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**Preservation and Reflections on Santali Folklore: A Study
on the Approach of the Christian Missionaries**

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Abstract: The Santals constitute one of the largest indigenous tribal communities in India. The Santals have no ancient written texts documenting their religious beliefs. They do not have temples, idols, or fixed places for regular worship. They uphold traditional beliefs in life after death, animism, and ritual cleansing ceremonies. Lars Olsen Skrefsrud (1840–1910), Paul Olaf Bodding (1865–1938), and Otto Jeske (late 19th–early 20th century) were key Christian missionaries who collected and recorded Santali folktales, songs, myths, and ritual narratives. They first learned the Santali language. Thus, they could enhance their acceptability among the Santals. This paper aims to explore the role of Christian missionaries who recognised the importance of collecting Santali folklore and traditions. Along with documentation, they also incorporated the messages of Christ. To explore this approach, this paper focuses on the exegetical study of the Santali creation myth as translated by Christian missionaries, along with their documentation and holistic vision.

Keywords: *Santals, Indigenous, Christian Missionaries, Santali Folklore, Animism*

Introduction

Oral tradition is regarded as one of the most ancient linguistic practices within the Indian literary past, belonging to a non-formal knowledge system. Santali folklore traces trajectories of indigenisation as a form of tribal oral knowledge construction. In the view of G.N. Devy, under the influence of the colonial discipline, Indians started to look at “literature in terms of a binary division of ‘literature’ (which is available in written form) and ‘folk-literature’ (which is deprived of the opportunity of being written) (Devy 49). Among the homogeneous tribal communities in India, the Santals are one of the largest indigenous tribal communities, predominantly living in the states of West Bengal, Odisha, and Bihar. Their religion is animistic and nature-based. They transmitted Indigenous oral traditions, such as songs, myths, legends, and ritual narratives, through their cultural traditions and belief systems. P.C. Biswas, in his article “Primitive Religion, Social Law and Government Among the Santal”, writes:

If there is any culture which still carries on the impress of the underlying philosophic speculation and order of the thought that was widespread in India prior to the rise of the Dravidian culture, it was very likely the belief and social order of the pre-Dravidian culture of India, Santals ... So in the pre-Aryan and pre-Dravidian culture of India, the Santals ... stand in the lime light. (Biswas 1)

Timotheas Hembram, a scholar of comparative theology, in his book *The Santals: Anthropological-Theological Reflections on Santali & Biblical Creation Traditions* (1996), closely examines the Santals' creation narrative and the Biblical creation stories. Ethnically, the Hos, Santals, Kharias, and Mundas belong to the same Kolarian family. Linguistically, the Santals belong to the Munda language family. While grouping the languages spoken in central and eastern India, Max Muller, in his notable work *Letter to Chevalier Bunsen on the Classification of the Turanian Languages*, first gave the name Munda to the family of languages. In *The Mundas And Their Country* (1912), Sarat Chandra Roy traces their linguistic origin. Due to the absence of their own script, we have a very vague idea that they had a rich oral tradition. Christian Missionaries like P. O. Bodding (1865-1938), Lars Olsen Skrefsrud (1840-1910), and George William Campbell (Early 1800s – late 19th century) documented the Santali Folk Tales, Santali grammar, riddles and witchcraft in the Santal community. Along with propagating Christianity among the Santals, those missionaries recognised the importance of preserving Santali folklore to connect Christian cosmology and creation tales with Santali tales of the earth's creation.

Defining Folklore

Regarding the definition of folklore, scholars' standpoints are not beyond debate. One may take Alan Dundes' standpoint regarding the materials of folklore and the accepted methods of studying them. Dundes remarks that scholars are debating how to define folklore. It has liaisons with the disciplines of literature and the Social Sciences (Cultural Anthropology). Yet folklore has its independent epistemic entity. William Thoms coined the term "folklore" based on the combination of "folk" and "lore". In *The Study of Folklore*, Dundes remarks:

Most definitions concern the "lore," but some concern the "folk." Lore—the materials of folklore rather than the people who use the materials—has been described in terms of origin, form, transmission, and function. However, there has been no widespread agreement among folklorists about what folklore is. (Dundes 1)\

Various perspectives exist regarding the criteria that define folklore. According to the *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*, there are 21 definitions, with a common theme of a focus on "oral tradition". Folklore encompasses legends, myths, folktales, proverbs, chants, blessings, curses, oaths, insults, retorts, taunts, teasing, toasts, tongue-twisters, and greeting and farewelling formulas. Most definers agree that folklore includes material from both primitive tribes and subcultures in civilised society. WM. Hugh Jansen discusses both esoteric and exoteric aspects of folklore and mentions the French folklorists' term "blason populaire," which refers to jokes, songs, rhymes, phrases, and names associated with particular peoples. Folklore does not derive from institutionalised formal forces of education.

