SJIF Impact Factor (2025): 8.688| ISI I.F. Value: 1.241| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2016 ISSN: 2455-7838(Online)
EPRA International Journal of Research and Development (IJRD)
Volume: 10 | Issue: 6 | June 2025 - Peer Reviewed Journal

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES AMONG THE SANTALS OF WEST BENGAL: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

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Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.36713/epra22478
DOI No: 10.36713/epra22478

ABSTRACT

Santals are one of the most dominant tribes in India. They are the third largest tribal community in India after Bhil and Gond tribes. In West Bengal, among the listed forty scheduled tribal communities, the Santals are the largest tribal community. They have been described as the "most integrated and possibly the most resilient tribe in eastern India". The name of the traditional religion of Santals is 'Sarna' or 'Sari' dharma. Among the Santal, the religion is closely chained to every facet of life. Santal traditional religion is a mighty belief in strengthening the social harmony of the people. Santals have different gods and they call them by different names, but they don't have the statue of the Gods. They have their own methods of prayer. According to Tylor, religion is the "belief in spiritual being". Troisi analyses the Santal religion as man's relation to supernatural powers and the various organized systems of belief and worship in which these relations have been glorified. The relationship between a Santal and supernatural beings and powers that one cannot completely able to interpret the Santal social structure unless one goes through and feels their religious universe. This paper focuses on their beliefs and perceptions of God, benevolent, malevolent spirits and the religious practices followed by them which are entangled in their cognitive process including the effect of Hinduism and Christianity on their traditional religious beliefs, rituals and practices.

KEYWORDS: *Santal, Religion, Effect of Hinduism and Christianity*

INTRODUCTION

Santals are one of the most dominant tribes in India. They are the third largest tribal community in India after Bhil and Gond tribes. They spread out over a vast area of the country, mainly in the states of West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Assam. Some migrated to neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, and Nepal. In West Bengal, among the listed forty scheduled tribal communities, the Santals are the largest tribal community. They have been described as the "most integrated and possibly the most resilient tribe in eastern India". The religion of any community from anywhere in the world is not only to identify the community itself but also it is expected to strengthen the heritage of the community concerning literature, culture, and overall position in society. With almost every aspect of human activities, with every institution of human society, and with every aspect of human culture religion has intimate bonding. Whenever the moral or ethical value of human activities has been questioned the value of religion of that particular concern is involved. Tribal perception of health, disease, treatment, life and death is as varied and agglomerate as their culture. Notably, the tribal world is guided by customs beliefs and practices which have been laid down traditionally and every member of the society is expected to attune themselves and conform to those practices. Santal traditional religion is a mighty belief in strengthening the social harmony of the people. Santals have different gods and they call them by different names, but they don't have the statue of the Gods. They have their own methods of prayer. They don't have a written form of prayer but they believe that their good life is part of prayer. Thus, the Santals live not only in their tribal society but in a greater society consisting of supernatural beings as well (Datta-Majumdar, 2004:24). Living in close alliance with the *Bongas* or spirits, the Santals also believe that good health, happiness, harmony, and peace would only triumph if there is a balance maintained between human beings, nature, and the supernatural beings. They preach that any violation of social customs, incest or sinful act committed by an individual causes the individual to suffer from illness and the root cause of any misery in their life. Among the Santal, the religion is closely chained to every facet of life. According to Tylor, religion is the "belief in spiritual being". Troisi analyses the Santal religion as man's relation to supernatural powers and the various organized systems of belief and worship in which these relations have been glorified. Datta-Majumder while describing the Santal religion as, 'The Santals live not only in their human tribal society but in a greater society forming with supernatural beings also'. The relationship between a Santal and supernatural beings and powers that one cannot completely able to interpret the Santal social structure unless one goes through and feels their religious universe. Among the Santals, the *Bongas* or spirits are believed to exercise power over these contingencies of nature and, therefore, Santals have recourse to them through magico-religious practices. The name of the traditional religion of Santals is '*Sarna*' or '*Sari*' dharma. This paper focuses on their beliefs and perceptions of God, benevolent, malevolent spirits and the religious practices followed by them which are entangled in their cognitive process including the effect of Hinduism and Christianity on their traditional religious beliefs, rituals and practices.

