Ethnic Identity and social organization of Santhal Adivasis in Eastern India: An Overview

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Abstract

The Santhals are part of a wider culture of tribal communities in eastern India, including the Mundas, Oraons, Hos, and Kharias. These groups belong mainly to the Austroasiatic (Munda) and Dravidian linguistic families and share similar ecological habitats, though their social systems and cultural expressions remain distinct. Santhali, the language spoken by the Santhals, belongs to the Munda branch of Austroasiatic languages. The introduction of the *Ol Chiki* script by Pandit Raghunath Murmu in the early 20th century has been central to linguistic and cultural revivalism. Santhal society is organized into exogamous clans (*paris*), each named after a natural element or animal, with totemic rules guiding marriage and social behaviour. Their festivals—*Baha* (flower), *Sohrai* (harvest), and *Karam* (youth)—serve both religious and communal functions, closely linked to seasonal cycles and agricultural practices. Together these and other features comprise Santhal identity and ethnicity, and social organization which is the subject of the present article.

Keywords: *Santhals, Adivasis, Eastern India, Jharkhand, ethnicity, identity.*

Introduction

The Santhals are one of the most prominent Adivasi communities in eastern India, with significant populations in Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, and Assam. Their traditional territory lies in the ecologically rich and geographically distinct zones of the Chotanagpur Plateau and the Rajmahal Hills. These forested highlands, abundant in sal trees, laterite soil, and water sources, historically supported a self-sustaining economy based on swidden agriculture, hunting, fishing, and forest foraging. The region's geographical isolation enabled the Santhals to preserve their indigenous socio-cultural systems and communal traditions over centuries. This article will look at the question of their ethnic identity and social organization with reference to existing research. Their sociopolitical identity has undergone notable transformations over time—referred to as "Aboriginal Tribe" in colonial administrative discourse, later labeled as "Backward Hindu" within nationalist frameworks, and eventually redefined as "Adivasi" (original inhabitant) in sub-nationalist and internationalist settings (Rycroft, 2005).

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The term "Santhal" itself was not self-ascribed but rather imposed by others. According to Bodding, it likely originated from "Saontar," a term used by Bengali speakers for the Santhals who lived in the Saont area of present-day Midnapore district in West Bengal. The Santhals refer to themselves as *hor* (human beings) or *hor hopon* (sons of men), contrasting themselves with *diku*, a term broadly used among tribal communities in Chotanagpur and Central India to designate outsiders. Historically, *diku* referred to exploiters such as zamindars, Brahmins, Biharis, and the British. (shuttle-Droesch, 2018). These changing designations, both imposed and internal, reflect a fluid, historically situated identity that resists fixed categorization and underscores a legacy of both resistance and adaptation (Ghosh, 1994).

Under British colonial administration, the Santhals were drawn into the formal economy through land settlement policies, notably the creation of the *Damin-i-Koh* in the 1830s. This initiative aimed to bring uncultivated land under agriculture by relocating tribal cultivators like the Santhals (Troisi, 2024). While this brought short-term economic improvement, it also subjected them to systemic exploitation by landlords, moneylenders, and state officials. Despite such external pressures, Santhal communities preserved a significant degree of local autonomy through customary institutions such as the *Manjhi* (village headman), *Naike* (ritual specialist), and the *Manjhi Haram* (village council) (Troisi, 2024). These indigenous governance mechanisms enabled continuity in cultural practices amidst widespread change.

Historical Identity and Classification of Tribal Communities in India

India has been the homeland of numerous ethnic groups and cultural communities since prehistoric times. These groups, considered among the earliest inhabitants of the subcontinent, are referred to by various terms—"Adivasi" being the most widely recognized. Over generations, many of these communities have managed to preserve a distinct social identity, particularly in terms of their customs and socio-religious practices.

Since 1891, Indian census reports have recorded these communities using different classifications. Over time, they were variously described as:

People with tribal religion (1891), Animists (1901), Tribal animists or tribal religion followers (1911), Hill and forest tribes (1921), Primitive tribes (1931), Tribes (1941), and finally Scheduled Tribes (in the post-Independence censuses of 1951, 1961, and 1971).