In the introductory section of his translation of *Santal Folk Tales* (1891), A. Campbell opines on the ethnological values of the Santali folktales and, based on the originality, draws two fundamental classes: "those apparently purely Santal in their origin, and those obtained from other sources". (Campbell i) In view of cosmogenic myth, with their numerous tales, the Santals show their creations and own fancy.

Roles of Christian Missionaries in the Santal Parganas

To talk about the context of the arrival of Christian missionaries in India, one needs to trace it back to the 16th century, with the arrival of the Jesuit mission in Goa. William Jones's foundation of the Asiatic Society (1784) in Kolkata aimed to form a new conception of Indian arts, science, linguistic families, and philosophy. During the latter half of the 19th century, Friedrich Max Muller's predictions and adulation for India were prominent, though he was in the minority among his European scholarly circles and among contemporary European administrators. G.N. Devi traces Max Muller's attention to

Indian thought as reflected in *India: What Can It Teach Us?*, which deserved the attention of European administrators who internalised a sense of cultural superiority and dismissed Indian forms of knowledge. Devy notes Max Muller's point in making the inner life of the Europeans "more perfect, more comprehensive, more universal, in fact more truly human ..." (Muller 10). Devy embodies a critical perspective on the Indian knowledge system that Muller traced to the Western intellectual domain. If ruling over and civilising India were the primary concern of the European administrators, Western intellectual domination would have overlooked India's theoretical contributions in the field of universal science and philosophy, which Muller emphasised as necessary for them to make perfect. Here comes the point of cognitive processes and ontology in the Indian knowledge system breaking cultural asymmetry. Knowing about the peoples of India, their ethnic identities, and their imagined past was a major concern for the Western colonisers just after the step-by-step settlement of colonies in India. The arrival of Christianity coincided with the rise of European influence in Eastern India. All European mission societies generally accepted that colonising India was part of divine providence and viewed it as both a moral obligation of the colonisers and a spiritual mission.

Christian Missionaries took prominent roles in the Santal Parganas after the Santal rebellion of 1855-57. Regarding their activities in the Santal Parganas, an Austrian-born anthropologist and missionary, Stephen Fuchs, in his book *The Aboriginal Tribes of India* (1973), remarked that Christian missionary activity in India began comparatively late, in the middle of the 1900s. Fuchs observed:

Christian mission's work in the tribal areas have started relatively late, only in the middle of the last century. Neither the Syrian Christian who came to India in the early centuries of the Christian era nor the Portuguese who arrived in 1499 were interested in the conversion of the aborigines. The first Christian mission among the tribals was started in 1841 by Protestant missionaries in Assam. Even this attempt was half hearted and soon abandoned but a few years it was restarted and then proved successful. (Fuchs 71)

Maltese social anthropologist C. J. T. Troisi, in his book *Tribal Religion* (1979), states that the activities of the Christian missionary among the Santals of West Bengal (Midnapore) were initiated in 1882 and in Orissa in 1883. Lars Olsen Skrefsrud and Hans Peter Børresen, founders of the Church Missionary Society and The Indian Home Mission to the Santal, focused on propagating Christianity among the Santals at Benagaria, near Dumka in West Bengal. The United Free Church of Scotland in the 1870s, the American Methodist Episcopal Mission in 1884, and the Catholic church in 1930 reached almost every part of the Santal Parganas. P.O. Bodding came to India in 1890 and was assigned to the Mohulpahari mission. He collected Santali Folktales, Santali riddles, learnt Santali

grammar, and studied Santali medicines. Cecil Henry Bompas(1860-1939), a British Anglican missionary who observed the Santal's social organisation in detail, their animistic religious belief system, and boongas (spirits). In his book *Folklore of the Santal Parganas*(2023), he intended to preserve their cultural heritage, oral traditions, and spiritual belief system through translation. In the preface of *Folklore of the Santal Parganas*, Bompas mentions:

