

Santhal Belief and Spirituality: An Exploration of Their Psychological Traits

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Abstract

The study of myths, beliefs, and superstitions among the Santhal community opens a crucial window into the epistemological foundations of one of the largest indigenous groups of eastern India. In this paper, an attempt has been made to discuss the myths, beliefs, and superstitions across the life cycle of the Santhals, specifically focusing on birth, marriage, death, and witchcraft. This study will refer to Santhal folklore and examine the intricate relationship between the traditional beliefs and spiritual practices of the tribe and their apparent psychological characteristics. The arguments go beyond a purely anthropological description of their customs, aiming to investigate how the Santhal worldview, which seems to be deeply rooted in animism, worshipping the ancestors, and a strong connection to nature that influences their cognitive processes, regulation of emotions, social behaviour, and, overall, their psychological well-being. Further, it aims to provide insights into the adaptive functions of indigenous spiritualities by analysing the psychological implications of their unique belief system and to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of human psychology across diverse cultural contexts. This paper, thus, argues that Santhal myths and so-called superstitions function as culturally encoded forms of knowledge that sustain social order, ecological ethics, and collective identity across generations.

Keywords: Santhal tribe, Witchcraft, Myth, Superstition, Spirituality, Folklore

Introduction

The Santhal tribe appears to be a prominent indigenous community that primarily resides in the states of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha in India. They have a rich cultural heritage that is marked by distinctive social structures like vibrant artistic expressions and a spiritual system which is deeply ingrained. Researchers have done mostly anthropological studies that have extensively documented their customs, rituals, and social

organisation, but there remains a significant gap in understanding the psychological underpinnings and implications of their unique belief system. In this paper, an attempt has been made to bridge this gap by exploring how Santhal beliefs and spirituality may shape the development of specific psychological traits and influence their cognitive processes, emotional landscapes, and social interactions.

Santhal myths and spiritual beliefs constitute a comprehensive symbolic system through which life is rendered intelligible and emotionally manageable. Birth, marriage, death, and witchcraft are not isolated cultural practices but nodal points in a psychological economy of belief that organises fear, hope, grief, and moral anxiety. In Santhal cosmology, the sacred is not distant but immanent, inhabiting forests, ancestors, spirits, and everyday ritual life. This paper argues that these myths and beliefs function as psychological instruments that regulate individual and collective affect, providing interpretive frameworks for crisis and transition. Colonial discourse historically framed indigenous belief systems as superstition, thereby reducing their epistemological legitimacy. Contemporary anthropology challenges this dismissal by recognising myth as a mode of knowledge that structures perception and emotion. As Clifford Geertz argues, religious systems provide “models of” reality and “models for” action, shaping both understanding and conduct (93). Santhal spirituality exemplifies this dual function, translating metaphysical belief into everyday psychological orientation. This paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing upon psychological anthropology, ritual theory, and feminist critique to examine how Santhal myths encode emotional management strategies across key life-cycle events. The discussion proceeds through four thematic sections on birth, marriage, death, and witchcraft, followed by a feminist perspective on gendered experience, and concludes with reflections on cultural resilience.

Scholarships on myth and folklore suggest that Myth operates not merely as a narrative but as a symbolic structure that organises experience. Scholars like Mircea Eliade define myth as the narration of sacred origins that remain operative in the present (5). In Santhal culture, myth is continually reactivated through ritual, embedding cosmology within everyday affective life. Bronislaw Malinowski suggests that the performance of rituals serves to alleviate anxiety during moments of uncertainty, offering emotional reassurance through symbolic action (86). Similarly, the concept of symbolic efficacy, as developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, further illuminates how ritual belief produces tangible psychological effects by

reorganising experience into culturally intelligible patterns (190). Such symbolic ordering enables individuals to endure suffering by situating it within a meaningful cosmology. Evans-Pritchard's analysis of witchcraft among the Azande demonstrates that spiritual explanation does not negate rationality but addresses moral causation and emotional coherence (69). These theoretical insights provide the framework for interpreting Santhal beliefs as psychologically functional systems rather than irrational residues. But, when it comes to the myths and beliefs on witchcraft, the Santhals seem to behave irrationally and practice it to segregate the 'rebel' women who do not conform to the norms in their society.

