

Santhal Lives Matter: Towards an Historical Anthropology of Adivasi Communities in Santhal Pargana Region of Eastern India

Dr. Kumari Khusboo

Associate Professor in the Department of History, University of Delhi.

Abstract:

This article highlights some of the critical political and cultural issues in the lives of the Santhal Adivasis in eastern India. It points to customs, rituals and questions of livelihood to demonstrate that the story of the Adivasis in Santhal Pargana is an unfinished project of autonomy. The state of Jharkhand is a geographical and administrative reality, but the dream of a true self-governed space, where their customary practices, spiritual beliefs, and relationship with the land are sovereign—remains elusive. Indeed, the Santhal people are not expected to remain helpless victims of history. They are agents who have consistently fought for their honour and self-respect, from the epic rebellion of the Hul to the everyday forms of resistance documented by scholars like James Scott. Their history, once silenced and marginalized, is now being sung in their own language and written through their own scholarship, fulfilling the call for a “history from below” and challenging the dominant national narrative. Insights from history and anthropology are deployed here to show how Santhal lives matter and should be studied for its own sake and for larger concerns regarding the concerns of indigenous communities in what may be termed as tribal India.

Keywords: Santhals, Adivasis, tribal customary practices, Jharkhand, eastern India.

Introduction

This article on historical anthropology of Adivasi communities in Santhal Pargana region of eastern India aims to cover a vast and intricate landscape, from the deep structures of cosmology and kinship to the disturbing terrain of political rebellion and state formation. It argues that the history of the Santhal people is not a linear narrative of assimilation or decline but a dynamic and persistent struggle to preserve a distinct world—a world defined by a sacred relationship with land, a complex spiritual ecology, and resilient customary institutions. The journey from the autonomous villages of the Chotanagpur Plateau to the contested political space of the modern Jharkhand state reveals a central, enduring conflict: the collision between the Adivasi lifeworld, rooted in the principles of communal ownership and cosmological balance, and the successive projects of external domination, from colonial resource extraction to post-colonial “development” and political integration.

*Corresponding Author Email: khusboo631310@gmail.com

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Some fine samples of current research on Adivasis, in general, help in excavating the foundational pillars of Santhal identity and culture in the larger context of Adivasi struggle for livelihood and existence (Singh 2024; Sundar 1997 and 2016; Pati 2019; Mohan 2008; Rycroft 2005; Troisi 2024; and Xaxa 2008). Their socio-cultural institutions—the patrilineal clan system, self-ascribed identity as hor (human beings), and their oral traditions—were not static relics but adaptive systems honed by geography and history. The imposition of external labels, from “Aboriginal Tribe” to “Backward Hindu,” reflected the gaze of the outsider, but the community’s internal coherence was maintained through these very structures. The creation of administrative boundaries and the subsequent Santhal Hul of 1855-57 were not ordinary historical events, but pivotal moments that crystallized this identity in opposition to the diku, outsiders. The Hul, as a foundational rebellion, was more than an economic protest; it was a cosmological struggle to restore Santhal Raj—a moral and political order where their relationship with the land and spirits was sovereign. This set the pattern for a history where resistance would become a primary mode of identity formation (for more details. See Singh 2006 and 2024).

Santhal Cosmological Universe

Delving into the Santhal cosmological universe, one may be able to uncover the profound philosophical underpinnings of this resistance. The Santhal sacred world, centred on the negotiation with bongas (spirits) is a testament to a lived philosophy where the human, natural, and spiritual domains are deeply intertwined. The benevolent but remote supreme deity, Thakur Jiu, and the ever-present, demanding bongas of the village (jaher), clan (abge), and ancestors (Hapramko) create a web of obligations and protections. This system is not one of mere “superstition” or “fear”, as colonial observers often dismissed it, but a pragmatic and coherent framework for engaging with the world. The sacred grove (jaherthan) is not just a cluster of trees; it is the ritual heart of the village – the dwelling place of guardians whose favour ensures communal welfare. This spiritual geography made the colonial and post-colonial state’s declaration of forests as “Reserved” or “Protected” not merely an economic dispossession but a spiritual calamity—a severing of the community from its divine protectors. The resilience of this belief system, even amid the syncretic inroads of Hinduism and the disruptive demands of Christianity, underscores its role as the bedrock of Santhal identity. As anthropologist Marine Carrin suggests, this indigenous knowledge, existing at the “interface of orality and writing”, has been a crucial resource for historical consciousness and identity assertion (Carrin 2022).

