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## To study of Santhals festival history and the culture of performance

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### Abstract

The Santhal tribe in the Singhbhum region, with a particular focus on their customs, festivals, and systems of social organization. As one of India's most prominent and populous indigenous communities, the Santhals represent a unique intersection of cultural resilience, ecological knowledge, and historical depth. These celebrations-ranging from familial rituals like Jomsim Bonga and Karam Bonga to community-wide festivals such as Baha Bonga and Sohoray Porob-play a central role in maintaining social cohesion, cultural identity, and intergenerational continuity. The event is a significant part of people's communal lives. Therefore, the festivals are more than simply events; they are a sonic wave of long-established traditions and practices that create the fabric of Santal life. There have been several festivals held within the Santal family since the beginning of time, and all members of the family, including descendants, participate in these celebrations.

**Keywords:** Santhal, celebrations, festivals, communities and religion

### Introduction

People from all walks of life and faiths have coexisted harmoniously in India for thousands of years. There is a Santal population here, and they have their own language, culture, religion, and society. The event is a significant part of people's communal lives. Therefore, the festivals are more than simply events; they are a sonic wave of long-established traditions and practices that create the fabric of Santal life. As a legacy of the Santals' illustrious culture, we celebrate with several events. A rich musical instrument set, rituals, and the performance of songs are all part of the festival's history. According to a Santali saying, "Taram Gem Luhukag Khan Eneg ar Ror Gem Rahaak Khan Sereng," which translates to "Singing is the origin of speaking," one form of expression evolved from walking. The music and dancing styles vary from festival to festival. Although dance and song have evolved throughout the years, not every festival has the same repertoire. To a culture, religion is paramount. There is a community of saints and a manifestation to carry out the event. The santal states that the first month of the year is called the Magh (a

month's name). In Santali, the first day of the month known as Magh is called Akhan. All through the year, the santal celebrations take place. The Santal community celebrates with two distinct festivities. There are two types of festivals: social and familial. There have been several festivals held within the Santal family since the beginning of time, and all members of the family, including descendants, participate in these celebrations.

The names of these rituals include "Jomsim Bonga," "Abge Bonga," "Karam Bonga," "Gora Bonga," "Pata Bonga," and many more. During this occasion, the priest will be chosen from among the members of each household. During a festival, anybody may play the role of a priest. During religious ceremonies, they wear their distinctive traditional attire, which is often white. Many social holidays are celebrated by the Santal people. Among these are the following: 'Baha Bonga', 'Makmore Bonga', 'Shohoray Porob', 'Dansay Porob', 'Magh Bonga', 'Rohoni Bonga', 'Erok Bonga', 'Muchri Bonga', 'Ashariya Bonga', 'Karam Bonga', 'Runda Porob', 'Sakarat Parab', etc., among many others.

Here, on the holy site known as "Jaherthan," all of these festivities are traditionally held. Songs, rituals, and a rich ensemble of musical instruments are all part of these celebrations. The religious and social importance of the Santal Community is mirrored in these celebrations, which also reflect the connection between rituals of the past and present and the central Indian concept in harmonious cohabitation. As a break from the monotony of everyday life, festivals provide a welcome renewal. A sense of renewed vitality is one of the many benefits of taking part in the event. People are able to put their troubles, anxieties, and afflictions behind them during the celebration as a result.

We only know that festivals allow people to get together to celebrate a variety of deities via the sharing of traditional foods, costumes, and rituals. During the time of worship, Santals enjoy a special meal called "Sore Daka." "Panchi Parhar" and "Panchi Dhuti" are the names of their traditional garments. The "Panchi Parhar" and the "Panchi Dhuti," respectively, are garments worn by men and women. Religion, culture, society, and psychology are the main themes of the Santal celebrations. As a whole, the Santal community feels closer thanks to the celebrations. Essential to the festivities are the prayers and rituals performed by members of the Santal community. When worshipping a god or goddess, it is usual practice to eat a meal in order to bring forth feelings of contentment and pleasure.

