

TRADITION, ECOLOGY AND CULTURE: LESSONS FROM THE SANTHAL COMMUNITY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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The paper explores the social system, cultural and traditional art forms of the Santal tribes in India and their approach to ecological preservation and sustainable use of land, water and forest resources. The Santhals' mural art forms, like the Deowal Chitra and the use of musical instruments like the Banam reflect a spiritual connection to their land and surroundings and the seamless incorporation of natural elements in their cultural life. The paper reiterates the relevance of the Santhal community's contribution towards promoting sustainable living and community governance, which necessitates preserving these artistic traditions, farming practices, and a balanced approach to resource utilization.

Introduction

There are different tribal communities in India that have rich cultural heritage, unique socio-cultural identities, community traditions, and primarily depend on forest-based livelihood activities. The states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, and West Bengal of India are home to the majority of 'Santhals' or 'Santals' (traditionally those who were referred to as 'Saontar' in Bengali by the people of Bengal) are one of the largest indigenous tribes in India, after the Bhils and Gonds, according to the 2011 census. The Santal tribe belongs to the Proto-Australoid group (group with the *Munda* family language) of the pre-Aryan period, and they have also expanded their presence in other South Asian countries, like Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh¹. The Santhal tribe is diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture, and ways of life, all of which have evolved over thousands of years due to various geophysical and environmental factors. The Santal community follow their own set of values, is largely self-contained over time and space, with limited connection to mainstream civilization. The article examines the close relationship between nature and the Santhals' cultural

traditions, art forms, community practices, and their ways of sustainable living that contribute significantly to environmental protection.

Santhals' Way of Community Living

The main sources of income of the Santhals include farming, harvesting food, and managing livestock, although they also engage in fishing, hunting and are primarily dependent on physical labour for livelihood. Transiting from a semi-nomadic life, they now reside in a permanent settlement and work in agriculture. The Santhal follow a clear, traditional, self-governing judicial system, wherein there is a sense of democracy in the community since settlements are made through consensus and community-based decision-making rather than by elections.

Indigenous knowledge among the Santhal tribe is deeply ingrained in their traditional ways of living and livelihood practices that are intimately linked to nature. They worship the natural world, believe in the close connection between man, nature and God and uphold conservation practices. They are primarily engaged in agricultural activities and have a deep cultural and spiritual connection to the land. As a community that practices sustainable forest management, where forests are also perceived as sacred spaces, access to such sacred groves are regulated through traditional norms that restrict

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activities such as logging, hunting or gathering to protect the biodiversity and maintain the ecological balance. Their social life, philosophy, ceremonies, rites, folk music, dance, festivals and way of thinking are linked to the natural cycles, natural elements and agricultural practices, and these are modes of expression of their cultural identity. The Forest Rights Act, passed in 2006, ensures the rights of forest-dwelling communities to land and other resources, including rights of ownership, community rights and the right to live in the forest and utilise forest resources.

They live in an egalitarian society, without any caste or social stratification, thereby preventing any form of social discrimination, with community interests taking precedence over individual interests. People lead simple lives based on equality, dignity and mutual respect². The women in the Santhal community, enjoy considerable freedom for choosing their own husbands or can leave the marriage in case of any disagreement, and even women with children can remarry without encountering discrimination or criticism. Additionally, it is not a social stigma for unmarried couples to live together and raise children³.

Santhals' Environmental Practices and Sustainability

The Santhal community are also adept in forest fire management, regenerating vegetation, pest control, water harvesting techniques thereby ensuring the long-term sustainability of land, forest and water resources while conserving them for future generations. adopt a community-based approach for local management of forest resources and ensuring wildlife conservation. The Santals engage in agroforestry, organic farming, and adopt terracing techniques in the hillside cultivation to prevent soil erosion and protect the biodiversity against hunting and fishing. The Santhals prevent overexploitation of land and regulate grazing activities while taking care of the livestock in a sustainable manner. These practices can promote sustainable modes of ecological conservation and balanced use of natural resources without depletion⁴.

Santhal Music, Art and Culture: A Close Connection with Nature and Spirituality

Dance and music are integral components of the Santhals' way of life, which is an invariable part of their community celebrations, with special songs and dance used for different occasions⁵. Santhals have long been skilled in woodworking and woodcarving, creating exquisitely carved musical instruments, utensils, and carts primarily for their own use, such as basketwork, mat

weaving, and making cups and dishes from *sal* leaves. The music is created using a range of indigenously crafted musical instruments. One of the most fascinating instruments used at many Santali festivities is the *Banam*. One wooden log from the Gulanj Baha tree, literally meaning "hollow instrument", is considered by the Santals as an extension of their bodily selves. The shape of the instrument resembles a human body form, separated into the stomach, chest, neck, ears and head. The Santals believe and trust that this instrument is composed of the same five elements as the human body: earth, water, air, fire and ether or space. The most crucial component of the *Banam* is the string, which is regarded as the body's and the instrument's breath, or *prana*. It unifies all the components of the *Banam* and connects the five fundamental components of life. It imparts the vitalizing energy to the instrument. The whole *Banam* symbolizes the body or the soil, which is a female emblem of fertility and a source of life⁶.

The Santhal tribe's most revered occasion is *Sohrai*, a harvest festival that is connected to a ceremonial art form, *Sohrai art*. The festival is also held to express gratitude to the cattle and plough that have helped with their land cultivation⁷⁻⁸. The Sohrai Art influenced the present form of the mud wall painting or "deol chitra", where the walls of the mud houses are covered in lovely patterns featuring natural elements like the sun, trees, flowers, birds and animals spontaneously made, using different kinds of soil or mud and natural pigments for colouring by the Santhal women⁹⁻¹⁰. The paintings also feature scenes of many social and cultural activities, such as dancing and hunting¹¹. The paintings are made in the walkways, passageways, kitchens, sitting rooms, cow sheds, and enclosed courtyards to make the house more appealing and noticeable.

Conclusion

The Santhal tribe has rich musical and artistic traditions, strong community ties, and their traditional knowledge systems can become guiding models for shaping environmental ethics and community-centric initiatives to tackle contemporary problems of climate change and loss of biodiversity. It is also necessary to protect the forest rights of these local communities and indigenous tribes, which can support both conservation and create livelihood opportunities for the forest-dwelling communities. Strong institutional measures by the government and civil society initiatives are critical to protect these traditional knowledge systems that promote innovation and ecological sustainability. □

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