Despite these classifications, not all tribal communities in India are recognized as Scheduled Tribes. According to Article 342 of the Indian Constitution, only those communities or specific parts/groups within them that are formally notified by the President of India are deemed Scheduled Tribes. This constitutional provision allows the identification and classification of certain tribes for legal and administrative purposes (Dr S. Hayong, 2018).

In addition to the term "Adivasi," several other labels have been used to describe tribal groups, reflecting their lifestyle or geographical setting. These include Vanyajati (castes of the forest), Vanvasi (forest dwellers), Paharia (hill dwellers), Adimjati (original communities), and Janjati (folk people). Such nomenclature illustrates the deep-rooted connection between tribal communities and their natural environment (Troisi, 2024).

Demographic Identity and Classification of the Santhals

The Santhals represent the largest homogeneous Scheduled Tribe in India. According to the 1971 Census, their population was approximately 3.63 million, making up about 9.55% of the total Scheduled Tribe population in the country. However, this figure may not reflect their actual numbers accurately, as it does not include Santhals living in states like Assam and Meghalaya, where they are not officially classified as Scheduled Tribes.

In 1951, India's Scheduled Tribe population was recorded at 22.5 million, accounting for 6.25% of the country's total population. After several Presidential orders issued between 1956 and 1960, this number increased to nearly 29.9 million, which represented 6.87% of the total population (1961 Census). Later Presidential orders (1961, 1966, 1967, 1968, and 1970) further updated tribal classifications. As a result, by the 1971 Census, the Scheduled Tribe population reached 38 million, or 6.9% of India's total population (Troisi, 2024).

Defining Scheduled Tribes and their Legal Recognition

The classification of a community as a Scheduled Tribe is not uniform across India and is based on four main criteria: Primitive traits 2. Distinctive culture 3. Geographical isolation and 4. Backwardness and lack of integration into mainstream society Communities which show a high degree of integration with the larger society are generally excluded from this classification. The 1967 Advisory Committee on the Revision of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Lists emphasized this principle.

The etymology of the term "Santhal" has intrigued numerous scholars and researchers over the years. According to Skrefsrud (1968), the word is believed to be a corrupted form of "Saont," a name used historically to describe a region in the vicinity of Saont, a locality now associated with the Silda Pargana area in the Midnapore district of West Bengal. It was during the time when the Santhals settled in this area that the name gained prominence. W. B. Oldham offered a linguistic interpretation of the term, suggesting that "Santhal" could be an abbreviated derivation of "Samanatala." In his analysis, "Samanatala" was a term used for the plateau region, and "Samanta" was another variation found in historical references O'Malley (1910: 99), in a similar vein, contended that "Saont" referred specifically to a territorial designation, and that the term "Santhal" itself is likely a derivation from Hindi, further anglicized to match the pronunciation "Saontar," a form used frequently by Bengali-speaking communities.

It is noteworthy that the term "Santhal" appears to have undergone several orthographic transformations in early records. Sir John Shore, for instance, used the spelling "Soontars" to refer to the group, while McPherson recorded the name as "Saungtars." This diversity in spelling and pronunciation underscores the fluidity of ethnonyms over time. Despite these variations, modern anthropologists tend to concur that the name "Santhal" was not originally used by the community to describe themselves (Bhukya, 2008). Rather, it was an external label imposed by non-Santhals. Among themselves, Santhals refer to their group using the term *Hor*, which translates simply to "man." This form of self-identification is more intimate and human centred. In certain pockets of West Bengal, particularly among Santhal populations more integrated with Bengali society, the term *Manjhi* is often used as an identifier of communal identity and leadership.

Linguistically, the Santhals possess a distinctive and self-contained language known as Santhali. It belongs to the Munda family, which in turn is a part of the larger Austroasiatic language group. Peter W. Schmidt, a linguistics scholar, classified Santhali firmly within this category. Numerically speaking, Santhali stands out as the most significant and widely spoken language among all the Munda languages. Furthermore, it has deep historical roots, being among the most ancient linguistic traditions in the Indian subcontinent. Campbell, in his study, emphasized this point by asserting that Santhali had attained "a much higher stage of development than any other sister language." This assertion speaks to the complexity and richness of the Santhali language, which has maintained its structural and cultural integrity despite extensive contact with other linguistic groups.

