

Bongaism: Reconsidering Santal Cosmology Beyond Animism and Totemism

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Abstract

This article examines the Santal, an Indigenous community in India, understanding of *bonga*, i.e., supernatural being, and explores how Santal cosmology cannot be fully explained through universal religious theories such as animism and totemism. Drawing upon long-term ethnographic engagement with the Santal community in the Jangal Mahal region of West Bengal between 2020 and 2025, the study analyses how Santal religious, spiritual and cosmological understandings are formed and transmitted through rituals, oral narratives, festivals, sacred spaces, agricultural practices, and everyday interactions with the natural world. The article combines ritual observation, oral narratives, textual analysis, and ethnographic reflections to examine the relational and performative dimensions of Santal cosmology. While theories such as animism and totemism provide important insights into spirit beliefs, clan relations, and sacred associations with natural entities, they remain insufficient to explain the complexity of Santal understandings of *bonga*. The study demonstrates that the Santal concept of deity differs significantly from idol-centred religious frameworks, as the *adi bonga* are generally perceived as omnipresent, formless, and deeply connected to sacred landscapes, ritual practices, and collective life. In this context, the article argues that “bongaism” may provide a more culturally grounded framework for understanding the relational, ecological, and performative dimensions of Santal spirituality and cosmology.

Keywords: bongaism; Santal cosmology; animism; totemism; Santal ritual practices, embodied knowledge

Introduction

Across the world, indigenous communities have long understood the relationship between human beings, nature, and the spiritual realm through relational systems of knowledge that cannot always be fully explained through universal religious categories (Bird-David, 1999; Viveiros de Castro, 1998; Ingold, 2000). In many indigenous cosmologies, mountains, rivers, forests, animals, ancestors, and other natural entities are not viewed merely as physical objects but as living presences connected to collective life, memory, ethics, and ritual practices. Such knowledge practices are transmitted through oral traditions, rituals, performances, myths, and everyday interactions rather than solely through codified scriptures (Taylor, 2003; Ong, 1982).

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These worldviews also shape social relations, kinship structures, ethical responsibilities, and the community's understanding of coexistence with the natural world (Descola, 2013; Kohn, 2013). The Santal community, one of the largest indigenous communities in eastern India, similarly maintains a complex cosmological system in which ritual life, oral traditions, and relations with nature occupy a significant place. Central to Santal cosmology is the concept of *bonga*, which broadly refers to supernatural presences often associated with deceased ancestors, natural entities, sacred spaces, and other spiritual forces. Their presence is maintained not simply through abstract belief but through rituals, offerings, oral narratives, festivals, and embodied performances practised within the community (Taylor, 2003).

However, indigenous belief systems, including those of the Santals, have often been interpreted through externally imposed anthropological frameworks such as animism, totemism, religion, or nature worship (Tylor, 2016; Durkheim, 2001; Canney, 1928; Carrin and Lyche, 2008; Troisi, 2023). Classical anthropologists like Edward Tylor and Émile Durkheim attempted to explain the origins and structures of religion through concepts such as animism and totemism. While these frameworks provide important insights into spirit beliefs, clan relations, and sacred associations with natural entities, they do not entirely explain the complexity of Santal cosmology. The tendency to translate *bonga* directly as “deity,” or to interpret Santal beliefs only through the framework of animism, risks reducing a relational and performative cosmology into a fixed religious category. Similarly, although totemic relations are visible within Santal clan structures and ritual practices, these relations cannot be understood merely as symbolic representations detached from lived experience and ecological interaction. Such universal frameworks often overlook the embodied, performative, and place-centred dimensions through which Santal cosmology operates within everyday life. This article, therefore, argues that the concept of *bonga* requires a more culturally grounded interpretive framework that emerges from within Santal cosmological understanding itself. In this context, the article gradually arrives at how the term “bongaism” may provide a more appropriate framework for understanding the relational nature of Santal spirituality and cosmology. Rather than treating *bonga* simply as supernatural beings or deities, bongaism helps us understand how relationships between human beings, ancestors, natural entities, ritual practices, and collective memory are continuously negotiated through embodied and communal practices.

