

Individual to Community OR Community to Individual? A Question of Sociological Significance of ‘Baha Bonga’ of Santal Tribe of Odisha

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary world, the rituals/festivals of a community/tribe celebrated not just for entertainment. This contrast with the identity of individual and community to be part of the larger society because of the risk of disappearance. The Santals are one among sizeable population of the country observing different religious rituals time to time to show the integrity among the individuals being part of the society. In a way dysfunctional features of religion in a multi-religious society have been questioned by social scientists. This paper highlights one of the religious rituals called “Baha Bonga” considerably one of the important reflections of Santal Identity, celebrated in two different set up (in a village and in an institution). The paper not only questions the individualist society but also shows the sociological significance collectiveness in the domain of modernization.

Keywords: Santal, Baha Bonga, Sociological Significance, Rituals, Modernization.

INTRODUCTION

The Santals are one of the most populous Adivasi communities in India. They reside in the states of Assam, Jharkhand, Odisha, Tripura, and West Bengal, and are also found in neighboring countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal. The origin of the Santals remains unknown and is still a matter of scholarly inquiry. Although their exact origins are yet to be determined, their belief systems, rituals, and culture are far richer and more distinctive than those of the mainstream communities in the country.

The festivals of the Adivasi not only strengthen the cultural heritage of the community but, in the long run, also help preserve and empower their literature, rituals, and traditions. These festivals are celebrated partly out of a fear of cultural extinction, serving as a reaffirmation of their unique identity. Traditional Adivasi festivals are marked by distinctive attire, elaborate rituals, and vibrant celebrations. The Santals, as the largest Adivasi community in India, have maintained their language, culture, and stable identity through their rituals and festivals. Their festivals and rituals are closely linked to agricultural activities and are celebrated year-round with deep customary significance. These celebrations are incomplete without tribal songs and dances performed by members of the community.

The Santals are deeply committed to preserving their Adivasi legacy, even though ongoing social changes pose serious threats to their society, particularly to their rituals, culture, and festivals, which face pressures from dominant social groups. Historically, the chief source of livelihood for the Santals, at least since the 19th century, has been settled agriculture. Prior to that, hunting was also an important means of subsistence. However, population growth, reduction of forest cover, and government restrictions have made hunting a limited and declining vocation for the Santals. While most Santals are still agriculturists, some have moved to less traditional forms of work. In contemporary Indian society, even though the majority of the community depends on agriculture, they no longer rely solely on farming. Nevertheless, they continue to remain culturally and socially isolated from their immediate neighbors.

Despite these challenges, the Santals retain a strong command over their language, culture, and heritage, expressed through their festivals throughout the year. Their festivals are closely intertwined with their language and culture, serving as both a cultural expression and a break from the monotony of daily life. Many festivals are strongly associated with the agricultural cycle and the rhythms of nature. The Santals' festivals are a reflection of their faith and are vital to preserving their rituals and traditions.

The Santal community, spread across the country, often lacks the opportunity to celebrate their festivals simultaneously in all regions. However, for major festivals, the Santals harmonize the timing and dates of celebration as much as possible. This article focuses particularly on Baha Bonga, one of the significant festivals of the Santal community in Odisha.

Odisha is home to 64 vibrant Adivasi communities, including 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), spread across the length and breadth of the state. Among them, the Santals form the largest homogeneous tribal group, concentrated mainly in the districts of Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Balasore, Malkangiri and Dhenkanal.

METHODOLOGY

The present study on Baha Bonga, a significant festival of the Santal community in Odisha, is based on qualitative, field-based research aimed at understanding the cultural, social, and ritualistic aspects of the festival and its relevance in contemporary times. The research design combines ethnographic methods with descriptive analysis to capture both the observable practices and the community's perceptions surrounding the festival.

Study Area

The research was carried out in Santal-dominated villages of Odisha, particularly in the districts of Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Balasore, and Dhenkanal, where the Santals form a significant proportion of the population. Villages were selected purposively based on the concentration of Santal households and the extent to which traditional festivals like Baha Bonga are observed. Both remote and semi-urban villages were included to reflect variations in the observance of traditions.

A qualitative research approach was employed to explore the cultural significance and practices of Baha Bonga. The following methods were used for data collection:

1. **Participant Observation:** The researcher spent extended periods in the study villages during the Baha Bonga festival to observe the rituals, dances, songs, and social gatherings associated with the festival. Detailed field notes were maintained to record the sequence of events and community participation.
2. **In-depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including village elders, community leaders, women participants, priests (Naeke), and youth. These interviews helped uncover the historical significance, symbolic meanings, and changes in the observance of Baha Bonga over the years.
3. **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** FGDs were organized with groups of men, women, and young people to understand diverse perspectives on the festival's role in cultural preservation, intergenerational transmission of traditions, and social cohesion.
4. **Secondary Data:** Relevant literature, previous studies, government reports, and cultural documentation on Santal festivals and traditions were reviewed to provide context and support primary data.