The stories and legends which are here translated have been collected by the Rev. O. Bodding, D.D. of the Scandinavian Mission to the Santals. To be perfectly sure that neither language nor ideas should in any way be influenced by contact with a European mind he arranged for most of them to be written out in Santali, principally by a Christian convert named Sagram Murmu, at present living at Mohulpahari in the Santal Parganas. (Bompas xi)

So, the initial stage of Christian missionaries' activities in the Santal Parganas had fostered an optimistic view among the aboriginal tribes, who had shown themselves more receptive than other sections of the Hindu community, though they faced crises such as a loss of faith in animism and other traditional religious belief systems. F.B. Bradley-Birt, in his *The Story of an Indian Upland*, remarked that the penalties for Santals embracing Christianity were crucial to their affinity or non-affinity with Hinduism, as casteism was enforced on the Santals. Therefore, Christian missionaries' progressive initiatives, such as establishing schools, health clinics, and other philanthropic works, drew the attention of the aboriginal tribes, but Christianity could make only limited progress in the Santal parganas. Bradley-Birt wrote:

... though the penalties for embracing Christianity are no less severe among the Santals than the higher race where the caste system is rigidly enforced. No Santal would take food or water from a Christian, and the adoption of the new faith at once involves the extreme penalty – that of being outcast from the tribe and a loss of all privileges as member of the race community. For a Santal to face so a great penalty requires much courage and belief. (Bradley-Birt 220)

Initially, the propagation of Christianity among the Santals was not easy for missionaries, as the Santals had been following a strict, conservative belief system and stood firm in their traditional worldview. Hence, the missionaries felt the importance of understanding their traditions, creation narrative, language, and well-defined social administration, which were obscure in the world. Claus Westermann (1909 – 2000), a scholar of German Protestant *Old Testament*, remarked on the epistemic significance of gaining extensive knowledge of primitive tribal religion, which had hardly any publicity worldwide. In his book *Genesis 1 – 11 : A Commentary*, he remarked:

They range from tales, or primitive stories, through myth to mythical epic, as in Babylon, and to many other forms. Our very extensive knowledge of literature about creation primeval time does not allow us to draw a sharp line of distinction between the high cultures and the primitive cultures and then to exclude the latter from the pre-history of the biblical story of primeval events. (Westermann 4-5)

Westermann argues for the cultural inclusion of knowledge systems between primitive and high cultures in the development of human religion and history, and one shouldn't ignore the essence of their universal importance. Hence, translations of Santali folktales by the Christian missionaries are of great importance for drawing reflection on the creator and creation tradition.

Preservation of Tribal Identity through Santali Creation Myth

In the two main versions of the Santal creation tradition- *Horkoren Mare Hapramko Reak Katha* translated by Rev. Lars Skrefsrud, and another version, *Santal Folk Tales* (1891), translated by Rev. A. Campbell- the cosmogenic myths convey to us about the Santal theology, belief system, and space as a concept of totality and creation. As the Santals had no written records of their creation myths, both missionaries collected those tales from an old guru named Kolean. In both versions, creation may be understood as a collaborative process in which Thakur-Jiv is the supreme creator, regarded within the space rather than in history. Then, the direction of the sun's rise is regarded as the birthplace of humanity in Skrefsrud's version, and both versions refer to the primordial origins of water, earth, birds like Hans and Hasin, a tortoise, one pair of human beings made of clay and the process of their animation. Regarding the creation narrative, both versions contain subtle differences in how they describe aquatic animals, the formation of mountains, and the order of trees. In the book *The Santals: Anthropological-Theological Reflections on Santali & Biblical Creation Traditions* (1996), T. Hembrom drew a comparative study of these two versions and found descriptive differences. Hembrom notes that Campbell's version features fewer aquatic animals attempting to raise the earth from beneath the water than Skrefsrud's. Campbell does not mention the mountain formations, and the sequence of tree growth differs; Campbell states that Karam was the first tree to grow, while Skrefsrud claims it was Sirom grass.