Birth

In Santhal society, they believe in several types of myths and superstitions. In the book *Traditions and Institutions of the Santals* by P.O. Bodding, a Norwegian missionary, linguist, and folklorist, the Santals are said to have originated from two birds, *has* and *hasil*. It is supposed that Thakur Jiu created two birds, and they laid eggs; from those eggs, two humans were born. The names of the two humans are *pilchu haram* and *Pilchu Budhi*. *Pilchu haram* was male, and *Pilchu Budhi* was female. After sexual union, they multiplied in many ways. Before creating humans, they believed that Thakur Jiu also created the world. Although there are very few sources to know about the myth of the Santhal tribe, fortunately, we came across the writings of a few linguists, historians, folklorists, and Christian missionary administrators who preserved information about the tribe. P.O. Bodding, citing Rev. L.O. Skresfsud's elaborated on the myth of the Santal tribe. Skresfsud mentioned an old Santal guru named Kolean, who described the Santals' myth to him, and he wrote it down and published it as a book. It appeared that Thakur Jiu first created water, and the earth was under it. Then he created water creatures like "the crab, the crocodile, the alligator, the raghop boar fish, the sole prawn, the earthworm, the tortoise and others" (*Traditions and Institutions of Santals* 3). After that, Thakur decided to create humans: "Whom shall I make now? I will make man" (Bodding 3). Then Thakur made two humans from soil, and when he was about to give them life, the day-horse arrived and destroyed them. With a heavy heart, Thakur Jiu created two birds *has* and *hasil* from his chest. The two birds started living with Thakur, and after that, they moved to the sea, but they did not find any food, so they came back to Thakur for help. Thakur then called the alligator and asked it to bring up the earth, but it failed to do so. One by one, most of the water creatures were unable to bring up earth, and lastly, with the

help of the earthworm and the tortoise, Thakur succeeded in bringing up enough earth. And made a proper place for the two birds. Bodding narrates the story in these lines:

“Thereupon Thakur caused the earth to be harrowed level. By continual harrowing some was heaped up on the implements; this became mountains. Then when the earth had been brought up and levelled, the foam that was floating on the surface of the water stuck to the earth, and Thakur sowed *sirom* seed on this foam the *sirom* plant sprang up first (before all other plants). After this he let the *dhubi* grass be sown and came up; after this the *karam* tree, thereupon the *tope sarjom*, the *labar atnak*, the *ladea matkom* and after this all kind of vegetation. The earth became firm. In all places where there was water, there he let sods be put, and in all places where water was bubbling up, there he let it be closed up by pressing pieces of rock down on it”. (5)

After that, the two birds carefully hatched the eggs, and a few days later, two humans were born from these eggs. The two birds were confused; they did not understand how to raise the humans. They went to Thakur Jiu and asked for help. Thakur Jiu requested the birds to locate an appropriate habitat for human beings, and consequently, they flew away to identify the site Hihiri Pipiri, where they introduced the two humans and left them there. Subsequently, the whereabouts of the two birds remain uncertain to the Santals. “They put them down and left them there. What become of Has and Hasil, this the ancestors of old have not told us; therefore we do not know” (Bodding 5). In Charulal Mukherjea’s book *The Santal with illustrations*, he also recounted the same myth about the creation of the Santal tribe.

According to their belief, their ancestor moved from *Hihiri Pipiri* to Khoj Kaman. In Khoj Kaman, they became furious and lost humanity. Seeing this, Thakur Jiu got angry and asked them to come back, but they did not pay attention to Thakur’s words. Enraged, Thakur decided to destroy mankind. However, he called a pair and instructed them to hide in a cave known as Harata Mountain. It is believed that for seven days and nights, Thakur showered rain of fire and devastated humankind.