Baha Bonga Among The Santals In Odisha

The Santal of Odisha have incompatible number of festivals celebrated round the year. And major of these festivals are Sakrat, Sohrae, Baha and others. Baha Bonga literary flower ritual is one leading ritual of Santals. This rituals is being usually observed in the Santals' month of *Fagun*, usually falls in the month of February and March. During this time the community and forest looks different due to appearance of leaves, flower and fruits

all around. It is also believes that creatures depends on nature, birds and human rejoice the gift of nature. And with the same believes Santals observed the festival of Baha Bonga, religious rituals celebrated in sacred grove.

The main convictions in the wake of observing Baha Bongs is paying homage to nature and respect the gift of in terms of leaves, flowers and fruits. At the time of the year, all creatures wonder in search of fodder in the forest. Hence this is right time for all living being to make use of gifts of nature in the form of leaves, flowers and fruits. It is also believes that in rejoicing or collecting such forest produces, human being may encounter various threats or collects toxic fruits, flower or leaves for consumption. There is another believes that outbreak of epidemics like small pox and chicken pox may occurs in the month of March. At the same time it seen that pet like oxen, cow, buffalo and birds, venture deep into the forest in search of food. They also face similar probability of danger in the forest. The Santal observe Baha Bonga in order to get rid of possible danger, wrongful effect of natural produces. In Baha Bonga, Santal seek blessings and invocation from their God and Goddess. Santals also seek asylum from almighty to ward off from potential harm, evil and deadly effect of nature and also look for consent from the creator of nature to bring it in use. During this time flowers of Sal tree and Mahua tree are more prevalent and hence the celebration is termed as Baha Bonga, literal meaning is flower festival.

Baha Bonga, community based celebration of ritual and village is considered to be the unit of community. In every Santal village Jaher (Sacred grove) is being established with the establishment of village and Baha Bonga is observed at Jaher for three days are 1. **Um Nadka** (literary means bathing, cleaning and purify) 2. **Sardi Maha** (Means actual day when rituals is to be performed) and 3. **Aag rada** (means unlocking of bow and arrow). The actual day of Baha Bonga is schedule by headman of the village in consultation with functionaries, villagers and being observed on the fifth day of fagun month in Santal calendar. Villager takes the decision much ahead for reason to get physically and mentally prepared like washing, cleansing, overlaying and colouring homes. The villagers requires enough time to invite guests, brew rice beer and purchase new cloth for the festival.

Um Nadka Hilog marks the first day of the Baha Bonga. On this day, the village community, with the active participation of unmarried youth, undertakes the purification of the Jaher (the sacred grove) The Naike (the priest who performs the rituals) cleanses and anoints the Jaher and the ritual articles with mustard oil at the Jaher Thaan.

In consultation with the Naike, the villagers prepare the necessary ritual items such as winnowing baskets, vessel-shaped baskets, arrows and bows, a chopper, a floor brush, glass bangles, pendants, and buffalo horns. To purify himself before performing the rituals, the Naike takes a ceremonial bath, assisted by the Kudam Naike (the Naike's attendant), who helps him get ready for the proceedings.

In the evening, the villagers gather in the courtyard of the Naike's house, where all the ritual articles prepared earlier are accounted for and verified by the community. After validation, three men are chosen and seated in front of the Naike. The Naike hands each of them a winnowing fan and rice, symbolizing their invocation of the divine. It is believed that the three men enter a trance-like state, embodying Jaher Ayo (the Goddess), Marang Buru (the Supreme God), and Moreko-Turuko (a protective deity).

The man representing the Goddess wears a necklace, bangles, carries a vessel on his head and a broom in his hand; the one representing Marang Buru holds an axe; and the one embodying Moreko-Turuko carries a bow and arrows. The three then proceed to the Jaher to inspect the sacred space — ensuring it has been properly cleansed, the shed over the deities is well prepared, and all other arrangements are in place.

Upon their return from the inspection, the Naike washes their feet and marks their foreheads with vermilion. Finally, he invokes them to emerge from their trance. The three gradually regain consciousness and are then offered handi (rice beer) as a gesture of respect. The ritual concludes with the villagers joining in drinking rice beer, singing, and dancing in the Naike's courtyard, celebrating the spirit of Baha Bonga in unison.

Sardi Maha/ Bonga Hilog the day two in Baha Bonga observation starts with villagers collecting Sal flowers from nearby forest. Godet (one of the functionary of village) collects all the articles required for community feast like rice, salt, turmeric and others from villagers.

