally mean spirits. They are of the opinion that they are completely surrounded by these *bongas*<sup>10</sup>. They ascribe an interesting story about the existence of the *bongas*. They recall a tradition that says that the *bongas* did not have their abode on earth but were living with *Thakur Jiu* or *Chando* as His deputies. At some point of time they revolted against him saying, that they did not get due recognition of the work they did<sup>11</sup>. Another version says that the *bongas* wanted to take away the power that *Thakur Jiu* has, as a result they were driven away from *Thakur Jiu*'s presence. So, they came down to the earth and occupied the villages, hills and also lived in rivers, water pools, trees, rocks etc., and all possible places wherever human beings live and move. The spirits want to seduce humans and get them in their power knowing well and hence being

<sup>5</sup> A. VAN EXEM, “The self-understanding of the Sarna man”, in *Sevartham* 11 (1986), pp. 59.

<sup>6</sup> P. O. BODDING, “Notes on the Santals”, in J. TROISI (ed.), *The Santals: readings in tribal life*, vol. X, Indian Social Institute, New Delhi 1979, p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> J. TROISI, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

<sup>8</sup> V. M. RAJ, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> The term *bonga* could literally mean spirit. The Santals use this term variously and analogously for it may denote to God as spirit, ancestral spirits or the Hindi equivalent of *bhut*. The spirits can be either benevolent or malevolent. In the Santal Pantheon both forms exist in abundance.

<sup>10</sup> It could be contested that all the primitive societies may share similar worldview. To give an example, the fellow tribals (Mundas, Uraons, Kharias and others) inhabiting Chotanagpur Plateau have, more or less, the same type of worldview. For that matter, the Jews, even at the time of Jesus, shared similar worldview. Jesus a Jew himself was confronted with the spirits at several occasions during his public ministry (cf. Mk 1, 23-27, 32; 3, 11, 22-23, 30; 5, 2-10).

<sup>11</sup> J. TROISI, “Tribal way of life”, in *The Santals: reading in tribal life*, vol. I, Indian Social Institute, New Delhi 1977, p. 59.

jealous of the fact that *Thakur Jiu* loves the humans<sup>12</sup>. C. Das opines that the Santals are monotheists and that the *bongas* or spirits may be the later addition in their lives. The spirits, however, are not the primary ones in their lives. He comments:

*Thakur Jiu* certainly occupies the place of the Supreme Deity in the Santal tradition. Even the fact that *Thakur Jiu* has no specific worship in his honour serves as a proof for his supremacy in the Santal pantheon. The Santals were a wandering tribe and it is mainly during these wanderings that the ancestors of this tribe conceived of the existence of the *bongas* (spirits), both benevolent and malevolent, who had to be appeased through sacrifice<sup>13</sup>.

### 1.1.2 Types and grades of *bongas*

According to J. Troisi, J. Gausdal records the names of one hundred and seventy-eight different type of *bongas* who are said to be prevalent among the Santals who constantly either intervene or hinder them in their enterprises and affairs. J. Troisi himself broadly classifies them into ten categories or classes maintaining that the classification does not imply any notion of hierarchy in which one class is superior to the other. He begins with mentioning (1) village tutelary spirits consisting of *Marang Buru*, *Moreko-Turuiko*, *Jaher Era*, *Gosae Era*, *Pargana Bonga* and *Manjhi Haram Bonga*. (2) The *abge bongas* or subclan spirits. (3) Household spirits known as *orak' bongako*. (4) The spirits of ancestors, known as *hapramko bongas*. (5) Tutelary spirits or the *saket bongas* of the Santal *ojhas* (exorcist). (6) The *jom sim bongas* (7) The *deku bongas* or the Hindu deities that find a place in the Santal pantheon. (8) Here they are quite a few namely *sima bongas* or the village boundary spirits, the *bahre bongas* or the spirits of the village outskirts, *buru/dungri bonga* or mountain and hill spirits, *dak' bonga* or spirits that occupy water and the like. These spirits are by nature malevolent and harmful. (9) Then there are a peculiar type of *bongas* that include the *naihar bongas*, *kisar bongas*, *thapna bongas* and the *bonga* husband of witches. These *bongas* or spirits cause some disease or other mischief which are found through *ojha* divination. The *ojha* then exorcises them lest they continue to malfunction and torture them. (10) Finally, there are tramp or stray mischievous spirits and impersonal powers which are not the object of worship; instead they have to be driven away through exorcism or magic. Among these they are *curins*, *bhuts*, *ekagudias* and *rakas*<sup>14</sup>.