Ethnographic Setting and Research Methodology

While acknowledging the regional differences in ritual practices, deities, and cosmological understandings among the Santal community across different parts of India and beyond, this study specifically focuses on the Jangal Mahal region of West Bengal, India, situated in the south-western part of the state and comprising the districts of Bankura, Jhargram, Purulia, and Paschim Medinipur. The selection of this region does not suggest that Jangal Mahal preserves a more “authentic” form of Santal ritual practices or that the presence of *bonga* is limited to this particular geographical area. Rather, the region has been selected to enable a more detailed and grounded exploration of Santal cosmology, ritual practices, and the concept of *bonga* within a specific socio-cultural context. At the same time, the author's long-term familiarity with these places adds another important dimension to the study. Having grown up

within this region, the author has observed and participated in various rituals, festivals, performances, and communal practices since childhood. Such experiences provide not only repeated access to the field but also a form of embodied and experiential knowledge transmitted through collective participation, ritual performances, and everyday community interactions. This positionality allows the study to engage more closely with the lived and performative dimensions of Santal cosmology while also enabling a thicker description of ritual practices and collective beliefs. Furthermore, the article draws upon long-term ethnographic engagement with the Santal community in the Jangal Mahal region between 2020 and 2025. The study combines oral narratives, ritual observation, ethnographic reflections, and textual analysis to understand how Santal religious knowledge and cosmological understandings surrounding *bonga* formed, practised, transmitted, and continuously reinterpreted within the community. Rather than treating Santal cosmology as a fixed or static belief system, the article approaches it as a lived, performative, and dynamic practice that continues to evolve within changing social and cultural contexts.

Santal Ritual Practices and Sacred Spaces

During my fieldwork conducted in multiple phases, I observed that the Santal community practises various worship rituals and festivals throughout the year, each connected to seasonal cycles, agricultural activities, and collective relationships with the spiritual realm. For instance, Magsim marks the first major worship ritual of the Santal new year. Similarly, Baha, considered one of the biggest worship festivals among the Santals, is closely associated with flowers, fertility, and renewal. During this festival, flowers are first offered to the deities at the *jaher than*, a sacred place, before they are used by the community members. Likewise, different stages of agricultural activities, such as ploughing, sowing, transplanting, and harvesting, are marked through rituals and sacrifices offered to *bonga* in order to seek protection, fertility, and a successful cultivation season. Another significant festival is Sohrai, during which the Santals express gratitude towards cattle, land, and various natural entities associated with cultivation and survival. During these worship practices, several major deities are invoked, including Marang Buru, Jaher Ayo, Mareko Turuiko, and other *bonga* associated with specific rituals and contexts.

However, the Santal understanding of deity differs significantly from idol-centred religious frameworks. Santals generally believe that deities are omnipresent and not confined to any singular physical form. As a result, they do not traditionally worship deities through fixed idols or permanent representations, particularly in the case of the *adi bonga* or *disham bonga*¹, such as Marang Buru and Jaher Ayo. Their sacred spaces, especially the *jaher than*, also reflect this relational understanding of sacredness. Traditionally, the *jaher than* does not

¹ Dharam Das Mandi, in his book *Baha Mag Mare Binti* (2022), categorises four kinds of Santal deities. The first are *Adi* or *Disham bonga*, such as Marang Buru and Jaher Ayo, who are believed to be omnipresent and associated with the origins of human beings. The second are *Ophel bonga*, including Karam, Jamsim, and Bidu Chandan. The third are *Sendra bonga*, such as Tusa, while the fourth category includes *Orag bonga* or ancestral spirits, including forebears, warriors, and rebel figures like Sidhu and Kanhu. However, in the last category, ancestral spirits and historical figures are often worshipped in physical form. For example, rebel leaders associated with the Santal rebellion, such as Sidhu and Kanhu, are represented through statues or idols, which are then worshipped during ritual and commemorative practices.

possess rigid physical boundaries because sacredness is associated more with presence, relation, and ritual practice than with architectural enclosure. Although nowadays boundaries are increasingly being constructed around these spaces due to land encroachment and changing socio-political conditions, the earlier understanding of sacred space remained more open and ecologically connected.

