

## Hunting Tradition of the Santals

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### Abstract:

Among India's Scheduled Tribes, the Santhals are the third most populous. They primarily reside in the states of Bihar, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha, and Assam, but a significant number also live in Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. Despite this wide geographical spread, their culture and traditions remain remarkably consistent. Among their many cultural practices, hunting stands out as a significant tradition. Hunting is a traditional culture of Santals. It's a men's game. They worship and hunt the forests once a year. It is also called the marriage of forests. Worshiping the gods of forests and mountains, they feel comfortable roaming only after hunting in the forests.

First of all, they fix the day of hunting and tie the Gira to invite peoples. They tie the Gira of Khajoor or Kita branches. People open or pluck each leaf of the Khajoor or Kita Gira every day from the day of tying to the appointed day. On the day when the leaves end, people worship the forests and hunt. Hunting does not mean killing wild creatures. They drive away wild animals from their surroundings so as to save the crop from wild animals. In the Santal Society, hunters are respected. After returning from hunting, the hunters' feet are washed with respect. After that, they enter the house and are given food. Married men re-wear the wife's bracelet opened before going to the hunt. The meat is offered to the gods and ancestors, after which all the people of the family eat.

**Keywords:** hunting, traditions, santal, forest, worship, gira.

### Introduction:

Hunting is the traditional culture of Santals. This is the greatest happiness of the men of the Santal society. They say, the greatest pleasure of us men is to go hunting (Skrefsrud, 2010, p. 185). From children to young and old people are also eager to go hunting. Just as mothers are happy when they give birth to a child, men are happy in going hunting. Not only this, it is also the biggest test of their life and death. The greatest calamity of women in childbirth and in the hunting of men; If you cross this line, you will be able to see many generations (Skrefsrud, 2010, p. 195). Yes, it is also true that the biggest pain of women's life is labor pain, whose pain is equal to breaking twenty bones of the body simultaneously. If women don't give this pain, think about not giving it to death. Similarly, men going to hunt is a battle between life and death. If the man came back from hunting, he could see a new period of life, otherwise the last line of life was there. Thus, both the childbirth of women and the hunting of men are battlegrounds. No matter how big the problem is among the people of Santal society, they definitely go hunting. They have even said, we have been hunting since ancient times, no matter how big the situation comes between us, we will not stop hunting. We will call it the religion of men (Skrefsrud, 2010, p. 185). In society, the hunter is given the status of a true male and

the one who is afraid to go on the hunt is considered equal to a eunuch or a woman. In Santal society, it has even been said that, a person who has not gone hunting three times in his life time is not worthy to be called 'Purusha' among the Santals (Murmu, 2013, p. 232. "In Santal culture, "playing hunting" has been considered a part of life by men.(Tudu, 2013, p. 35) The hunter is a symbol of masculinity, valor and honor. They said that, our ancestors fought bravely against lions and bears. Sometimes the lions and bears won, and sometimes humans did- and even today, people continue to fight in the same way (Skrefsrud, 2010, p. 185). that is why hunters are given special respect in society.

### Literature Review

Skrefsrud (2010) and Murmu (2013) documented in detail how Santal religious beliefs are interwoven with nature-centric rituals involving forest spirits, mountains, and deities. Previous ethnographies (Tudu 2013; Soren 2017) suggest that hunting historically served not only as subsistence but also as a communal legal system (Lo-Bir Dorbar), where justice was performed publicly through symbolic oaths and divine arbitration.

Studies have shown that Santal hunting is distinct from pleasure-sport (Murmu, 2013) and fits within their nature-worship worldview — aimed at crop protection rather than extermination of wildlife. With the enforcement of Article 48A of the Indian Constitution, hunting practice has transformed into ritual worship rather than actual killing of animals (Soren, 2017). This paper builds on such literature by providing updated documentation of ritual practices and community perspectives.

### Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic method.

- **Primary data** were collected through participant observation in Santal villages during the annual hunting season (sendra), along with informal and semi-structured interviews conducted with Dihri (ritual priest), hunters, Majhi, Pargana and women family members.
- **Secondary data** were gathered from published ethnographic texts, folk literature, and government documents relevant to hunting traditions.
- **Thematic content analysis** was used to organize data into major recurring themes: masculinity, ritual, justice, food-sharing, historical transformation, and ecological adaptation.
- **Ethical validation** was maintained by obtaining oral consent from all participants and avoiding recording of restricted rituals.

**Rules and restrictions for hunters and their families:** there are some rules and restrictions for hunters and their families have to follow. It is said that, when married hunters leave the house for hunting, before leaving, they take off the iron bangle placed on their wife during marriage and they take it with them (Murmu, 2013, p. 232). If the hunter comes back alive, his wife gets the status of wife again or else she becomes a widow. Therefore, women live in purity

after their husbands go on the hunt. She does not do such things that her husband has to suffer untoward things. Some works are forbidden, they follow. Like - wife does not adorn herself and no member of the family removes ash from the stove. When the husband comes back, the wife washes his feet, bows to each other. After that, the iron bracelet opened by the husband again wears the wife. Thus, again his wife gets the status of wife. Hunting is not done casually, it happens with law.