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OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper is an attempt to present, highlight and analyze based on the following objectives:

- To know the religious beliefs and practices among the Santal of West Bengal.
- To enquire the effect of Hinduism and Christianity on their traditional religious beliefs, rituals and practices.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

I had the privilege of associating intimately with the Santals over several years and was insensibly drawn to their deities and spirits along with religious beliefs and practices. Gradually, I started to collect data relating to their traditional religion along with associated beliefs, rituals, and practices by applying ethnographic methodology viz. participant and non-participant observation, interviews, focus-group discussion, etc. Sometimes I joined their different religious festivals and occasions and tried to take part in their religious festivals, and occasions to get more in-depth data about their traditional religion. When I started my journey towards the exploration of their religious beliefs and practices I also had little idea. But as the work proceeded I was completely involved in my research work and also tried to enquire the effect of Hinduism and Christianity on their traditional religious beliefs, rituals and practices. The secondary data of this study have been collected from different books, journals, research articles, and websites. This study was delimited to only the religious beliefs and practices of the Santals of the Indian state of West Bengal along with the effect of Hinduism and Christianity on their traditional religious beliefs, rituals and practices.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: The findings along with the discussion on the religion of Santals are given below through two sections— I) Religious Beliefs and Practices II) The Effect of Hinduism and Christianity on Their Traditional Religion :

I) Religious Beliefs and Practices: The supreme deity among the Santals is *Thakur Jiu* or *Sin Bonga* or *Dharom* who accept him with the highest veneration and exorcism a pre-eminent locus. The *Thakur Jiu* is regarded as a benevolent deity and does not harm anybody, so there is no particular worship for the *Thakur Jiu* among the Santals, but they respectfully bear in mind their supreme deity i.e. *Thakur Jiu* in their every religious festival and life cycle rites i.e. childbirth, marriage, and death.

The Santals have a shoal of *Bongas* or spirits which they believe malevolent effect in their life, so the Santals always try to placate those *Bongas* through different types of magico-religious practices. The Santals worship these *Bongas* by offering animals, rice-beer (*haria*), fresh blood of animals etc. during their different festivals, crises of life and important life cycle rites to calm these malevolent *Bongas* or spirits. Indeed the concern of Santals about those Bongas is one of dependence, submission and appeasement due to fear of harm in their life. An overview of different *Bongas* associated with the religion of Santals is given below:

- **Total number of *Bongas***: 178
- **Chief *Bongas***:
  1. *Maran Buru*
  2. *Gosae Era*
  3. *Moreko- Turuiko*
  4. *Pargana Bonga*
  5. *Jaher Era*
  6. *Manjhi Bonga*
- **Lesser *Bongas*:**
  1. *Orak Bonga*
  2. *Abge Bonga*
  3. *Sim Bonga*
  4. *Hapramko Bonga*
  5. *Deko Bonga*
  6. *Buru Bonga*
  7. *Rango Ruji*
  8. *Basumata*

The above *Bongas* or sprits play a crucial role in the life of the Santal and their religious beliefs and practices are closely connected with those *Bongas*. The Santals kept their chief *Bongas* at the *Jaherthan* except *Manjhi Bonga* who resides in the *Manjhithan* situated inside the village. The *Jaherthan*, the sacred place where the five important chief *Bongas* out of six reside, is a cluster of five trees of which four are *Sal* (*Shorea robusta*) and the rest one is *Mahua* (*Madhuca longifolia*).

In this context, it may be noted that the Santal traditional village council has a crucial role in the proficient running of the village administration and organizing religious activities in the village. They elect a village headman and his assistants from among the leading members of the group. A fully-fledged Santal-traditional village council consists of seven officials namely *Manjhi* (village headman), *Paranik* (assistant headman), *Naeke* (a village priest, who performs all the village religious activities), *Kudam Naeke* (the priest worshipping local spirit, and help priest for liturgical celebration, or in another word he is a deacon). *Jog Manjhi* (guardian of the moral life of the Santal community and vigilance during all the social gatherings and liturgical celebrations), *Jog Paranik* (assistant of the *Paranik*), and *Godet* (the messenger of the village).