### Literature Review

Political fragmentation persisted throughout the Indian subcontinent's history, and the number of autonomous states peaked around the year 1000, when our research began (Nag, 2007, p. 28) <sup>[1]</sup>. (De la Garza, 2016, p. 12) <sup>[2]</sup>. The Vijayanagar Empire, the Deccan Sultanates, the Rajput kingdoms, and the Delhi Sultanate were among the most powerful competitor nations in the early sixteenth century (Roy, 1994, p. 57) <sup>[3]</sup>.

According to Roy (1994, pp. 57–70) <sup>[3]</sup>, these pre-colonial kingdoms could all muster sizable armies. According to reports, the Vijayanagar Empire fielded a million-person army, whereas Sultan Alauddin Khilji of Delhi commanded 475,000 horse men. Additionally, there is evidence that institutions have evolved in reaction to outside pressures. For instance, the Vijayanagar Empire extended state power by constructing new military garrisons and introducing new weapons and cavalry under King Krishna Devaraya.

The Mughal Empire ranked high among the most powerful Indian subcontinental nations from 1526 to 1707 (Richards, 1995, pp. 1, 6-9; De la Garza, 2016, p. 1) <sup>[4, 2]</sup>. After many failed efforts, Babur finally overcame the Afghan kingdom headed by Ibrahim Lodi in 1526, therefore establishing this empire. The next year, the Mughal government was able to solidify its grip over northern India thanks to Babur's tiny army's victory against a massive Rajput coalition with 80,000 cavalymen and 500 war elephants.

According to De la Garza (2016) <sup>[2]</sup> and Nath (2018) <sup>[5]</sup>, the Mughals allocated a substantial portion of their budget into war. For instance, according to Richards (1995, p. 75) <sup>[4]</sup>, by far the larger portion of this budget was dedicated to financing a vast military establishment' when describing the state budget for 1596. Mansabdars, who were high-ranking military officers in the Mughal Empire, received about 80%

of state funding, with the central military apparatus receiving the remaining 9% (Richards, 1995, pp. 75-6) <sup>[4]</sup>. In comparison, the Mughal royal family received less than 5% of the budget each year.

The colonial encounter profoundly reshaped the social, economic, and cultural landscape of the Santal communities in Singhbhum. Prior to British intervention, the Santals lived relatively autonomous lives within forested and agrarian settings, governed by their indigenous institutions and guided by animistic beliefs and communal values. However, the advent of British colonial rule in the 18th and 19th centuries brought about unprecedented disruption. The British, driven by revenue collection motives following the Permanent Settlement of 1793, identified the Santals as ideal laborers for agricultural expansion due to their industrious nature and willingness to clear forests for cultivation. This led to large-scale migration of Santals into the Damin-i-Koh region, including parts of present-day Singhbhum, where they were employed to convert forest lands into revenue-generating farmland.

### The seasonal cycle and agricultural celebrations

**Baha (Spring festival):** The Santali word for "flower" is BAHHA. This event is second only to the harvest festival, "Sohrae," in importance to the Santal people. This sacred event is observed annually in the first month of the Santal calendar, Fagun or Falgun, which is February or March. Common trees such as Mohua, Peepal, Mango, Polash, Neem, Sal, and Moringa often produce new foliage, blossoms, or fruits around this season. The Santals believe that as trees begin to bear fruit, it is best not to harm them physically or spiritually by removing their blossoms, leaves, buds, or branches. As a result, Santals never partake in eating mango blossoms or fruits, and they also never remove the leaves of peepal or neem trees in preparation for Baha.

At the moment, neither women nor men are cutting down trees for firewood or using Sal flowers as hair ornaments. In such case, the firewood is stored outside the settlement rather than carried within. The community priest, who is supposed to visit every home during Baha rites, will not pay a visit to any household that disobeys these regulations. Over the course of two days, they celebrate Baha Porob.

**Erok (Planting festival):** The Santals' most joyous celebration is the Sohrae (harvest feast). Because their supplications and prayers have been heard, their offerings have been accepted, and now there has been a bountiful harvest thanks to the wonderful rain that followed. Over the course of five days in the month of pus (December–January), it is commemorated. An egg, representing the universe's creation, is presented to the god. It seems that the Santals' religious beliefs inform the many celebrations and feasts that they observe. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the Santal religion's tenets and practices.