The argument then moves to demonstrate how this spiritual and cultural world was directly assaulted by the machinery of the modern state. The global imperial drive for resources, culminating in the Indian Forest Act of 1878, systematically transformed the Adivasi homeland from a communal territory into a state-controlled commodity. Important here is the environmental history debate, showing that while an unspoiled “pre-colonial equilibrium” may perhaps be a scholarly simplification, the scale, intent, and impact of colonial commercial exploitation were unprecedented and fundamentally disruptive. The post-colonial state, tragically, adopted this colonial legacy. Using the Land Acquisition Act of 1894 and other instruments, it perpetuated an “internal colonialism” where the “national interest” consistently demanded the sacrifice of Adivasi land and forests for dams, mines, and industries. The

protective legislations like the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (CNTA) and the Santhal Parganas Tenancy Act (SPTA), born from the blood of earlier rebellions, were continually undermined by the state's power of eminent domain and a bureaucracy often in collusion with commercial interests. The failure of the Samata judgement to truly halt the transfer of tribal land in Scheduled Areas is a testament to the relentless struggle against this exploitative paradigm. Therefore, the defence of the forest was never just about livelihood; it was, and remains, a fight for cultural survival, a defence of the very ground upon which their sacred world is built.

This protracted struggle over territory and resources naturally evolved into a political movement for self-determination, which is an important socio-political concern. The theoretical framework of group representation, embedded in the Indian Constitution through reserved seats, was the state's formal acknowledgment of historical marginalization. However, for the Santhals and other Adivasis of the region, it was also a new arena for a much older struggle. The journey from the millenarian visions of Birsa Munda's Ulgulan to the ethno-regional politics of the Jharkhand Movement represents the translation of customary aspirations for self-rule (Munda Disum, Santhal Raj) into the modern vocabulary of statehood. The Jharkhand Movement's ideological evolution—from the ethnic consolidation of the Jharkhand Party to the class-based activism of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha and the militant student agitations—reflects a community strategically navigating the constraints of the Indian nation-state, grappling with the central tension between an exclusive Adivasi nationalism and an inclusive regional identity (for more on these issues, see Krishna 2025; Singh 2002; Moodie 2015).

The creation of Jharkhand in the year 2000, on the birth anniversary of Birsa Munda, appears as the triumphant culmination of the century-long struggle. Yet, it was a profoundly paradoxical and compromised victory. The state was carved out as Vananchal, a territorially truncated entity that deliberately excluded parts of the cultural Jharkhand and, crucially, ensured that Adivasis would be demographic minority within it. This demographic engineering that has critical political consequences, preventing the emergence of a dominant indigenous political force and allowing the continuation of policies that benefit a non-tribal elite. The “internal colonialism” against which the Hul was first waged has not been dismantled; it has been institutionalised within the very state that bears their homeland's name. The promises of the Forest Rights Act (2006) and PESA (1996) remain largely unfulfilled, caught in a web of bureaucratic inertia and political indifference. As a result, the core conflict—between a lifeworld rooted in communal sovereignty and a state system based on resource extraction—remains the defining feature of the Adivasi condition in Santhal Pargana today (for older observations on these concerns, see Krishna 2025).

Customary Practices

This brings us to the enduring significance of the customary practices. In the face of state failure and political co-option, the traditional institutions of the Manjhi Haram—the village council of the Manjhi, Parganait, Naike, and Godet—continue to offer a parallel system of governance, dispute resolution, and social cohesion. These institutions, though increasingly marginalized by the formal Panchayati Raj system, are repositories of a different political logic, one based on consensus, custom, and a deep connection to the local ecology. Similarly, the vibrant oral

traditions, festivals, and the revival of the Ol Chiki script are not merely cultural performances; they are acts of resistance against cultural homogenization and a means of reclaiming a narrative that has long been controlled by outsiders. The digital diaspora now uses these very tools to reconnect and reimagine their heritage, ensuring that tradition is not lost but transmuted in the face of modernity (Xaxa 2008; Troisi 2024).