P. C. Biswas, christening the spirits as supreme, superior and supernatural, classifies them into nine different types. He too admits that the division could be on parallel lines finding it difficult to distinguish the superiority or inferiority of them according to the beliefs of the Santals. He, however, unlike Troisi, begins the list of the classification with the highest divinity whom, according to him, the Santals call *Chando*. He is the Supreme Being, the Creator, the giver and restorer of life of all kinds. He then mentions the spirits of the dead ancestors, household spirits, hunting spirits, village tutelary spirits, the spirits of the village boundary, then the tramp or stray mischievous spirits, the spirit of the father-in-law's household, and finally the spirits or rather mysterious powers residing in or connected with certain objects such as battle-axe etc<sup>15</sup>. Depicting the religious universe of the Santals, C. Mukherjea too enumerates the deities and spirits as others have done. He too begins with the Supreme Being, the Creator of the Santals by the name *Thakur Jiu* who is the Creator and Sustainer of the world. Something new to be found in his description is *Basuki* or *Basumata* a spirit invoked for the welfare of agriculture. Just at the beginning of agricultural season, i.e., sometimes in June-July, he is offered sacrifices of fowls and goats asking him to intervene into their agricultural enterprise<sup>16</sup>.

### 1.1.3 Benevolent *bongas*

The members of the Santal invisible world, strictly speaking, might be of two types, the departed of their own family and the *bongas* (spirits) in general. Sometimes the Santals themselves are unable to have precise terms and concepts regarding the exact nature and function of all their spirits but that should not be taken to mean that they do not differentiate between the various spirits. The early Christian missionaries too thought that the Santals were mere worshippers of malevolent spirits with the motive to avert disasters with which their spirits take delight in afflicting humankind. In such case, one may think that all the *bongas* are bad. In fact, writes J. Troisi, there are more benevolent spirits than malevolent:

In religion proper, the Santals' relation towards these supernatural spirits is one of reverential fear, dependence, submission and propitiation. Communion with these spirits is concretely manifested mainly through supplications, rice-beer offerings and animal sacrifices made on behalf of a particular group, be it the whole village, subclan or household. To these must be added the ceremonial sharing of sacrificial food and rice-beer libations, besides certain special observations and taboos<sup>17</sup>.

Agriculture is the source of sustenance for the Santals. Every act related to it marks special significance and is therefore preceded by supplications and sacrifices, be it ploughing, sowing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, threshing and the like. The Santals know from their experience that there are many dangers involved in their agricultural adventure. Drought, flood and famine are beyond their control. When struck by these, they have loss of crops and hence face a threat to their existence and identity. When they have a good rain and good crop they have every reason to rejoice and pay obeisance to their deities. As a token of gratitude for the favours received from the benevolent *bongas* they worship them, and in order to maintain a good rapport with the other

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> C. DAS, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

<sup>14</sup> J. TROISI, *Tribal religion*, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>15</sup> P. C. BISWAS, *op. cit.*, pp. 134-137.

<sup>16</sup> C. MUKHERJEA, *The Santals*, 2 Bankim Chatterjee Street, Calcutta 1962, pp.272-284.

<sup>17</sup> J. TROISI, *Tribal religion*, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

*bongas* they placate them. They do not necessarily worship the second grade *bongas*; but in order to be happy and not to be troubled by them, they perform certain rituals to propitiate them. The Santals' religious rites express the conviction that the supernatural powers can be exercised by the *bongas* and secondly, the *bongas* are invoked to secure the good will of the beneficent ones and to avert the ill-will of the maleficent ones<sup>18</sup>.

In the process of mentioning the benevolent *bongas*, J. Troisi starts with village tutelary spirits and starts right away with *Marang Buru* affirming that, "He is the chief of the Santal *bonga* pantheon"<sup>19</sup>. He is the most powerful *bonga* and the Santals have always venerated him as a genial and kind grandfather propitiating him on all festivals and rites of passages. The Santals also believe that there is a close affinity between *Marang Buru* and their ancestors. As seen above in the first chapter, the first human Santal couple, *Pilchu Haram* and *Pilchu Budhi*, received instructions on agriculture, brewing of rice beer and the enjoyment of sex<sup>20</sup>. *Moreko-Turuiko* literally means five-six but is venerated as one spirit who is supposed to look after the welfare of the village and to have control over rain, crops and epidemics<sup>21</sup>.