In terms of language preservation, the Santhals have achieved a remarkable feat. Although a large segment of the community, particularly those in West Bengal, is bilingual—often fluent in Bengali as well—they have nevertheless preserved their mother tongue. Santhals are recognized as the largest tribal group in India to have maintained an aboriginal language into the present era. Unlike many indigenous languages which have succumbed to linguistic erosion due to external cultural and linguistic dominance, Santhali has remained intact in its grammar and syntax. In fact, it has shown a striking resilience against agglutinative processes and foreign linguistic influences. Their vocabulary, however, has been somewhat permeable to external words, yet the essential character of the language has remained undisturbed.

The demographic presence of the Santhals across India during the early 1970s provides an insightful perspective into their geographic and social spread. Data from the *Census of India 1971*—specifically, Series 1, Paper I of 1975—indicates that out of the total population of 547,949,809 people in India, the Scheduled Tribes accounted for 38,015,162, and among them, Santhals numbered 3,633,459. This placed them as one of the most significant tribal groups numerically. Regionally, Bihar and West Bengal were the two major strongholds of the Santhals.

In Bihar, the Santhal population was approximately 1,801,304, comprising 9.55% of the state's Scheduled Tribe population. In Odisha the Santhals numbered 452,953, or 8.93% of the Scheduled Tribe count. In Tripura, their numbers were significantly lower at 2,222, representing a mere 0.4%. West Bengal, however, presented a unique case. With a total population of 44,312,011 and a Scheduled Tribe population of 2,532,069, Santhals constituted 1,376,980 individuals or an impressive 54.36% of the Scheduled Tribes population in the state. Geographically within un-divided Bihar, Santhals were primarily concentrated in the districts of Santhal Parganas, Singhbhum, Hazaribagh, Dhanbad, and Purnea. In West Bengal, their presence was heavily concentrated in Midnapore, Purulia, Burdwan, Bankura, West Dinajpur, Birbhum, and Malda districts. These concentrations reflect the historical migration and settlement patterns of the Santhal community.

Interestingly, despite their substantial population and cultural heritage, the Santhals have at times been excluded from Scheduled Tribe lists in certain states, especially where their language or socio-cultural identifiers did not align with bureaucratic classifications. For example, the omission of Santhals from Scheduled Tribe lists in some contexts was reportedly due to the classification of tea plantation tribal labourers, who, though Santhal by ethnicity,

were not officially treated as Scheduled Tribes. The 1967–68 Advisory Committee on the revision of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes lists addressed this anomaly, particularly in regions like Assam. Moreover, the Santhal diaspora extends beyond the political boundaries of India. Significant populations of Santhals are also present in Bangladesh and Nepal, further testifying to their historical mobility and cultural resilience.

The Santhal people, lacking a script of their own, have historically adopted other writing systems, particularly the Roman script, modified with diacritical marks to represent unique Santhali sounds not found in English. This adaptation was largely influenced by Christian missionaries, such as Rev. Jeremiah Phillips, who took a pioneering role in studying and documenting the Santhali language. As early as 1852, Phillips published *An Introduction to the Santhali Language* using the Bengali script. In certain regions of Odisha, the Oriya script has also been employed for this purpose. (Phillips, 2017).

Anthropologically, the Santhals are characterized by their short to medium height, dark complexion, sparse beards, and distinct facial features such as a broad flat nose and thick lips, along with wavy to curly hair. These physical traits, shared with other Mundari-speaking tribes, have led to diverse and often conflicting racial classifications by scholars. Historically, Santhals have been labelled as pre-Dravidians, Kolarians, Dravidians, Proto-Australoids, Nishadics, and Austrics (Beattie, 2004).