The Santals have established elaborate rituals to confront these profound uncertainties. These ceremonies aim to attract good fortune, honour their deities, diminish the influence of malevolent spirits, and secure the protection of benevolent powers. It appears that when a woman becomes pregnant, the tribe follows various rituals, which sometimes

seem to be superstitious. During pregnancy, a tribal woman is involved in sexual activities that are normal and advisable. They believed that “while daily intercourse with her husband is not only permissible but advocated- ‘it will make the child big and strong’ – she must on no account have relations with any other man.’ If she does the child will be born in pain. She may even die in childbirth’ (Archer 32).” During a solar eclipse, the pregnant woman should remain in her place and must not break or tear anything, or the child born with a cleft lip or other deformities. Similarly, it is prohibited to attend or witness any of the death rites. “If by accident or in spite of taking every care she sees a corpse and its eyes are open the eyes of her child will be ‘wide and staring’ and move ‘like the eyes of an owl’. If, however, the eyes of the dead person are shut the child’s eye will either be small or never open at all” (Archer 32).

Marriage

Marriage within the Santal community is a core institution that embodies indigenous worldviews, ancestral veneration, and clan-based social structure. The Santal *bapla* (marriage ceremony) is more than just a ritual; it is a communal affair featuring negotiation, music, dance, symbolic exchanges, and spiritual acts. Marriage system of the Santals in greater depth, focusing on mythic origins, ritual symbolism, gender perspectives, and modern transformations. It seems that the Santal tribe rarely die single, as they are very open minded in terms of sexual activities. At the age of twenty or twenty five, Santal males are considered eligible for marriage and females are eligible after their puberty. Various types of marriages take place in the tribe: *Dol bapla*, *Tunki dipil*, *Sangha*, *Jawae kirinok bapla*, *Hikom cetan*, *Iputut*, *Or ader*, *Nirbolok*, *Kundal napam*, *Apangir*, *Ghardi jawae*, *Ghar jawae*, and others. Although Santals are not polygamous in nature, if the wife fails to carry a child, they prefer to marry another woman. Sometimes the younger brother marries the elder brother's widow to inherit the property.

Dol bapla is a formal marriage arranged by the village matchmaker; essentially, it is a process of buying a bride. The mutual consent of both families is paramount in this context, rather than the romantic relationship between a girl and a boy. When the matchmaker finds a suitable girl for the concerned family, he involves the village headman of the girl's village. After that, a date has been decided by both parties, and they arrived at the village headman's house. As Santal people believe in various superstitions, they carefully maintain certain precautions to avoid bad fortune for the would-be couple. “Now, when the youth’s father starts with a party on the day appointed, they will drop the journey and marriage proposal, if

they see a cart carrying fuel or a jackal passing from their right to left or a man carrying an axe or a kudi (an implement for digging) or even receive the news of the death of a cow” (Mukherjea 198). The girl is taken to the headman's house, and the groom's family minutely examine the girl. If they find the girl suitable for their son, then they proceed with the preparations for the marriage. Bride price plays a crucial role in this type of marriage; it varies from place to place. Apart from money, the bride's family received various gifts, including a goat, a cow, sarees, and more. It is believed that as the bride's family take the bride price, the bride entirely belongs to her in-laws. “Now we have eaten the bride price, and the gifts to the bride's brother, the grandmother and mother. Bone of her bones and ash of her ashes, we have sold. But the blood of her head and the blood of her ears, we have not sold and should she die, we follow you for her” (Archer 184).

On the day of the marriage, villagers are involved in many rituals. The bride and bridegroom bathed three times, and they wore yellow clothes. Then the bride is carried to the place of marriage on a basket by the elder brother of the bridegroom. Main ritual of the marriage is *sindur daan*, the bridegroom applied vermilion on the forehead of the bride with the middle finger. After marriage, the couple go to the bridegroom's home, then the bridegroom's sister locks them in a room. Therefore, the relatives enjoy a feast, and the bride follows a peculiar ritual: “the bride is next made to eat a meal soaked in the water in which the feet of the husband had been washed to ensure that she will be his bond slave forever” (Mukherjea 209). The ritual specifically reflects the tribe's patriarchal mindset.