The third among the village tutelary deity is *Jaher Era*. As the name implies, she is the Lady of the Sacred Grove or *Jaherthan* for she is believed to be residing over the Sacred Grove. She never harms the Santals; in the stead she concerns herself with the bodily needs of the Santals obtaining them good crops. She is believed to be instrumental in obtaining the good health of the villagers and their cattle. She is invoked whenever the cattle disease ravages the village. A fowl is offered to her in all the Santal feasts and on *Baha* festival (flower festival) she is remembered with extra enthusiasm<sup>22</sup>. *Marang Buru*, *Moreko-Turuiko* and *Jaher Era*, according to Santal belief, are very closely connected among themselves. Thus, in the *Jaherthan*, the sacred place where they are believed to abide, "Three of the *sal* trees must stand in a row; at the foot of each tree is one stone for each of the following gods:-*Jaherera* (the lady of the grove), *Moreko* and *Marang Buru*"<sup>23</sup>. There are various categories of benevolent *bongas* but not all can be mentioned here. These have been mentioned to show that the Santals do not indulge themselves to *bonga* worship as one can conclude but rather, according to them, these *bongas* aid them at different moments of their life. J. Troisi sums up:

The spirits of the *jaherthan* are often considered by the Santals as their national spirits since they are worshipped by all. Sacrifices are performed during the principal festivals, namely the *Sohrae* (harvest festival), the *Baha* (flower festival), the *Erok' Sim* (sowing festival), *Hariar Sim* (sprouting festival) and the *Janthar* (First Fruits festival). While *Marang Buru*, *Moreko-Turuiko*; *Jaher Era* and *Gosae Era* are propitiated by the village priest (*naeke*), the *kudam naeke* (the priest's assistant) propitiates the *pargana bonga* through a blood offering called *Bul Mayam*<sup>24</sup>.

#### 1.1.4 Malevolent *bongas*

In fact the early Christian missionaries, working among the Santals, had thought that all the spirits of the Santals are demonic in nature. In the stead it has been said above that most of the spirits are beneficent ones. But it looks as though where there is goodness, there may be the possibility of evil also; thus along with the benevolent *bongas*, the Santals mention some of the malevolent ones from whom only inaction is all that expected of. C. Mukherjea notes, "Santals have about a number of mischievous minor spirits, who find a devilish delight in bringing epidemics to men or cattle, unless propitiated with appropriate ritual"<sup>25</sup>. J. Troisi gathers that among the Santals, the *sima* and *bahre bongas*, that is, the village boundary spirits and village outskirts spirits, are more malevolent than all others. The most feared ones are however the *sima bongas* for the Santals believe that they cause snakes and other animals to attack men and women in the fields. They reside in some trees; especially at the end of a village street. So, any tree at the end of the village street are said to be dedicated to them. During festivals, one will find the strings round such trees to honour them. And whenever there is a drought in that area, Santal villagers offer sacrifices to these boundary spirits promising them of further propitiation when rain falls<sup>26</sup>.

The *bahre bongas*, on the other hand, reside in the area outside the village, further away from the boundaries or in the area demarked for one particular village, their favourite abodes being pools, tanks, ponds-places where water is to be found. When the thirsty men and women go to drink water, these *bongas* seem to delude these people by causing imaginary reservoirs. On vowing to offer them sacrifices however, they relent and cause to appear water in its reality enabling them to quench their thirst. J. Troisi writes:

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80. He also mentions that other tribes such as Bhumij, Birhor, Ho and Munda too worship him though the Ho tribe considers him as a minor deity.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81. Troisi collects the different opinions the different authors have given on this deity called five-six, that is, *Moreko-Turuiko*. According to Troisi, P. Bodding believes that they are five brothers and one sister. C. Mukherjea presents them as five brothers who were wedded to six sisters, in another myth, they are referred to as being five brothers and *Jaher Era* as their mother. (cf. J. TROISI, p. 81).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> L. S. O'MALLEY, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

<sup>24</sup> J. TROISI, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

<sup>25</sup> C. MUKHERJEA, *op. cit.*, p. 281.

<sup>26</sup> J. TROISI, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-102.

Both the *sima* and *bahre bongas* are said to be very jealous and if they are in any way hurt, for example, if sacrifices are not offered to them, they become hungry for a sacrifice and cause disease. It is very difficult to propitiate them and not everyone is competent to do so. For this reason, in almost every Santal village, there is a *kudam naeke* whose primary function is to propitiate these spirits through collective sacrifices. This is done twice a year, on the occasion of transplanting and harvesting. Fowls are offered in their honour and all present, with the exception of women, partake of the food<sup>27</sup>.

C. Mukherjea mentions further mischievous spirits among the Santals in *Kalachandi*, a male spirit, and *Kalamahichandi* and *Nason-kudra*, both female evil spirits, as exercising an uncanny influence on them. The offering that pleases them are some worms, such as frogs, grass-hoppers, fowls, human blood, vermilion, sun-dried rice, powdered charcoal and burnt clay from ovens. They are invoked in the household and also at the junction of two roads<sup>28</sup>. Among the malevolent *bongas*, there are *buru bongas* (mountain and hill spirits). According to J. Troisi, W. Hunter and C. Mukherjea have inaccurate views of *buru bongas* for C. Mukherjea calls *buru bongas* 'the horrible deity' who delights in human blood and Hunter seem to identify them with *Marang Buru*. True, the Santals do believe that some of the spirits do reside in hills or mountain who cause accidents of various types including ruining the crops unless propitiated. Santals offer sacrifices to these *bongas* as they go on a long journey as they may have to pass through hill or jungle. Offerings are made to these *bongas* also in case of the drought imploring them to send rain so that their crops are not ruined<sup>29</sup>.