Similarly, many rituals are performed directly in open fields, forests, or near natural entities rather than inside temples or enclosed structures. For example, during Magsim Sim worship, rituals are often conducted in open spaces connected to agricultural land and nature. Furthermore, trees are considered sacred presences, and the Santals worship deities through trees or understand certain trees themselves as associated with bonga. Such practices indicate that the Santal concept of deity is not based on fixed physical representation but on relational presence within nature, ritual performance, and collective belief. However, based on my fieldwork observations and lived experiences within the community, Santals generally do not perceive the adi bonga in fixed physical forms. While visual representations or idols may sometimes be used for ancestral spirits or historical personalities such as Sidhu, Kanhu, or Pandit Raghunath Murmu, who are remembered through collective memory and historical narratives, the adi bonga are approached differently. These deities are considered formless, omnipresent, and capable of existing in multiple forms simultaneously. Their sacred presence is understood through ritual practice, oral narratives, nature, and collective belief rather than through fixed images or idols.

It can therefore be inferred that the tendency to depict deities in specific forms within some contemporary texts or practices may partly emerge through long-term interaction with neighbouring Hindu traditions, where deities are often worshipped through visual and embodied forms. Such influences indicate processes of cultural exchange and interaction between the Santals and neighbouring communities. Nevertheless, the broader Santal cosmological understanding of bonga continues to remain deeply connected to relational presence, sacred landscapes, and performative ritual practices rather than fixed idol worship.

Bongaism

As we saw, the Santal orientation toward the religious and spiritual realm, particularly the figure of bonga, is central to their cosmology and ritual life. The bonga are conceived as spiritual presences that inhabit natural elements, ancestors, and specific places, and they can be either benevolent or harmful depending on how they are engaged. While bonga is often translated as “deity,” in English, this translation does not fully capture the relational, plural, and place-centred nature of bonga in Santal thought. Unlike the more universal, often transcendent and singular notion of a deity, such as “a god or goddess” as defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, bonga are immanent and closely tied to context-specificity (“deity,” OED). They inhabit rivers, trees, and other elements of nature, and are embedded within seasonal cycles and kinship networks. Their efficacy is maintained not through abstract belief but through ritual performance, embodied memory, and a shared sense of social responsibility, as I mentioned. Therefore, the concept of a bonga does not align entirely with the broader or more universal idea of a deity, and it might be more appropriate to describe their belief system as bongaism to reflect its unique cultural context. Their rituals, prayers, sacrifices, and offerings,

whether to ancestor deities or disham deities, indicate a belief in supernatural beings. A hypothesis can be proposed about how the Santals came to revere certain deities by considering theories like bonganism, animism and totemism. In his book *Primitive Culture*, Edward Tylor (2016) develops his theory of animism² to describe religion, defining it as the foundation and earliest form of religion. The term ‘animism’ originates from the Latin word *animus*, meaning spirit(s). Tylor characterises animism as the belief in spirits or supernatural beings, whether ancestral spirits, the souls of the deceased, or natural spirits inhabiting plants, animals, and other natural entities, which forms the foundation of religious thought (Strijdom, 2021; Tylor, 2016). In chapter 8 of the book, “Mythology,” Tylor mentions that in ancient times, humans tried to explain the natural scenario by mixing their imagination and rational experience. He suggests further that myths provide us with a road map for primitive cultures’ imagination and their thought process. In the mythical story, we find many animations and personifications of natural entities because of the belief that natural entities also possess spirits, personalities or souls. The myths often attempt to rationalise the relationship between human beings and the natural world by attributing supernatural power to natural elements (2016, p. 306-339). Tylor argues that over time, multiple layers are added to this form of religion to survive, while the core aspect remains throughout, with changes and developments coming along throughout its trajectory.