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The *Naeke* is a spiritual man of the village. He has a spiritual responsibility to perform all religious occasions in due respectful manner. His only concern is to perform during common worship. Before any sacrifices and rituals, he needs to have fasting and penance. He has to sleep on the floor using the hay and 24 hours fasting is compulsory. He should abstain from sexual activities for at least 24 hours before performing his duties on any religious occasion. Same time his wife has the moral duty to help him and prepare him for spiritual sacrifices on behalf of the entire village.

A brief account of some important *Bongas* or spirits is given here to have a better understanding of the religious beliefs and practices among the Santals.

A) ***Maran Buru*****:** Literally the '*Maran*' means 'great' and '*Buru*' means 'hill or mountain', thus as a whole '*Maran Buru*' means 'Great Mountain'. *Maran Buru* is the most powerful chief of the Santal *Bonga* pantheon. *Maran Buru* is worshipped on all the Santal's festivals and during any crisis of life with the sacrifice of either a white fowl or a white goat and with the offering of *haria* (rice beer).

B) ***Gosae Era*****:** *Gosai Era* is considered the youngest sister of *Moreko-Turuiko* and is worshipped against sores by sacrificing a white fowl. She is also worshipped by some clans of *Murmu* as their *Abge Bonga* or *Orak Bonga*.

C) ***Moreko-Turuiko*****:** Among the Santals *Moreko-Turuiko* is considered a village deity and is worshipped for the welfare of the village. The Santals seem to have *Moreko-Turuiko* control over rain, crops, and epidemics. This village deity is addressed in plural, where '*Monren'* means 'five' and '*Turu*' means 'six'. The Santals believe that they were five brothers who were wedded to six sisters.

D) ***Pargana Bonga*****:** This *Bonga* has a lot of influence among the Santals as he is believed to have some control over the witches. The Santals worship him whenever there is an epidemic of contagious diseases in the locality. In addition to that he is also regarded by the Santals as a spirit who has the power to eradicate all misery and misfortune from their life.

E) ***Jaher Era*****:** *Jaher Era* or 'the Lady of the grove' is the presiding spirit of the sacred grove called *Jaherthan*. Among the Santals, she is considered a benevolent spirit and is worshipped for the overall welfare of the village like for good crop production, good health etc. During the outbreak of the cattle epidemic, she is predominantly propitiated.

F) ***Manjhi Bonga*****:** Being the spirit of the headman of the Santal village and a benevolent one, this spirit functions as the adviser to the headman regarding matters related to the overall welfare of the village. This spirit is only worshipped by the headman of the village by offering rice-beer and sacrificing two pigeons and the heads of the sacrificed pigeons are eaten only by the headman. Among the Santals, only this chief *bonga* resides in the *Manjhithan* which is constructed at the house of the *Manjhi* (village headman) and the rest of the chief *bongas* reside at *Jaherthan*.

G) ***Orak Bongas***: The *Orak Bongas* are considered by the Santals as the household spirits. There is several household spirits or *Orak Bongas* with different name among the Santals. All these spirits for their intimate relation with the household members are highly respected and honoured including worship once or twice a year with the sacrifice of a hen and offerings of *haria* (rice-beer) as they protect them from all sorts of troubles and distress caused by some malevolent spirits. Every Santal house has a small place called *Bhitar* meant for the *Orak Bongas*.

H) ***Abge Bongas***: The *Abge Bongas* are the most personal spirits of the Santals and are given high respect and honour. These spirits are regarded as the most sacrosanct and most guarded household spirits among the Santals. They are believed to be the saviour of the Santals and save them in times of distress and tough situations of life and family. For constant safety and welfare, these spirits are worshipped once a year with the sacrifice of a hen and offerings of *haria* (rice-beer).

I) ***Sim Bongas***: There is forty-four different *Sim Bongas* with a different name as believed by the Santals. All of them are worshipped during the *Jom Sim* festival of the Santals and as such these spirits are also known as *Jom Sim Bongas*.

J) ***Buru or Pats Bongas***: The Santals believe also in numerous hill spirits whom they called *Buru* or *Pats Bongas*. According to the beliefs shared by the Santals, these hill spirits are very much harmful deity who delights in human blood. The Santals worship them so that these spirits cannot harm them. They believe that these hill spirits reside in the surrounding hills and mountains and may ruin crops and cause sudden accidents if get displeased.