To conclude the discussion on *bongas* and spirits it could be said that belief in a soul, spirit and God is as old as humanity. In order to avoid overlapping in understanding them, it is worth noting the differences made by D. Cupitt. The Soul is the principle of biological life, sustenance and movement. Without it, the body is dead meat. Some associate it with blood. Plato considers the human soul as rational belonging to the noumenal world of timeless intelligible Forms. Aristotle sees it as participating in universal and cosmic 'Objective Reason'. And in religious tradition, the human soul that draws closer to God may participate in God's own nature as immortal spirit. Spirit is very different from soul in that it is normally embodied. It is active, always on the move and has no boundary and has almost supernatural power. It is busy delivering messages, causing trouble and torments or helping people. God is portrayed as someone who sits enthroned over the cosmos on a mountain or in a temple. He employs the spirits in his service and to communicate to his people. As civilization grew, people moved to fertile land along Nile or similar riverbeds carrying their gods with them. This God was the Lord, the landlord who gave them the land and also was the symbol of solidarity<sup>30</sup>.

## 2.1 Source and sustenance of life

In order to comprehend better the cultural and religious aspects of the Santals it is necessary to understand the very life style of the Santals. Their occupation and ritual life coincide so densely that they become indivisible. The important thing to understand is that the Santals have a uniform way of living, i.e., practically all of them in the village live by settled agriculture. However, the fact worthy of note is that they still have the primitive method of agriculture. Years roll by but the primitive method of cultivation remains unaltered; neither have they given it up nor do they attempt to better it. Worse still, until today, the Santals have not thought of an alternative way of living other than agriculture. Agriculture, therefore, is much more than just a means of livelihood; indeed it is a whole way of life which permeates the life of a Santal through and through. In other words, agriculture, as it were, is an axis around which their whole life and the celebration of life revolves. It keeps them engaged practically whole throughout the year in different agricultural operations like ploughing, sowing, transplanting, weeding, harvesting, threshing, etc. The Santals know it only too well that there are dangers involved in their agricultural tasks. They are well aware of the fact that a drought or a destructive blight on the crops inevitably means hunger for all, while a good harvest means prosperity. Hence, the Santals have a series of seasonal rites and festivals which mark the different stages of their agricultural year. "The Santals believe that, should they fail to perform these annual rituals, their *bongas* would be displeased and visit the village with calamities. On the other hand, the Santals also rejoice with their spirits over a bumper crop"<sup>31</sup>.

That apart, as they have no custom of taking a break from their work neither do they have any other means of entertainment; when tired and worn-out, to relax themselves, they have naturally and spontaneously discovered these feasts- all of them connected to nature and their livelihood. The feasts they observe and celebrate helps them not only to relax from their physical fatigueness but they have theological and social values as well. Theological in the sense that they help obtain and maintain communion with their deity. It is communal in that they celebrate it together maintaining and strengthening their societal and familial bond. It has been noted above that no public celebration is effected without the knowledge, approval and initiative of the village chief. Once the festivity has been decided and announced, everyone takes part in it with total fanfare. 'More the merrier' is the tribal principle and spirituality. J. Troisi aptly observes:

The Santals' religious worship is mainly congregational. There is no individual approach to the *bongas*, but fellowship with them is maintained through sacrifices, offerings and libations made on behalf of a particular social unit, be it the village, the subclan or the household. Likewise, the celebrations which accompany such collective rituals, in which

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>28</sup> C. MUKHERJEA, *op. cit.*, pp. 281-282.

<sup>29</sup> J. TROISI, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>30</sup> D. CUPITT, *After God, the future of religion*, A Phoenix Paperback, London 1997, pp. 3-9.

<sup>31</sup> J. TROISI, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

people participate for the welfare of the entire group, are truly occasions for collective action. They function as channels through which cultural traditions are expressed and affirmed<sup>32</sup>.

### 2.1.1 Insertion and invention of festivals

That life is something central to the Santals can be seen from the celebration of their festivals and strict observances of rites of passages. The following points that will just be dealt will further clarify their understanding of the centrality and essentiality of life. Their trust in *Thakur Jiu* and their dependence on the spirits for various assistances may indicate to the fact that they know both the preciousness and fragility of life. In a way, that might be the reason why they fabricated such a well organized society so as to live and have a fullness of life. It is just needless to say that the Santals are orderly in their behaviour. They follow certain hierarchy in their life-pattern and should anything go wrong, they have their community not only of the visible world but also invisible to take resort to. This is where one will find that the Santals have various spirits, various feasts and four 'religious' rites.