The Santals, Mahali, Bhumija, Ho, Birhor, and Lodha are some of the tribes whose names are associated with the earliest agricultural celebration, Erok-sim, Ero sim, or enoki sim. May and June, the warmest months of the year, are when it takes place. In order to bring about bountiful harvests, abundant rainfall, harmony, and good fortune, the deities of Jaherthan, Manjhithan, Orak-bonga, Abge bong a,

and border bonga are publicly and privately appeased by offerings on this occasion. The whole village rejoices. It takes place just before planting the first seed in the fields. As a group, Santals visit the Jaherthan to offer prayers to the goddess Jaher, chanting –

- Aisa Aisa Chhita Kapura.
- Aisa Aisa Dangi Punri.
- Aisa Aisa Hinshi, Dumni.
- Aisa Aisa Ga.

### Harihar (Harvest festival)

The process of harihar-simco is used to transplant paddy seedlings. According to Campbell and Riseley, it's the same as Erok-Sim in June. When the seedlings are young, it is celebrated. In rituals honoring Mother Earth, sacrifices of uncooked rice, flowers, and vermilion are made. Women are not permitted to take part in it. In the months of Sharabana (July and August), it is celebrated. As part of this ritual, it is customary to sacrifice hens with green eggs. This is done with the expectation that the paddy tree would become more verdant in the future.

### Sohrai and Dasain

It takes place in October or November during the Hindu month of Kartik, on the day known as Amavasya. It takes place in Santal Parganas from January 10th to the 15th. People fast, decorate their homes, and make delicacies for this event. They worship the animal god Gaurea at night by lighting clay lamps in the barns housing the livestock.

An important part of this event is marking the end of an agricultural cycle that has been very labor-intensive and dependent on livestock. Bandna is the most popular name for the event, but it goes by several others, including Soharai, Badhna, and Gohail Puja. This study will go more into the word 'Bandna' and its crucial significance. The festival's roots go all the way back to the agricultural sector, an important economic driver in the area. Animals that are vital to farming, such as buffaloes and cows, are honored during the event.

### Communal events and traditional hunts

#### Disom Sendra (Annual hunt)

Historically, Disom Sendra was seen as a rite of passage, marking the transition of young men into adulthood and warriors of the community. Armed with bows, arrows, spears, and now occasionally country-made weapons, participants enter the forest after performing rituals to honor the forest spirits (*bongas*) and their ancestors. The event is accompanied by music, chants, and offerings at sacred groves (*Jaher Than*), signifying the Santals' spiritual connection to nature and their belief in co-existence with the forest (Ekka, 2020) [8]. Importantly, the event reinforces clan ties, gender roles, and indigenous knowledge of animal behavior, seasons, and topography. In recent decades, Disom Sendra has come under intense scrutiny and debate, particularly from conservationists, forest officials, and animal rights activists. With the creation of protected areas like the Dalma Wildlife Sanctuary, the hunt is now considered illegal under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. Forest authorities often try to prevent the event, citing the threat it poses to wildlife populations, especially to elephants and endangered species.

### Karam festival practices

Brothers Karam and Dharam are not related. West Bengal and Jharkhand celebrate Santali with the karam puja. Traditional Karam Puja societies w.b. in an effort to appease the deities of fertility the "Mother of Earth" The night of "Bhadr Ekadasi," often in the middle of August, is commemorated with karam puja. It is essentially a festival related to agriculture. They pray that the deity "karma" would protect their family from harm and reward them with abundant harvests. A happier marital life is what most women wish for. "JHUMUR NRITO" is the name of the dance that is performed before the Karam Puja. The primary gist of it is a bunch of young men and women dancing to the beat of "Dhol" and "Madal."

In India, the Karam Festival is mostly observed by the tribal communities of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Assam, Chhattisgarh, and several other states. A term used to describe the tree's natural enemy, NAUCLEA PARVIFOLIA, the "karam" in the festival's name. On the auspicious day, this tree is revered as a symbol of Koram Debotha.