Risley's early classification grouped the Santhals within the pure Dravidian racial stock, though this theory has since been discredited by subsequent research which highlights their racial divergence from Dravidian-speaking populations (Guha, 1937). Peter W. Schmidt, for instance, categorized the Santhals as Austro-Asiatics, while A.C. Haddon associated them with the pre-Dravidians (Guha, 1937). E. von Eickstedt, in his 1935 work, aligned the Santhals, along with the Mundas and Hos, with the Austro-Asiatic racial group. B.S. Guha further supported this view, including the Santhals among the Proto-Australoid population, observing a racial affinity between them and the aboriginal peoples of Australia. Another interpretation by A. von Heine-Geldern considered the Santhals as belonging to the Mongoloid race. S.S. Sarkar proposed a hybrid classification, arguing that although the Santhals display Mongoloid traits, they also exhibit a strong Australoid strain, making them a composite racial group (R.Von Heine-Geldern) But this hypothesis was denied by Risley and Bodding (Sarkar, 1938).

Social Organisation

The Santhal community follows a patrilineal and exogamous clan system. A significant cultural myth among them concerns the origin of humanity and the emergence of their twelve clans. This story has been documented in various forms by different authors, but one of the most comprehensive versions was narrated by Kolean and later recorded by Skrefsrud in 1887. Bodding (1942/3-14) also provides a detailed account, which has been translated into English. The paraphrased version presented below captures the central features of these earlier renditions.

In the mythological beginning, when the Earth was submerged beneath water and no land existed, the Supreme Being, Thakur, created life. First, he created aquatic beings, then attempted to create humans. However, an early attempt was disrupted when the Day-horse

trampled the figures made of mud. Subsequently, Thakur formed a goose and a gander and tore them apart. He then produced new material from his chest, breathed life into it, and thus created human beings.

Eventually, these two birds built a nest at a place called Hihiri Pipiri, where they laid two eggs. From these eggs, a boy and a girl were born—Pilhu Haram and Pilhu Budhi, whose names translate to "First Old Man" and "First Old Woman." One day, a being named Maran Buru, disguised as Lita, visited the two and taught them how to brew rice beer. They consumed the drink, became intoxicated, and engaged in sexual intercourse. Over time, they had fourteen children—seven boys and seven girls. The boys accompanied their father on hunting trips, while the girls helped their mother collect vegetables and leaves.

One day, when the girls went into the forest alone and completed their chores early, they began singing and playing near a banyan tree. Upon returning from the hunt, the boys, also alone, were captivated by the singing of the girls. According to Santhal oral tradition, after Pilcu Haram and Pilcu Budhi gave birth to fourteen children (seven boys and seven girls), the eldest boy chose the eldest girl, and the youngest boy chose the youngest girl as partners. Observing this, their parents arranged their marriages, and thus all fourteen children were paired off. To further prevent incest, the couple divided their offspring into seven exogamous clans, establishing the rule that "a brother may not marry a sister." These clans were named Hasdak, Murmu, Kisku, Hembrom, Marandi, Soren, and Tudu (Bodding, 1916).

Later, the community moved to a place called Khoj Kaman, where, according to myth, they began behaving in a lewd manner, "acting sexually like buffaloes and cows" (Bodding, 1916). Witnessing this, Thakur became enraged and warned that he would destroy all of humanity unless they mended their ways. When they failed to reform, Thakur sent down fire and rain for seven days and nights, destroying everyone except a chosen couple who were hidden in a cave on Harata Mountain. After this near-annihilation, the survivors multiplied, and the Santhals once again spread and grew in number. They migrated to Sasanbeda, settled there for a long period, and were again divided into clans. Alongside the original seven, five new clans emerged: Baske, Besra, Pauria, Core, and Bedea—although the last eventually disappeared (Troisi, 2024*).* The Santhals continued migrating, moving from region to region until they reached Champa land, where they lived for a long time. As one tradition puts it: "we were a great people… not subordinate to anyone" (Bodding, 1916). Each clan built its own forts for defense, complete with unique passwords and fortifications.