It is not possible to depict in great detail all the annual community cycle of Santal festivals but it is good all the same, to briefly introduce the intent and orientation of every celebration. In making it too short, however, the danger may be that some nuances and significance may be omitted and thereby only partial picture of the whole thing be presented but it is hoped that one will read in between the lines. The observances of these feasts give them both the needed break and rest in their endeavour and on the other hand, they inject in them energy and renewed vigour to continue their agricultural operation with hope and trust. In the following lines, one will enter into the celebration of the Santals' festivals, as narrated by M. Hasdak', a Santal himself.

### 2.1.2 Various agricultural and nature festivals

The first of the festivals is the *Baha Porob* (Flower festival) which also marks the New Year of the Santals. The Santal's celebrate this feast on the fullmoon of *Phalgun* month (Feb-March) signifying new life in harmony with nature. The wild flowers and fruits are gathered but before consuming any of them, the offerings and sacrifices are made to the deities. The elders of the village gather together to decide upon the day and the things needed for the feast. The *Godet* then goes to each house to collect things needed for the same.

*Sendra Porob* (hunting festival) is held sometimes in the month of *Baishakh* (April-May) in which all adult males are expected to participate. The priests of the locality assemble to elect an old priest who would perform the sacrifices and to fix a day for hunting. In some occasions, even the site is fixed. Before the departure, the deities are invoked and a sacrifice is offered to them for the success of the expedition and the safe return into the village.

*Erok' sim* (sowing festival) is celebrated in the month of *Asar* (June-July). After the first shower, the villagers gather in the house of the priest to decide the day for the festivity. The national deities are invoked and offered sacrifice of fowl imploring their favour on the whole village community and ask them to protect the growing crops against all natural calamities. *Hariar Sim* is celebrated in the month of *Sawan* (July-August) as the paddy turns green and healthy, the priest and elders of the village go to the *Jaherthan* to invoke the deities to protect the green paddy from all kinds of insects and calamities. He implores for timely rain fall as well. *Janthar* (first fruits) is celebrated in *Kartick* (Oct-Nov) when the first rice crop of highland and the upper portion of the low land are harvested. *Sohrae* (harvest festival) is the merriest of all festival for the Santals. Naturally so for their prayers and invocations have been heard, the sacrifices have been accepted as a result followed by good rain, there is a good harvest. It is celebrated for five full days in the month of *pus* (Dec-Jan). The deity is offered an egg signifying the creation of the universe<sup>33</sup>. The various feasts and festivals that the Santals celebrate seem to be connected with their religion. Hence, it is a felt need to view the concept and characteristics of the Santal religion.

### 3.3 Concept of religion for the Santals

The word 'religion', always and everywhere, arouses a great discussion. It is natural because it affects every sphere of human life. There are thinkers who have propagated positive, negative and neutral views on religion. S. Freud may argue religion as born of "Man's need to make his helplessness tolerable"<sup>34</sup> and P. Parathazham may opine that, "Religion represents man's search for a source of power with which he can align himself for personal security and comfort"<sup>35</sup>. Among those having positive thinking for religion P. Tillich, one of the champions on this subject, comments that "Religion is the substance of culture; culture is the form of religion"<sup>36</sup> while R. de Menzes writes, "From very ancient times peoples and nations seem to have believed that each of them had its own specific religious tradition and its particular God or gods"<sup>37</sup>. V. Noort is emphatic and clear as he reasons out:

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>33</sup> M. HASDAK', "Santal rites and rituals and feasts and festivals", in *Indepth study report of Santal feasts and festivals*, Social Development Centre, Dumka 1987, pp. 13-18.

<sup>34</sup> S. FREUD, *The future of illusion*, Hogarth Press, London 1934, p. 18.

<sup>35</sup> P. PARATHAZHAM, "Sociological approaches to the study of religion: implications for theology", in K. PATHIL (ed.), *Religious pluralism: an Indian perspective*, ISPCK, New Delhi 1999, p. 6.

<sup>36</sup> P. TILLICH, *Theology and culture*, Oxford University Press, New York 1959, p. 42.

<sup>37</sup> R. de MENEZES, "A new look at Solomon, Inter-religious dialogue in ancient Israel", in A. AMALADASS - R. ROCHA (eds.), *Crossing the borders*, St. Paul's Publication, Mumbai 2000, p. 224.

No one, not even an atheist, is ignorant of the existence of religion. Religion is a commonplace as trees, and like trees it grows in an endless variety of shapes, sizes, and colours all over the world. And as some trees are gigantic in size and others are small some flowering and some stunted; some beautiful in form and others grotesque, so too is with the variant forms of religion<sup>38</sup>.