Death

Death and death-related customs play a crucial role in the Santal community. When someone died in their society, they had to practice a few set rituals. As they believe in an afterlife, they carefully follow the rituals to give the dead person a smoother afterlife. In his article, “The Birth and Death Rituals among the Santals of Assam,” Nayan Jyoti Das argues that the Santals do not subscribe to the concept of natural death; rather, they firmly believe that any death is caused by a supernatural spirit (69). If a death occurred, the community believed that the whole village became polluted or impure. The news of death spread by three times, beating a drum, the headman, along with villagers, came to the deceased's house to mourn and to help the family perform the death rituals. First, the women started to rub oil and turmeric on the dead body, then the dead body taken out from room to the yard on a ‘khatia’ (a kind of rope bed which woven by them), and the room cleaned with cow dung and small

amount of paddy has been thrown. Therefore, four men carried the dead body towards the place where the funeral take place, “carrying a winnowing fan containing fire in a bundle of straw, some seeds of cotton, straw picked from the thatch of the deceased, some fried paddy (khoi), powdered sundried rice mixed with turmeric, cow dung and a small chicken in one hand; while the other, he holds a pot with lid, which will serve as the receptacle of the bones of the dead. In the rear, follow the villagers carrying *tangis* (axes), *kudis* (an implement for digging earth) and thus they reach the crossroad at the outskirts of the village” (Mukherjea 221). The women wash the hands and the feet of the dead body; it is noteworthy that the women lamented with specific mourning songs.

After that, a small amount of cotton seeds is placed under the legs of the bed, and the bed is moved three times. The deceased is then taken to the cremation ground. The women have no rights to the cremation ground. It is a necessary step for the women, except those of the deceased family, to take a bath in the pond or lake. At the cremation ground, they arranged fuel and put the dead body on it and sacrificed an animal and hang it on a post. Three mohua leaves are placed on the body of the deceased. They carefully brushed the teeth of the dead body with ‘sal wood’, tobacco and lime put into the mouth. After that, the son of the deceased set the fire with the straws which they brought from the deceased's family. There is also a specific rule of setting fire to the pyre if the dead person had no son. As the Santal women have restrictions on performing such rituals, the dead body should be set on fire by the father, brother, agnates, and men of the clan, respectively.

Next, a few men rushed to the deceased’s house when the body is halfway burnt, and arranged ‘sal tooth sticks’, ‘leaves of bena tree’, and fish. There is a ritual to cook three handfuls of rice, meat, and fish curry, and to offer it to the gods. The pyre is put out with water first by the man who set the fire and then by the other pallbearers. A bone of the forehead kept in a pot and buried it under a sal tree. They return home after taking a bath, go to the roadside where a hut has been built for this purpose, and offer cooked food that they had prepared earlier to Mran Buru and the spirit of the dead person. After the ritual is completed, they burn the hut. After returning home, the head of the family, along with his wife and villagers, eat the remaining food. Meanwhile, a few men got possessed by the deceased’s spirit and Maran Buru, which they call ‘jhupar’. They began asking questions of the possessed individuals, and a question-and-answer session carried forward.

The community observed nine days of impurity until the final purification. During these nine days, they maintain certain prohibitions; they are restricted to eating fish, meat and oil, and they do not share fire with other villagers. It is believed that the clan and the village become impure due to death. This restricted period is called 'telnahan' or 'chotokaman'. After this, they are prepared for the final purification (asidha). On the last day of the nine days, the headman, other villagers and relatives come to the deceased's house. A barber is appointed to shave the family members, and after that, they take a bath. "Now, a ceremony follows when three tooth sticks, four fingers in length, oil, oil cake and narkan hasa (a kind of earth to wash hair) are arranged on three sal leaves and offered to Maran Buru, the deceased and the dead ancestors, so that Maran Buru may admit the released spirit after purifying it with all these materials" (Mukherjea 225). Therefore, all the men take a bath and accept the deceased's family again, exclaimed with the sound of 'horibol', which is again a symbol of endorsement. Two men, again possessed by Maran Buru and the spirit of the dead. All the members of the family worshipped them with rice beer and a special kind of hotpotch. The ritual ends with a feast, and at night, they offer food in the name of the dead person's spirit. It is believed that, in the morning, if any food particles are left, it means the deceased spirit had eaten the food.