Fig 1: Karam Festival

### Maak' More and other rituals

The biggest village event in the Santhal is Sohrae, which means harvest festival. Bandna is the name of the post-harvest event when the local's pay homage to cattle. Before thatched grass is harvested, the Magh Sim celebration is held. During the Baha'i holiday in February and March, girls in every home wash the priest's foot and receive sal flowers as a blessing. From that day on, they start utilizing fresh sal leaves. May and June also mark Mak-more, another such festival. Although there is less of a gathering now, they still celebrate festivals like Sohrae, Baha, Mak More, and Karam. Their shifting perspectives on their festivals are due



to a number of factors. Because of this change in perspective, nature is no longer as significant to them as it before was.

People in Santhal are no longer only reliant on agriculture; many now work as factory workers or in other industries like as banking, education, administration, and healthcare. Since they have to be in town for work all the time, these events no longer seem important to them.

### Gender dimensions in festival participation

Tribal societies are often quite egalitarian. The landholdings are a collaborative effort between men and women. The majority of the Santhalese people spend their days tending to their fields as farmers. But, sadly! The natural world had a catastrophic impact. The role types of men and women in Santhale are transformed by the drought-like environment. Since women are primarily responsible for providing, managing, and protecting water-related resources and facilities, development goals in this area often address issues of availability, accessibility, and safety, as well as poverty reduction and health and wellbeing. Due to insufficient supply and service, the whole community-men, women, and children alike-suffers from a lack of proper diet, poor health, and the psychological and bodily harm caused by water and waste-related diseases. The operation and usage of water systems have been improved, and women and men now have equal opportunities for training and roles in these areas, thanks to the inclusion of women in planning, design, maintenance, and management.

### Histories of performance, dance, and music

#### Significance of Santhal music and instruments

The women align themselves in a line sequence as they dance and sing and the men would all be in the center playing the instruments made by them. The Santhal tribes of India have a typical tribal lifestyle and they have a magnificent skill in making musical equipment's. They play music using Tiria (bamboo flute with seven holes), Tumdak', a wooden frame instrument with leather on the lateral sides, Tamak, a wooden frame instrument with leather on the anterior side and the posterior side is hollow, Dhatra, a fretless stringed instrument with three or four strings, and Kat banam which is similar to a violin. Harmonium is a vital instrument in every dance and occasion. Kortal is a cymbal used during dances and festivals. It can be as wide as a plate or small as a cup.



**Fig 2:** Music instruments: a-Tamak, b-Tumdak', c-Tiria, d-Dhatra, e-Harmonium, f-Kortal

### Dance forms and their ritual importance

Countless seasonal and festival-specific dances are part of the Santal repertoire. These dances, says Mukherjee, "are an integral component of the religious life of the tribe" (Mukherjee, 1962: 365). The majority of the 31 dances listed by Bodding (Bodding, 1993; first published in India) include both men and women, while there are a few that are exclusively for one gender. As an example, "the large" is the most popular Santal dance, and while it is best performed under the moonlight, it may be done at any time. During marriage festivities, the don is often danced.

At the Sohrae and Baha celebrations, you may see Jatur performed. Dancing the Danta is also a part of the Sohrae. It is not common for women to participate in this dance. Conversely, the Baha dance, which is performed only by females during the Baha festival, is a kind of traditional dance. The males of the community put on spectacular dancing performances at the Bitlaha, the Annual Hunt, and the Karam festival.

### Celebrations of modern festivals

Chata Parab, Pata, and Jutra are Hindu celebrations that the Santals adopted and made their own. It seems that today's youth are less committed to their traditional practices than previous generations. They don't feel a connection to traditional celebrations since they see them as antiquated practices. They do, in fact, gather with loved ones to enjoy the holidays in their own ways. The research shows that they tolerate and even adapt practices from other castes, which is an interesting phenomenon. Nowadays, the younger generation of the Santal community still travels to these places to observe ancient festivals and rituals like as Saraswati puja, Viswakarma puja, Holi, Durga puja, Diwali, etc.