E. Schillebeckx puts forward his conviction in very simple terms as he says that, "Religion is above all a saving dialogue between man and the living God"<sup>39</sup>. G. Weigel affirms that "Religion is a distinctive human phenomenon. Nothing like it is found off the human plane"<sup>40</sup>. To be understood comprehensively, therefore, religion needs to be viewed from various perspectives demanding empirical, theological and historical definitions. All of them take different approaches. Further, the content of religion could be characterized by having an object, an attitude, an expression, a mythology etc. It is an inner attitude expressed normally by gesture, words or actions. And in this form, one finds prayer, sacrifice, passage rites, feasts and ceremonies<sup>41</sup>. Looking at it yet from another dimension, King notes, "Sociologists and anthropologists rightly argue that religion is never an abstract set of ideas, values or experiences developed apart from the total cultural matrix and that many religious beliefs, customs, and rituals can be only understood in reference to this matrix"<sup>42</sup>.

And on this point, the Santals could be recognized as having their own religion. On the basis of the empirical data, it will be shown how Santal religion, as manifested and expressed in its beliefs and practices, contributes to the existence and maintenance of the Santal society. Sachchidananda writes, "The Santal religion is a potent force in strengthening the social solidarity of the people. The Santal's concept of righteousness is bound up with his social or tribal consciousness. Santal deities have been classed into eight categories. The Supreme Being is called *Chando* or *Thakur*. He is unseen and incomprehensible. He is the creator, sustainer and destroyer of everything"<sup>43</sup>.

C. Mukherjea does not comment anything on how deep or shallow the consciousness of religion may play in the life of a Santal. He discovers another aspect of their religious consciousness as he remarks that "The educated Santals, living under Hindu influence, will readily identify their Supreme Deity with the Hindu idea in the Upanishads, whereas the Christian Santals will attribute to him Biblical ideas"<sup>44</sup>. What is important is that the Santals have a God whom they call by various names such as *Thakur Jiu*, *Singbonga* or *Dhorom*. It is of secondary importance whether their idea of God is borrowed from Hinduism or influenced from Christianity<sup>45</sup>. Their religion is called a *Sarna* religion. They worship their God in the Sacred grove. Every Santal village will have a sacred grove comprising of five or three *Sal* trees. They do express their inner attitude by way of prayers, sacrifices, rites of passages, feasts and ceremonies.

### 3.1.1 Aspect of prayer

To ask whether the tribals pray would be an irrelevant, if not an offending question observes P. Ponette. He convinces himself with the thought that inasmuch as they have a religion of their own, they must be praying too. Granted that "They never built temples or shrines, have no statuary, no graphic representations in whatever art-form of the Supreme Being they believe in, or of the spirits' they propitiate"<sup>46</sup> does not rule out the possibility that they pray in their own way known to them alone. Some of the Indian anthropologists too tend to conclude that the tribals are 'superstitious' thereby categorizing them as nature worshippers, worshippers of their ancestors and spirits who inhabit trees, streams, springs, reptiles and animals, etc<sup>47</sup>.

But let anyone ask L. O. Skreftsrud of his experience and findings whether or not the Santals pray and he will tell him or her that the Santals are monotheists and that they do pray. Prayer forms an important aspect of their lives. It could even suggest "A way of imagining the possibilities of human life. The religious group inhabits this vision and makes it tangible to itself and accessible to others. A historical community can transmit a vision of reality which helps decisively in the interpretation of life and the world"<sup>48</sup>. He will then narrate the prayer made by the *naeke*, the village priest at the time of the sowing festival:

We salute you *Bapu Thakur*, *Gosae Era*, *Marang Buru*, etc., in the name of the sowing festivals we offer you, accept and receive this. May the seeds bloom and multiply, and be plentiful from one quarter to twelve, grow them up through sufficient water and wind. Let no stomach ache, head ache, and other sickness enter our village; throw all the infectious

<sup>38</sup> V. NOORT, *Dogmatic theology*, vol. I, *The true religion*, The Mercier Press Limited, Cork 1961, pp. 2-3.

<sup>39</sup> E. SCHILLEBEECKX, *Christ the sacrament of encounter with God*, Sheed and Ward, London 1963, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> G. WEIGEL, *Religion and the knowledge of God*, A Spectrum Book, New Jersey, 1961, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> J. GOETZ, "Religion", in *The new catholic encyclopaedia*, vol. XII, McGraw-Hill Book Company, London 1986, pp. 240-246.

<sup>42</sup> W. KING, *op. cit.*, p. 284.

<sup>43</sup> SACHCHIDANANDA, "The tribal situation in Bihar", in J. TROISI (ed.), *The Santals: readings in tribal life*, vol. X, Indian Social Institutes, New Delhi 1979, p. 262.

<sup>44</sup> C. MUKHERJEA, *op. cit.*, p. 273-274.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> P. PONETTE, "Do tribals pray?", in *Sevartham* 22 (1997), p. 29.