K) ***Rango Ruji*****:** *Rango Ruji* is the forest-related deity of the Santals and they believe that she resides in a particular *Teral* tree. The Santals worship her to get success in hunting especially during their annual hunting festival which is known as *Disom Sendra*.

L) ***Basumata*****:** The Santals worship this spirit for plentiful crops and productiveness in their agricultural field.

II) The Effect of Hinduism and Christianity on Their Traditional Religion: The Santals came close to getting in touch with their neighbouring Hindus for a long time, and as a result of this contact, the Santals have borrowed various cultural traits and concepts from their Hindu neighbours. It is seen that the traditional Santal religion i.e. '*Sarna*' or '*Sari*' dharma in its present forms, shows that Hinduism has had the greatest impact. It has been also observed that the Santals have adopted many Hindu deities like *Hari*, *Parvati*, *Kali, Saraswati, and Laksmi* as '*Deko Bongas'* and given a place in their traditional religion. In this context, it has been cited that, according to Troisi, 'various aspects of Santal life— material, social, economic, linguistic, and religious have been affected by Hindu culture. Despite these borrowings, it has been observed that the Santal traditional religion has, to a great extent, overcome the Hindu influence and can keep its own identity almost intact. The acceptance of a few Hindu deities has not

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changed the basic uniqueness of the Santal traditional religion, which has been retained almost intact. Practically, they do not believe that they form the part of Hindu religion; rather they have a distinctive religion that does not have any relation with Hinduism. They do consider themselves followers of their traditional religion, which is their own religion. After the independence of India from the British, there was a decrease in the number of followers of *Sarna or Sari* i.e. the traditional Santal religion. They are either counted as Hindus or followers of other religions. Left with no choices, many people are being forced to choose other religions. In the absence of a separate religious identity option or citation in different official documents or applications, Santal and all the other tribal communities have faced this practical problem. They are forced to write as Hindu as their religions.

Besides the influence of Hinduism, the Santal traditional religion has also been reshaped by the forces of Christianity but concerning Hinduism, the impact of Christianity is relatively a modern phenomenon. The effect of Christianity on the Santal traditional religion had been started since the first half of the Nineteenth century by the Christian missionaries and their works were mainly evangelical in nature and that had got extra mileage after the Santal insurrection. Due to this process some pockets of erstwhile Bengal adjacent to the tea garden, nearby to the railway, and colliery area's Santals called them Christian Santals who had almost shaken off their traditional religion and identified themselves into a new society of their own, the Christian Santal community. At present, their generations go to church on a regular basis, pray and sing together and observe Christian festivals like Easter, and Christmas.

It is very interesting to note that those Santal who have converted to Christianity, follow all the rules and regulations of the Christian religion in their all life cycles rituals i.e. birth, death, and marriage and this rigidity towards religious beliefs and practices cannot find out among the Santals who have called their religion as Hindu.

CONCLUSION

From the above findings and discussion, it is evident that their traditional religion is intimately interwoven with the Santal way of life including their all day-to-day activities both material and ethical. It has been observed how deeply the Santals are dependent on their *Bongas* in every sphere of their life and activities. Despite their dependence on their spirits and their type of religion, certainly, Santal religion like any other religion cannot be defined by its subject matter in a narrow sense as spirit worship or as the cult of nature. Regarding the effect of Hinduism and Christianity on their traditional Religion, it may be stated that while a more normative religion i.e. Christianity has controlled the behaviour of the Santals both in social and religious spheres, Hinduism on the other hand, being a more enduring and less normative religion allowed the Santals to borrow new religious and social ideas and practices in such a way that the autonomous feature of their religious, social and cultural institutions was not undermined. It must be cited that the Santals have rich spirituality in their traditional religion, even without written documents the religion has survived till today. They don't believe in worshiping idols, and everything just believe in participating worship of God who is present in nature. They have a strong sense of community living. Their spirituality is fulfilled in community living; one cannot acquire true spirituality out of community. Thus it is clear that the Santals in spite of their long interaction with Hinduism, and Christianity, have been able to retain their own identity and entity unaffected to a great extent.

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