In response to earlier theories like animism, which focus on individual experiences with spirits to explain the origins of religion, in his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*³, Émile Durkheim (2001) argues that religion is a social institution shaped by collective experiences. He critiques Tylor’s animism theory and proposes totemism as the simplest form of religion based on his study of Australian Aboriginal tribes. In totemism, a particular plant, animal, or natural object is considered sacred and serves as the symbol of the clan. This totem resembles the clan’s collective consciousness and values, strengthening social bonds. In ancient times, when survival depended on collective efforts, clans often formed sacred connections with specific entities that resonated with their experiences or qualities. For instance, during communal activities such as rituals, ceremonies, festivals, or hunting, people often experienced an emotional state of collective effervescence associated with the totem, which could be a tree, animal, or other natural entity. Over time, these entities became symbols of the clan, representing its identity and values. This sacred attachment to the totem reinforces both their social cohesion and their shared worldview. This shared experience strengthens social bonds within the group. The totem then serves as a representation of the clan, embodying its identity and values.

The belief in animism and totemism, to some extent, is prevalent amongst the Santal community. It can be evident during religious rituals, festivals and personal interactions with the deceased’s other form, which they also call bonga, as they believe that after death, a person becomes a deity or bonga. For example, in prayers, they address deities or worship the natural

² His theory is based on analysing the work or data that the missionaries, ethnographers, anthropologists etc, collected from various parts of the world, though he himself was not involved in fieldwork.

³To understand Durkheim and use his ideas, I read *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), in Carol Cosman’s translation (Oxford World’s Classics, 2001).

entities, believing that the deity possesses these natural entities, reflecting the belief in animism, even as they adapt to modernity. However, in modern society, we may not have fear towards souls, spirits, or deities, but we worship them out of respect, love, or a sense of responsibility or duty, or we celebrate worship to gain relief or enjoyment from a monotonous life, etc. However, Santal animism not only reflects their traditional beliefs in supernatural beings but also incorporates “relational epistemology” (Naveh & Bird-David, 2013, p. 27-37), emphasising respectful engagement with nature. This relationship involves drawing qualities from natural entities and maintaining a connection through physical and relational interactions. Santal animism illustrates the interconnectedness between the Santals and the natural world, including mountains, trees, and other elements.

Again, for totemism, Subhra Bhattacharya (2021, 20-22) notes that while Santals don't firmly believe they originated from their totems, they sense a connection due to perceived similarities. This connection stems from a likeness or affinity with specific animals or trees, or even the deeds of their ancestors in relation to these elements, influencing their choice of clan names based on natural elements. For example, the clan name “Hansdak” or “Hansda” is derived from ‘Hans’ (goose) and ‘dak’ (water) (Kisku, 2021) and “Murmu” is derived from “Murmu enga” (mother goat). Similarly, the Kisku clan associates with the kingfisher as their totem, while the Tudu clan, known for their musicians, aligns with the owl totem. Similarly, the Hembram clan adopts the betel nut as their totem and so on⁴ (Bhattacharya, 2001, 22). Each clan's totem symbolises their connection to and inspiration from the natural world, which is why they hold deep respect for their totem and consider them as members of their clan. This reverence extends beyond their specific totem to encompass the entire species and the world, instilling a profound love and respect for all living beings. Furthermore, Santals might have started worshipping mountains as deities because mountains helped, protected and gave shelter to them in ancient times. Similarly, rocks, trees, and other natural entities became deities due to their significance in offering support or safety since, in ancient times, the Santals used to live in mountains and uneven places, and they utilised them as their shield for protecting themselves from various threats.