In Champa, clans assumed specific occupational roles, establishing a form of social stratification. The Kiskus became the royal lineage and rulers under the title Kisku Raj. The Murmus became the princely clan and were called Murmu Thakur. The Hembroms were elevated and given the honorific Hembrom Kuar. The Sorens, identified as the soldier class, were referred to as Soren Sipahi. Among the various subgroups, the Marandis were entrusted with significant responsibilities within the royal court, being appointed as both treasurers and stewards to the king. In recognition of their role in managing the royal wealth and household affairs, they were given the distinguished title of "Marandi Kipisar." On the other hand, the Tudus pursued the art of music and earned the designation "Tudu Mandariya," reflecting their contributions to the cultural and ceremonial life of the community. However, historical records

do not clearly indicate the specific roles or titles that may have been assigned to other subgroups during this period.

The evolution of clan identity within the Santhal community reflects broader processes of social integration and adaptation. While occupational roles once played a defining role in shaping inter-clan relationships and social hierarchy, these divisions have become increasingly obsolete. Marriage restrictions that once reinforced clan exclusivity have given way to broader social acceptance and integration (Bodding, 1916). For instance, although the Besra and Core clans were once stigmatized, such prejudices no longer dictate social interaction, particularly in terms of marriage or status within the village.

This shift illustrates not only the internal dynamics of Santhal society but also the community's response to external pressures. As Culshaw suggests, the occupational distinctions—especially those lacking in traditional authority—may have emerged more recently, serving as a mechanism for social compensation (Bodding, 1916). These divisions likely helped Santhals negotiate their status within the broader caste-ridden Hindu society by asserting a structured internal hierarchy, albeit one that has now faded (Culshaw, 2013).

Importantly, clan subdivisions into khuts serve not only genealogical purposes but also function as critical units of identity and exogamy. The wide range in the number of khuts across clans—from the Murmu's 65 to the Pauria's 16—indicates significant variation in both population and historical development within clans (Troisi, 2024). Despite such differences, all clans are represented across most Santhal villages, pointing to a deeply interconnected social structure. The Santhal clan system, therefore, reflects both a preservation of cultural lineage and an adaptability to changing social conditions. It is this balance between tradition and transformation that continues to shape the identity of the Santhals in contemporary times. (Singh and Bhandari, 2023)

Each Santhal sub-clan holds a distinctive origin myth that shapes its identity, and these sub-clans are further differentiated by unique customs. For instance, the Sada sub-clan refrains from applying vermilion during marriage or sacrificial rituals. Similarly, specific Murmu sub-clans—such as the Jaher Murmus, Nij Murmus, Manjhi Khil Murmus, Naeke Khil Murmus, and the Sada Murmus—are prohibited from constructing homes with four-cornered roofs, underscoring the symbolic role of ritual practice in clan identity (Gupta, 1976)

One of the most essential functions of the clan system is the regulation of marriage alliances within the tribe. Marrying within one's own clan is strictly forbidden; doing so renders the individual an outcaste (bithala). Historically, the rules were even more stringent in cases of intra-sub-clan marriage—wherein even unions involving a mother's sub-clan were prohibited. This enforcement emphasizes the deep-rooted commitment to exogamy in Santhal society. Moreover, sub-clans are intimately tied to the worship of ancestral spirits—abge bongas or sub-clan bongas—which reinforces social cohesion through shared rituals. This connection is encapsulated in a popular Santhal saying: *"Mit khutren kanale, mit khondrele"*, meaning "we are of one stock; we perform sacrifices in the same circle." (Troisi, 2024).

Conclusions

The Mundas, ethnolinguistic kin of the Santhals, are known for their long-standing resistance movements and large-scale conversions to Christianity. They follow a *Manki-Munda* administrative system that blends customary and formal authority (Sarma and Mukherjee, 2019). The Oraons, who speak Kurukh, a Dravidian language, follow the Sarna religion and are celebrated for their vibrant dance rituals, particularly during the *Sarhul* and *Karma* festivals (Xaxa, 1999). The Hos and Kharias maintain unique ritual systems, particularly surrounding ancestor veneration and metallurgical crafts (Sharma, 2008). While all these groups share animist beliefs, sacred groves (*Sarna*), and communal festivals, the Santhals are particularly distinguished by their oral epics, musical traditions—including instruments like *Tumdak* and *Tirio* (bamboo flute)—and wall murals, which encode collective history and myth (Singh, 1997).

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