Naike and Kudam Naike purify themselves by taking bath and display all the material required for rituals. After that village functionaries and villagers gathered in Naike's house. Later villagers starts procession of Naike's and company him to Jaher in the midst of singing and dancing. After reaching Jaher, Naike purify by cleaning and pasturing the space in front of God with poop of domesticated animal, shower water and milk followed by applying of mustard oil and maithi. In other words we can mentioned that holy bath of God and Goddess are being performed. Naike prepare Khond (structure) with powder made of rice and lay some raw rice in front of all the God and Goddess. The fowls are offered to the God with fresh rice from the square khond and offered to God amidst chanting of mantra and innovation. Rest of the rituals are being performed by Kuam Naike in separate place in Jaher. After the rituals, feast for Naike is prepare separately in new utensils and share with Kudam Naike. The villagers heads by Godet arrange separate feast from collected materials and distribute it to the villagers. In the evening villagers assembled at Jaher, seek blessing and ask for Sal flowers from the Naike. Flowers are worn by both Man and women followed by performance of Baha dance and songs. It is important to mention here that Baha Bonga is the lone occasion whereby male and female folk dance separately in front of God and Goddess at Jaher. And hence Baha Bonga is considered to be festival of equality in which male and female get equal chance to play musical instruments, sing and dance willingly under the nose of God and Goddess in divergence. It is considered that during the Baha dance, Bongas are pleased enough by dance and songs, they happen to visit human in form of male or female and get involves themselves in Baha dance similar to humans. Therefore, Baha Bonga is considered to be not only festivals of humans but festivals of Bonga as well. In the evening Naikes' tasks is to purify all the villagers present at Jaher with the sprinkling water on them and also in the Jaher premises. The three man assigned to act as a Jaher Ayo, Lita Gosian and Moreko-Turuko are to be impersonate and enter into the entrance of Jaher. After that Naike hand over their belongings to respective God, Goddess and Moreko-Turuiko. It followed by the procession at the village led by Naike, Jaher Ayo, Lita Godet and Moreko-Turuiko. The whole procession is followed by the villager with playing musical instrument, dancing and singing. At the doorstep of every house hold at village, Naike's feet is being washed by the female folks followed by washing feet of Bongas accompanied. In return they receive Sal flowers and blessing from Naike. The procession end the house of Naike which followed by the performances of dance and songs at Naikes' courtyard. The dance and songs in Baha is considered to be most sacred and during the rituals all the steps need to be followed as prescribed by forefathers since ages. Baha dance is also labelled as dance of Bongas as it is believed that Bonga participate in dance during Baha dance. Hence it is kept as pure as possible which is evident by dance and songs are performed separately by both men and women.

Akhan Sendera/ Aag Rada is the ritual of day three during Baha Bonga. The community hunting is to be performed during the day time and after that rituals of unlocking bow and arrow is to be performed on the third day. The said ritual are done in Naike's court yard with singing devotional and sacred Bonga song. On this particular day of Baha Bonga is the joyous day of Santals. During the dance and song both male and female can take part together by holding hands. Populations of all ages take part in dance, song and enjoy it to the fullest. It is observed that on the last day of Baha Bonga, particular dance form named **Dahar** is performed for the last time of that particular calendar year. It is obvious that no one wish to avoid such occasion to enjoy through dance and song. Finally the call off day is considered to be the end of dance, song and overall consideration is end of Baha Bonga celebration.

Effect Of Modernization On Baha Bonga Among Santals'

The initial sign of adopting culture from dominant society among Santals was through '**Safa Hor**' movement started by Bhagrit Manji in 1868. The movement resulted in adoption of few norms, ritual and values of Hindu society. The than Santals was deeply impacted before Safa Hor movement. The Santals adopting provision of religious thread and some of them considered to be higher in status of their counterpart, meanwhile quite few Santal restricted their diet by becoming vegetarians. The reason behind adopting culture and ritual of dominant religion was frequent contact with neighbouring Hindu for longer period of time. It immensely impacted Santal population, resulted in borrowed cultural traits and ideas which imbedded their festivals.

In the "The Santal: A study in cultural change", Datta-Majumder was observed from a month long field work of a single village in Birbhum. They mentioned that Cultural change among Santals appears to follow a pattern similar to that of other groups in India. It was having substantial domination of dominant belief system over Santals population. It was also mentioned that the Santals have embraced several God and Goddess from

dominant religion like Rama, Sri Krishna, Shiva, Parvati and Kali. However Santals have not replicated their Bongas with dominant religious God and Goddess, however exception in overlapping belief is hard to deny.