For instance, according to the Santal creation story, they lived in several places, including Hihiri Pipiri, Khoj Kaman, Harata, Sasang Beda, Jarpi, and Kaende country, eventually reaching the seven river land Campa⁵. At one point, when moving from Jarpi country, they encountered forest after forest and a large mountain and became trapped there, unable to find a way out of the mountain. They assumed that the spirit of the mountain had blocked their way and decided to pray to the mountain. For example, “O Marang Buru (O big mountain), if thou lettest us pass through, we shall worship thee when we have found a country to stay in” (Bodding, 2016, 9). After a certain time, in the morning, they find a way to come out, and the sun also rises as the mourning begins. Similarly, when they were staying at Hihiri Pipiri, Thakur created a storm and lightning to abolish the human beings as they were not

⁴ See page 18-26 of *Santhal Worldview* (2001) for more clans' totems.

⁵ In Chae Campa, they lived for generations, constructing forts. P.O. Bodding notes that it is impossible to trace the locations mentioned with certainty. However, Skrefsrud speculated that the 'country of the seven rivers' might correspond to present-day Punjab, while others suggest that Chae Campa could be identified with the northwest region of modern Chota Nagpur (Bodding, 2016, 10).

following any rules. The Santals took refuge in a mountain cave, which saved their lives. Such events likely led to their reverence for the mountain, considering their principal deity, Marang Buru, which can be translated as big mountain, also supports this argument. In the same way, they start to revere the sun deity and other natural entities. The worship of rocks, trees, and other natural entities may also originate from similar experiences. Since multiple layers are added to the form of religion, we can assume that a similar thing happened with the Santal religion, which is why it became complex.

Conclusion

The discussion throughout this article demonstrates that the Santal understanding of bonga cannot be fully explained through universal religious categories alone. Santal cosmology reflects a complex and interconnected worldview in which spirituality is deeply embedded within ritual practices, oral traditions, sacred landscapes, agricultural life, clan relations, and collective memory. Rather than existing as distant or singular divine figures, bonga are understood through lived experiences and everyday interactions with the surrounding world. Their sacred presence is maintained through festivals, offerings, communal participation, and embodied ritual practices that continue to shape the social and spiritual life of the community. Although anthropological frameworks such as animism and totemism provide important insights into Santal cosmological practices, they remain only partially adequate in explaining the complexity of Santal belief systems. Animism helps explain the spiritual relationship between human beings and the natural world, while totemism provides an understanding of clan identity and sacred associations with specific natural entities. However, the Santal understanding of bonga extends beyond these fixed theoretical boundaries. The sacred within Santal cosmology is not limited to symbolic worship or belief in spirits alone but is continuously negotiated through ecological relations, ritual performances, oral narratives, and collective experiences. Similarly, the Santal understanding of deity differs significantly from idol-centred religious structures, as the adi bonga are generally perceived as omnipresent and formless rather than confined to fixed physical representations.

In this context, the study suggests that “bongaism” may provide a more culturally grounded framework for understanding Santal spirituality and cosmology. Rather than reducing Santal beliefs to externally imposed religious categories, bongaism allows us to approach bonga through the relational, performative, and place-based dimensions embedded within Santal life and practices. At the same time, Santal cosmology should not be understood as static or isolated from historical change. Interactions with neighbouring communities, changing social conditions, and contemporary transformations continue to reshape ritual practices and sacred understandings. In recent decades, several large-scale Santal worship festivals have gained wider attention, where village-specific rituals are increasingly transformed into pan-Santal gatherings and collective cultural spaces. For instance, Lugu Buru, situated within the mountains and forests of Jharkhand, has emerged as an important pilgrimage site for the Santals (Bandyopadhyay 2019). Thousands of Santals from different parts of India gather there for communal worship, cultural celebrations, and collective participation. Such gatherings include exhibitions of Santal instruments and cultural items, speeches by binti gurus and community leaders, communal dances, and discussions on Santal identity and traditions.

These spaces not only reinforce religious and spiritual practices but also function as important sites for reclaiming cultural memory, collective identity, and community belonging. Similarly, festivals such as Buru Bonga also demonstrate how pan-Santal identity continues to be publicly performed and negotiated through ritual, performance, and collective participation in contemporary times. Nevertheless, the continuing significance of bonga within collective life indicates that Santal cosmology remains a living and evolving system of knowledge that sustains relationships between human beings, ancestors, nature, and the spiritual realm.

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