The idea of hell and heaven, among the Santals, varies from place to place. They believe that after death, virtuous people are rewarded in heaven and sinners are punished in hell. When the bone (*jan baba*) is thrown into the Damadar river, the soul of the deceased person goes to heaven. If the deceased person was a sinner on earth, he or she is in prison in hell, where they suffer a lot. It is believed that sinners are reborn as beasts or birds. The virtuous person reborn as a man. Among them, ancestor worship is limited to a fixed number of generations. An ancestor remains ritually significant only as long as there are living descendants who offer worship. When generational change removes him from active resemblance, his spiritual presence, as acknowledged through ritual, also fades.

Witchcraft

Witchcraft holds a considerable significance within the religious and cultural worldview of the Santal community. Originating from animism and spirit worship, Santal witchcraft is understood both as a supernatural explanation for misfortune and as a means of social regulation. The cause of disorder in the Santhal society is witchcraft. The belief in witchcraft is widespread as well as intense among Santhals. Bodding says that "There is no genuine Santhal who does not believe in witches" (161). Even today, when science and

technology have reached the highest of their achievements, the belief of the Santhals in the practice of witchcraft and witch is very much genuine to them. Even the educated Santhals are not ready to get rid of this belief system. Nayan Jyoti Das has appropriately commented on this issue in his article, "Santali Women: Under the Shadow of Long Silence". Belief and practice of witchcraft among the Santhals are firm even today among the Santhals. According to their belief, most dreaded magical effects and incurable diseases are believed to result from the practices of witchcraft. The Santhals have always been obsessed with the fear of witchcraft.

In Santal society, there are two types of witches: 'nanjom' and 'dan'. The names of witches vary from place to place; in Purulia, the Santal community calls them 'boksin', whereas the northern part of Bengal calls them 'foksin'. It is believed that 'nanjom' is the upper status of a witch. "When a 'nanjom' becomes very expert and has all the 'Dan Bongas' under her control, she is then called a Nanjom. She then walks with her hands and her legs are stretched upwards. Her witchery is said to be very powerful and it is said, no ordinary Ojha (witch doctor) can overcome her" (Mukherjea 300). A witch has always tried to make disciples of her own. If she finds a suitable girl, she starts singing a specific type of song, and the girl becomes possessed by her and is taught her witchcraft tricks. First, the new witch must kill her close relatives to prove her devotion; if she fails, she becomes insane and later dies.

They believe that the practice of witchcraft may destabilise society, cause harm to the lives of human beings, and can be the cause of death. So, suspicion is always present that witches may be at work when a sick person cannot recover. A Santal mind is always worried about the practice of witchcraft in society. Witchcraft is the most incommensurable matter that destroys the peaceful equilibrium in Santal society. If any untimely or immature death happens in society, Santhals think that evil forces are working. If the patient is not restored from disease or illness, the Santal society concludes that it must be the conspiracy of the witches. To re-establish peace in society Santal women are tortured in the worst possible way. Sometimes they are thrashed, driven out of the village, or even beaten to death.

On the other hand, the practice of witchcraft in Santal society gives power to women. Santal people get frightened if they encounter any woman with abnormal behaviour. They get scared. They either hide so that the witches cannot get sight of them or rush towards the home so that they can save themselves from the clutches of the witches. Therefore, it can

be said that while behaving like a witch, women gather strength or power. The practice of witchcraft offers women the opportunity to exercise power or to achieve authority in Santhal society. Society has thrust upon Santhal women a lot of restrictions and taboos. They are treated as 'other' in society.

Conclusion

Santhal myths and spirituality seem to articulate a psychology of belief which is culturally embedded and that structures emotional life across birth, marriage, death, and witchcraft. These beliefs function as a symbolic practice for managing fear, uncertainty, grief, and moral anxiety. Although these beliefs constitute coherent frameworks of meaning that sustain communal resilience. Critical understanding of the discourses on this matter seems to reveal that the ethical tensions within belief systems are particularly regarding gendered vulnerability and scapegoating. Thus, this attempt to read Santhal myths, beliefs, and spirituality in relation to the said aspects of the life cycle and their impact on the psyche of the Santhals is to recognise them as living structures of meaning, capable of both sustaining and constraining human experience.

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