<sup>47</sup> K. N. SAHAY, *Hindu impact on the tribals*, Maitryee Publications, Ranchi 1980, p. 27.

<sup>48</sup> M. WARREN, "The worshiping assembly: possible zone of cultural contestation", in M. WARREN (ed.), *Source book for modern catechetics*, vol. II, St. Mary's Press, Winona 1997, p. 40.

diseases out of our boundaries. Our goats and cattle that wonder through the hills and jungles guide and protect them, and return them safely. Our relatives and friends from far and near, protect them from all evil spells and influences...<sup>49</sup>.

### 3.1.2 Element of sacrifice

E. O. Chacko puts the prayer within the parameter of sacrifice suggesting that the prayers precede sacrifice and hence play a preparatory role in the act of sacrifice. He even tends to maintain that the prayers and sacrifice are inseparable as he indicates, "Invocation through prayer is an important part of sacrifice. Prayer is always part of the sacrifice, and there is no separate occasion for prayer"<sup>50</sup>. If the Santals offer sacrifice, which they do, the curiosity arises to know its content and its subject (in terms of direction). Chacko writes:

Sacrifice, in the religious context of the Santals, is an offering made to God and to the spirits, in acknowledgement of the sense of dependence on them. The main terms used for sacrifice are *puja* (worship), *dare* (sacrifice), *dare samang* (offerings), *bakher* (sacrificial prayer), etc. Sacrifices are mainly offerings of their ordinary food, both animals and agricultural products. The first fruits of all agricultural products, e.g. rice, millet, maize, flowers, etc., and domesticated animals like fowls, pigs, pigeons, etc. and libations of rice beer, etc. are the usual items of sacrificial offerings. The sacrificial offerings are collected from each house by the *godet* prior to the occasion<sup>51</sup>.

### 3.1.3 The purpose of sacrifice

The Santal act of sacrifice, then, constitutes the offerer, the receiver and the offerings. It also is offered to the Supreme Being, national gods and the ancestor spirits. In most cases, just as has been mentioned, the natural gifts are offered. They have a threefold purpose of the sacrifice: acknowledgement of the Supreme God who is the Creator and giver of life, to seek protection and prosperity from the benevolent spirits and; to control and to subdue the bad agencies and their harmful influences. The Santal sacrifices claim of having two elements: oblation and communion. The offerings are made to God and/or to the spirits, and the victims are eaten by the people present. The portion set aside for God, in whose honour the sacrifice is made, however, is not eaten. "With the sacrificial communion a sense of divine fellowship is felt and through this process of sharing in the sacrificial food and drink, the Santals also share in the benevolent power of divine providence"<sup>52</sup>.

### 3.1.4 Places of sacrifice

The Santals have not only three different types and grades of sacrifice but also three different places of sacrifice: they are *jaherthan* (sacred grove), *manjhithan* (place dedicated to the village chief) and *bhitar* (inner sanctuary within the house or hearth). Normally every Santal village will have a *jaherthan* or the sacred grove on the outskirts of the village. L. O'Malley writes:

It should consist of trees belonging to the primeval forest, and a cluster of trees is always permitted to stand round it; but only five trees are essential, viz., four *sal* trees and one mahua tree. Three of the *sal* trees must stand in one row; at the foot of each tree is one stone for each of the following gods:- *Jaherera* (the lady of the grove), *Moreko* and *Marang Buru*. A fourth *sal* tree standing anywhere has a stone for the *Pargana Bonga*, and at the foot of a *mahua* tree is a stone for the *Gosanera*. The stones are said to be put in their places at the command of the gods themselves...the gods of the *jaher* are national deities worshipped by all Santals; and the sacrifices are performed by the village *naeke*<sup>53</sup>.

*Manjhithan* is in the main street of the village. It consists of a small mud mound, with a thatched roof over it, supported by five posts. The central post is believed to be indispensable. There are various opinions about the *manjhithan*. Some opine that it is sacred to the spirit of the former *manjhis*, especially the first *manjhi*. Some say it is for *Pilchu Haram* the first and original *manjhi*. It has two significances: it is the place where the villagers offer sacrifices, and secondly, it is the place where the elders of the village meet to discuss village affairs and settle disputes<sup>54</sup>. *Bhitar* is the inner sanctuary of every Santal house. It is the place reserved for the family and the ancestral spirits. A low mud wall within the house separates it from the rest of the house. No sacred emblem or symbol is found as one finds at *jaherthan*. It is a store room of the paddy. The head of the family pays his obedience to the family spirits at *bhitar*<sup>55</sup>.