In the book titled “Tribal Religion: Religious beliefs and practices among the Santal”, written by J. Troisi. In the particular work he mentioned that, Santals are in contact with dominant religion for centuries and aspects of Santal life much affected socially, linguistically and religiously. The festivals like Holi, Durga Puja, Diwali, Saraswati Puja, Ganesh Puja and other have much influence in Santals practices of their festivals at expectational level if not at large. In other words, Santal’s gesture towards their own rituals and Bongas are optional and perception is being modified according the change in generation. The newer generation of santal finds age old tradition and rituals are primitive and lack in getting enough attention by younger generation. At present, Santals are actively involved in celebrating their respective festivals in aligning with the convenient situation with modern time, technology and gesture.

Sociological Singnificance:

The Santal festival of Baha Bonga, rich in ritual and symbolism, can be meaningfully understood through two influential sociological frameworks: Émile Durkheim’s concept of collective conscience and Victor Turner’s theory of the ritual process. Both theories illuminate how this ritual sustains social solidarity, negotiates social change, and reinforces cultural identity within the Santal community.

Durkheim’s Collective Conscience and Social Solidarity

Émile Durkheim (1912) argued in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* that religious rituals are a primary means through which society reaffirms its collective conscience—the shared beliefs, values, and norms that bind individuals into a moral community. For Durkheim, rituals are not only religious acts but also social acts that reinforce the cohesion of the group.

In the case of Baha Bonga, the collective cleaning of the Jaher, preparation of ritual objects, and the communal participation in the trance-like performances of the three men symbolizing divine entities all serve to reaffirm the collective identity of the Santal community. Even the distribution of rice beer, singing, and dancing at the end of the ritual highlights the communal joy and reinforces a sense of belonging.

Through these shared experiences, individual Santals are reminded that they are part of a larger moral and cultural whole. Even in the face of modern pressures and encroaching dominant cultures, Baha Bonga maintains the sanctity of Santal values and norms. It revitalizes their sense of unity, temporarily dissolving social distinctions and restoring the moral order in the community, which is precisely what Durkheim termed as the function of rituals in reproducing social solidarity.

Turner’s Ritual Process: Liminality and Communitas

Victor Turner (1969), building on Arnold van Gennep’s work on rites of passage, developed the concept of the ritual process, which he broke down into three phases: separation, liminality, and reaggregation. Central to Turner’s analysis is the idea of *communitas*, a profound sense of egalitarian solidarity experienced during the liminal phase of a ritual.

In Baha Bonga, the villagers symbolically separate themselves from ordinary life by purifying the Jaher and themselves, marking the beginning of a sacred time. The ritual participants, especially the three men embodying the divine figures, enter into a liminal phase, a transitional, ambiguous state where the normal social order is temporarily suspended. In this liminal space, these men are no longer merely individuals; they become vessels for divine power, mediating between the human and the supernatural.

The inspection of the Jaher by the three men symbolizes a moment of spiritual and social introspection: the community assesses its own readiness and purity. The entire village witnesses this and partakes in the experience, which fosters a sense of *communitas*, an unstructured togetherness and equality that transcends daily hierarchies.

Finally, the ritual concludes with the reaggregation phase, when the three men return to ordinary consciousness,

and the community resumes its normal social structure—but now strengthened and reaffirmed by the shared experience of collective ritual.

Negotiating Continuity and Change

Both Durkheim and Turner also help us understand the tensions visible in Baha Bonga today. Durkheim's framework highlights how modern social changes threaten the collective conscience of the Santal community, making rituals like Baha Bonga even more crucial for cultural preservation. Meanwhile, Turner's emphasis on liminality shows how the ritual can also be a space to negotiate change—where old values are reaffirmed, but there is also room for reinterpreting and adapting traditions to contemporary challenges.

CONCLUSIONS

Traditionally livelihood of the Santals are dependent on agriculture based activities. They are frequently in contact with their neighbour not having culture, festivals and among them mostly are Hindus. In cultural inter-linkage with their neighbours, the Santal society has acquired few socio-cultural elements from their neighbours. It resulted in change in their culture and festivals and adopted few cultural traits from other culture. In situation like this occurred due to modernization processes and change pattern in celebrating behavioural change in life and change in pattern of festival among Santal community. The most affected are especially among the Santal youths who are not able to relate himself with change in time and technology.

However beside some common practices, the religious, rituals and cultural alertness in Santals have intact their festivals and uniqueness similar to consistent. The Santal have not altered the basic characteristic in celebrating faith, and festivals are retained practically intact. In the concluding remark, the Santals despite of multiple hurdles, history of constant interaction with dominant cultures and technological slavery, the Santals are able to maintain idiosyncratic values are intact and their congruence is reflected in their language, ritual, culture and observation in different festivals.

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