Philosophic Speculation on Ancient Santal's Theism

Rev. Lars Skrefsrud, in his book *A Grammar of the Santhal Language* (1873), writes about the linguistic group and the origin of the Santali language, which "belongs to the Turanian family of speech" (Skrefsrud III). Skrefsrud, in *Hor Koren Mare Hapramko Reak Katha* mentions that the Santals usually identify themselves as "Hor Hopon," meaning children of human beings or children of

humans opposing diku, foreigners, and outsiders. Marine Carrine and Herald Tambs-Lyche, in their book *An Encounter of Peripheries Santals, Missionaries, and their Changing Worlds, 1867-1900*(2008), remark that the Santals “see themselves as members of the Santal samaj (society) and the formulation of Santal ethnicity is rooted in the consciousness of a distinctive past”(64). Santar, Santal, Santhar, Adivasi, and Kherwal are aliases of the Santals known for their regional identity. For the Santals, religious faiths such as animism, spiritism, and Bongaism are tribal belief systems that have been traced throughout history in successive forms. P.C. Biswas, in the article “Early Records Concerning the Santals”, figures out Edward Clodd’s citation of their nature of belief-system as an “example of beliefs proceeding animism” (Biswas 101) or Pater W. Schmidt’s idea of “primitive high god”. (101)

Under the lens of subconscious Christian “Urmonotheismus”(original monotheism), Schmidt’s speculation of “the primitive high god in the first cultural strata of food-gatherers.” (101-102)

Thus, the Santals fall in line with the idea of having a category of the “supreme being”. (102)

The idea of a supreme being or a personal high god is well known among the primitive tribes in India. Timotheos Hembrom believes that the perspective of Gospel values is present in tribal culture and worldview. Hence, the modalities of emergence of the Santal creative stories and the creation stories from the Genesis share an epistemic line rooted in the tribal worldview.

Thinkers like Nirmal Minz and Renthly Keitzer suggest approaches to the contextualisation and indigenisation of tribal culture. In the article “A Tribal Theology From A Tribal World -View”, K.P. Aleaz encompasses almost three collective approaches common in the Indian tribal worldview while theologising tribal theology. Aleaz remarks:

First is the approach of contextualisation and Indigenisation represented by senior thinkers like Nirmal Minz and the late Renthly Keitzer. Here the suggestion given is for adaptation of the Tribal cultural values. The second approach takes a perspective that the gospel-values are already present in the Tribal culture and world view. For example, Timotheos Hembrom would hold that the Santhal creation stories are in line with the Genesis creation stories. The third approach insists that a Tribal Christian theology has to emerge from a tribal world-view. The space-centred tribal world-view contributes to the very content of Tribal theology. (Aleaz20)

In the context of the present ecological imbalance and crises of human survival, the tribal worldview is crucial, as it holds central importance and affirms its space and understanding of reality.

Animals participate in decision-making; they, too, possess a strong sense of discernment and gratitude. Humans are an integral part of creation, not above creation. People, the world and divinity form one family. Hence, humanity loses the status of primacy and dominion over other creatures. Myths demonstrate that creation, humanity, and religion are interconnected. To truly grasp people's religious understanding, one must consider their relationship with space. Creation encompasses life, scripture, and the storehouse of all knowledge. The love and wisdom of the Supreme Being are reflected through creation, serving as a source of moral and spiritual lessons. People draw teachings from it and incorporate them into their daily lives. According to the two versions of the Santal creative myth translated by Christian missionaries, the Santals' religious faith is found to be animistic, with belief in Bongaism (benevolent spirits), non-idol worshippers, and non-institutional. Exegetical study of the Santal creation myth in both versions would suggest:

1. the Santal cosmogenic myth presents the beginning of the creation under the instruction of Thakur-Jiv;
2. a continuum of nature and human;
3. totality of creation as a coherent whole;
4. difficulty in tracing the date of the creation myth;
5. variations of narratives in oral transmission of the myth not in terms of philosophy

Conclusion

The discussion began with reference to G.N. Devy's observation that India's intellectual circle of the 19th century dismissed and consciously marginalised the folkloric traditions of tribal holistic vision that establish an organic link between past and present. Christian missionaries documented and preserved those Santali folktales. Thus, the Santals' throttled orality becomes literature (in written form). This proves India's intellectual failures in exploring indigenous knowledge systems. The approaches taken by the Christian missionaries may be viewed through the lens of Bronislaw Malinowski's methodology: participant observation for its close structural analyses that represent indigenous science, their eco-consciousness, and a continuum with the nature-human spirit. So, it may be concluded that the science of tribal ecological worldviews might be a blessed hope for the rest of the peoples to explore in today's survival crises.

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