### 3.1.5 Participation of the community

The Santal community at worship presents itself at slightly different level. It cannot be called a "community" at worship in a fuller sense of the word for the entire village community does not go to the place of worship i.e., to the *jaherthan*. Women and children do not accompany the *naeke* (priest), the village officials and the elders though the sacrifices are made in the name of and on behalf of the entire village community. The male members of every family can easily participate in the act of sacrifice. There is no prohibition; nor is there any kind of restriction. It is true that the entire village community contributes generously in cash and kind the essentials required for the sacrifice but it is a fact that the whole community is not present physically. While the

<sup>49</sup> L. O. SKREFSRUD, *op. cit.*, p.169.

<sup>50</sup> E. O. CHACKO, "Santal sacrifice and festival", in *Sevartham* 12 (1987), p. 115.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>53</sup> L. O'MALLEY, *op. cit.*, pp. 116-117.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> E. O. CHACKO, *op. cit.*, p. 117.



ritual sacrifice are being performed at *jaherthan*, the non-participating members of the village wait on at the outskirts of the village making preparations for the cooking of the sacrificial meal. Women and children do not take part in the sacrificial meal at *jaherthan* and *manjhithan*<sup>56</sup>.

It sounds rather ridiculous for a community like the Santals to exclude the women and children at worship, but that is how it is. L. O'Malley reports, "The religion of the Santals is essentially a man's religion. Women are not allowed to be present at sacrifices except when they are offered in the house to the ancestors and family gods, and then only if there are no men to help the sacrificer"<sup>57</sup>. Insofar as they do not form part of the sacrifice, they do not form part among the members that eats the sacrificial meal. O'Malley notes, "When a sacrifice takes place in the holy grove they may not eat the flesh of the offering, the men burning what they do not eat"<sup>58</sup>. A. B. Chaudhury furnishes further negative side of women's exclusion from the act of worship as he says:

Should they be allowed to worship the spirits, they would win favour quickly, and their nature being destructive, they would invariably indulge in destructive activities to the detriment of social interest. The women may take part in the ritualistic dances at 'jaherthan' and 'manjhithan' after the rituals are over, but they cannot actively associate themselves with the worship<sup>59</sup>.

Connected with the aspects of prayer and sacrifice, the Santals hold dear and important the ritual life that has to do both with this world and more importantly, for the world to come. From the beginning of their life until the end, they are ontologically and emotionally connected to the family, clan, the neighbour and the invisible world not only because they operate from fear but also and more importantly for the love of the family and clan and its continuity. Their ongoing and harmonious life here on earth and after life depends upon interconnectivity, intersubjectivity and interdependence. Any disharmony with family, clan, the invisible world and the nature their doom is more imminent than expected. To dispel any imminent or forthcoming, seen or unseen causality, they have recourse to their Divine whom they call *Thakur Jiu*. As much important is their spiritual life, so much important is their social life. They maintain the latter by way of festivities that gives them at once the possibility for their relation vertical and horizontal, with their deity and with one another. Integrity with their deity, nature and their prosperity and well being, these are the things the Santals ultimate concern. Anything above and beyond, that is out of their sphere.

## Conclusion

The Santals have followed their own religion, a religion, which, unlike a revealed or a cosmic one, does not have a temple to worship in, a Sacred Scripture to refer to and a religious founder to follow. But the nature and the function of the Santal society is such that it seems to have all that is necessary to evoke the sense of the divine in their minds merely by the power it has over them. This as background, the article evaluates the intent and motif of the cultural and religious life of the Santals. The festivals the Santals celebrate and the rituals they perform, takes into account a harmonious living with the spirits on the one hand, and on the other, they manifest and concern their inner longings and aspirations for the fullness of life here on earth and after death, (eternal) communion with their ancestors and with *Thakur Jiu* or *Chando* (the name by which they commonly call their God). Their hearts and minds are raised to *Thakur Jiu* (Omniscient Spirit) and *Marang Buru* (literally, great mountain, but it refers to one of the chief deities of the Santals) in thanksgiving and supplication, depending upon their existential situation.

The Santals are deeply rooted in their own traditional religion with a set of beliefs and practices, which bind them into a strong egalitarian community that hardly knows any separation between the spiritual and material world. Their religiosity finds its best expression in their ritual sacrifices to their Supreme God, national gods and other spirits. This belief article explores the concept of ritual sacrifice and its true significance so as to justify the Santal religion, beliefs and practices which influence much of their thinking and life style. Some scholars may limit the significance of this ritual act to merely a pragmatic end. But all the myths, with the rituals they contain, have a deeper dimension than they merely appear. For example, while narrating how the world was made at rites of initiation and *Sohrae* (harvest festival), they make one think of a Supreme Being who made it and has arranged it in such a way that human beings continue to live in this world harmoniously.

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>57</sup> L. O'MALLEY, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> A. B. CHAUDHURY, *Witch killings amongst Santals*, Sterling Publishing House, New Delhi 1984, p. 151.

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