### Commercial and tourism dimensions

The State Government of Jharkhand and institutions like the Tribal Research Institute have been instrumental in promoting tribal festivals as part of regional tourism strategies. Annual events such as *Adivasi Mahotsav* and tribal fairs are now organized in cities like Ranchi and Jamshedpur, featuring Santhal dance troupes, handicrafts, traditional foods, and musical performances. These festivals are often advertised in travel brochures and tourism websites, projecting Santhal culture as colorful, exotic, and marketable to urban tourists, NGOs, and foreign visitors. As a result, many Santhal artisans and performers have begun to earn livelihoods by participating in such events, selling traditional art, musical instruments, and costumes.

However, this commercialization also raises complex questions about cultural authenticity and commodification. While economic benefits can empower communities, the transformation of sacred rituals into staged performances for tourist consumption may dilute their original meanings. For example, the ritual significance of *Karam puja*-a deeply spiritual celebration of nature and sisterhood-is often lost when it is performed as a dance number without accompanying rites or narratives. Additionally, decisions about representation and profit distribution are frequently controlled by non-tribal event organizers, leaving Santhal participants with limited agency and lower economic returns.

## Cultural resistance and adaption at festivals

### Festivals in identity assertion

Festivals among the Santhals of Singhbhum serve as more than just religious or seasonal celebrations—they are crucial instruments of cultural memory, political resistance, and identity assertion. In the face of historical marginalization, land alienation, religious conversion, and assimilation pressures, Santhal festivals such as *Sohrai*, *Baha*, *Karam*, and *Disom Sendra* have emerged as vibrant expressions of tribal distinctiveness and communal solidarity. These festivals reaffirm not only the Santhals' spiritual worldview and connection with nature, but also their right to cultural autonomy in a socio-political landscape that often renders tribal voices invisible.

### Incorporation of new elements

**A middle-aged Santhal man elaborated:** In our disham (environment), there are no *jiwit* (living-being) or *goyet* (nonliving). Neither my Ora (home) nor the pond that sits behind it are alive, yet they are an integral component of our natural surroundings. Nevertheless, all living things—horses, tangris, and dares—have lives of their own.

**Another old woman described:** The areas around the home are called *marangdare*, *doringdare*, *tangri*, *Chede*, and *Ora*, respectively, and they feature both big and little trees. Some of them don't even exist, and we have no influence over them whatsoever, unlike weather (rain, air, etc.). The air we breathe and the soil we walk on are the two most fundamental components of our natural habitat. We make use of the weather and available land to grow our crops. The celebrations and ceremonies were timed according to the natural order of things, which included things like tree flowering and fruiting, as well as seasonal changes. It was thought by the Santhals that the environment might be influenced by ghosts.

*Bonga*, the good spirit, and *Bhoot bonga*, the bad spirit, were the two categories of spirits. All the beneficial works and advancements in social and economic life were accomplished by good spirits. Performing rituals helps appease beneficial spirits, according to the *thakur* (priest). In order to appease the gods, the Santhals observed a number of cultural festivals, including *Bahaparab* and *Marangburu*. Evil spirits are relentless in their pursuit of human victims. Only malevolent spirits are inside the witch's sphere of influence.

### Conclusion

The role of women, youth, and indigenous knowledge systems in sustaining cultural continuity while negotiating modernity. Moreover, this thesis offers a nuanced account of the interplay between state-led development initiatives and tribal autonomy. Through qualitative analysis and field insights, it underscores the agency of the Santhal people in preserving identity amid pressures of displacement, marginalization, and policy indifference. The Santhal tribe in the Singhbhum region, with a particular focus on their customs, festivals, and systems of social organization. As one of India's most prominent and populous indigenous communities, the Santhals represent a unique intersection of cultural resilience, ecological knowledge, and historical depth. In every human community, cultural ethos is a major

factor in how space is used. Urban areas have limited space and individuals have limited access to using that space for private freedom, but even that limited space has some manifestation of cultural ethos, which is why this cultural idiom is most significant in rural areas the Santhal community are marked by resilience, adaptability, and a persistent assertion of identity. Their journey, shaped by historical marginalization and contemporary challenges, also reflects a profound capacity to engage with change without losing cultural rootedness.

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