However, speaking on the basis of auto-ethnographic reflections as a Santhal woman researcher, the customary sphere is not without its own internal contradictions, particularly concerning gender. While Santhal women have always been active participants in the agrarian economy, ritual life, and even in rebellions, patriarchal norms within customary law often deny them land rights and formal leadership positions. The future of Adivasi assertion must necessarily involve a critical engagement with these internal hierarchies, ensuring that the struggle for community autonomy also embraces the liberation of its women, a project where education and legal activism are already indicating possible changes.

This work of historical anthropology demonstrates that the story of the Adivasis in Santhal Pargana is an unfinished project of autonomy. The state of Jharkhand is a geographical and administrative reality, but the dream of a true Santhal Raj—a self-governed space where their customary practices, spiritual beliefs, and relationship with the land are sovereign—remains elusive. Indeed, the Santhal people are not expected to remain helpless victims of history. They are agents who have consistently fought for their honour and self-respect, from the epic rebellion of the Hul to the everyday forms of resistance documented by scholars like James Scott (1985). Their history, once silenced and marginalized, is now being sung in their own language and written through their own scholarship, fulfilling the call for a “history from below” and challenging the dominant national narrative.

Primary material for this research is drawn from the following sources; archaeological survey of India reports, Anthropological Survey of India reports; District Gazetteers (Bihar and Bengal, Imperial), Census of India reports, colonial ethnography, especially the works of W.J. Culshaw (2013), W. G. Archer (1974), P.O. Bodding (1936), and A. Campbell (1916 and 1894), among others; recent researches, including the works of K.S. Singh (2002, 2006 and 2024), and more recent works by historians and Anthropologists (a number of them are women scholars, making it also gendered, see Banerjee 2006; Carrin 2022; Dasgupta 2021; Das Gupta 2011; De 2023; Misra 2025; and Sundar 2016); orally collected material from networks of extended family in Jharkhand and Bihar and auto-ethnographic observations, experiences and reflections as a lived experience of a Santhal scholar – bits of an ethnographic memoirs.

It may be pointed out that the Santhals do not have a formally documented or written history. As one member of the community so aptly put it, “the mouth is our printed book”—a phrase that reflects their reliance on oral traditions as the primary medium for preserving and transmitting historical knowledge. Similar to many other human societies, the Santhals have made sense of the world and their place in it by constructing narratives around the mysteries of creation, life, and history through myths and legends. These oral narratives, particularly Santhal folktales, serve a crucial function beyond mere storytelling. Like the folklore of numerous other communities, they play a critical role in safeguarding tribal wisdom, reinforcing cultural practices, and legitimizing traditional customs. These stories emphasize

moral values, social standards, and collective identity. Perhaps most importantly, they foster unity and resilience within the community by instilling a strong sense of confidence and belonging (for more on these concerns, see Troisi, 2024; for some difficulties involving beliefs and superstitions as well as resistance, see Sinha 2007; and Dubey 2024).

Conclusions

Insights from history and anthropology help in demonstrating how Santhal lives matter and should be studied for its own sake and for larger concerns regarding the concerns of indigenous communities in what may be termed as tribal India. For the Santhals and other Adivasi communities, the wounds of the past persist and the political landscape remains a battlefield. Yet, in the robust cosmology of the bongas, the enduring authority of the Manjhi Haram, and the strong political will of the people, lies the seed of a future where the soul of Jharkhand can truly align with its name. The Santhal past matters, not as a primitive relic, but as an important chapter in the human story of striving for dignity, balance, and freedom from any kind of humiliation. Their continued struggle is a reminder, as Gramsci would have it, of the constant battle against ideological and political hegemony, a struggle that is as much about reclaiming their history as it is about securing their future. Sometimes, when needed, Santhals also invoke their belief in the powers of the Supreme Being – Hey Chando!

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