The people of the area or province in which the hunt is going to take place meet and fix the day and tie the 'Gira'. 'Gira' which determines the day of hunting. The 'Dihri' (priest of mountain) who leads the hunt distributes the Gira to the people of different areas and they tell the people of their areas about it. they said that, in ancient times, people would send Gira from village to village for hunting, but since they began living in Shikar Disom, they started inviting hunters to the fairs instead (Skrefsrud, 2010, p. 185-186). When the hunters learn about the designated forest for hunting, they inform one another and begin preparing their weapons. They ready their bows and arrows, spears, swords, and axes. The women are asked to prepare Mahua lathe and grind rice for food. The village headman must provide five cups of rice and a bundle of Mahua lathe for the hunters. On the appointed date, all those people, with their weapons, reach the Gipitij or Sutan Tandi fixed for hunting. Gipitij or Sutan Tandi where hunters rest.

**Gipitij Tandi or Sutan Tandi- hunters' resting place:** Dihri already lives at the gipitij Tandi. He sees the omen of people from all directions. People worship the oil of the directions whose bad omen is found. The people of the village whose bad omen is not denied and there is a possibility of untoward incident, alerts the people of such a village. Dihri tells them to protect themselves or else go back. The hunters do not want to go back, so they beg Dihri to take care of our safety. Then Dihri worships in the name of those people. They offer chicken sacrifices to the gods and goddesses of the forest. After that, everyone eats food and goes out in the lead of Dihri for hunting. But until the blood of an organism is not flowing, Dihri does not eat food.

**The Tradition of Hunting: Rules, Risks, and Brotherhood:** The tradition of hunting is the symbol of Unity. During hunting, hunters help each other. Never cheat anyone. When hunters encounter a lion or a bear, all companions in the vicinity inform each other. If someone becomes a victim of a lion or a bear, then a kind of sound is made from the drum to inform everyone, by listening to which people understand that an untoward incident has happened with someone. Hearing this voice, everyone gathers and treats that injured person. Then start hunting after that (Skrefsrud, 2010, p. 190). In the ancient times, when someone became prey to a lion, especially brothers and friends risked their lives trying to save them, yes, everyone tried to rescue them and were ready to die for them. In the modern era, people have become so cowardly that the moment they hear the name of a lion, they pick up their dhoti and run away (Skrefsrud, 2010, p. 190). The truth is that in today's world, there is neither brotherhood nor any true friends. People only become friends when they gain something, once the work is done, even a so-called friend is forgotten. Even today, a certain level of brotherhood and friendship can be seen among hunters, but in ancient times, there was no comparison to the brotherhood and friendship among hunters. In those days, if a hunter violated the rules, he would be punished.

When it is evening while hunting, all the people gather in 'Gipitij tandi'. There, all the people of their village, group or area collect whatever food items they have brought in one place and

all eat together. Whether it is rich or poor, whether they have brought less or more or not brought it, there is no consideration of them, all are entitled to equality and eat together. After that, they cook food. Some people slaughter and cook hunted wild animals and birds. Some people perform Dhonged and Singrai dances and Sing Bir Songs with traditional musical instruments like the flute and Kendri, while others enjoy it. At the same time, a big meeting is called under the chairmanship of Dihri on 'Gipitij tandi'. People from all groups have to go to that meeting. Especially the main people of that group like Majhi and Pargana need to be present. it is called lo bir dorbar.

**Lo-Bir Dorbar: A Traditional Supreme Court:** 'Lo bir dorbar' is the final meeting of public affairs. Here, a final decision is made regarding any matters of the Santal community. Every case of society is solved here. People of the society consider it parallel to the Supreme Court. Therefore, people come here not only for the purpose of hunting but also to get justice for the oppression done to them.

In this meeting, Dihri is the Majhi (headmen) and people from various provinces are their public. In the meeting where the Dihri sits the public gather around him. The main people sit beside them. After that, they ask everyone about their good and bad experiences, mistakes, fights, sorrows, and problems. Dihri gives an opportunity to all the people coming from the country and the state to tell their sorrows and joys and every matter of those people is considered.

Then in front of the Dihri, they express their sorrow. One says - there has been a quarrel over the rabbit from such and such village. Then the Dihri asks how the quarrel happened? Then the person says I hit the rabbit with a stick and put it to sleep. The other person says my dog had caught the rabbit. Then the Dihri asks both - Do you have any witness for you? Then both of them answer yes, the people of a certain village. Then the Dihri calls all the witnesses and interrogates each witness from both sides one by one. After the discussion and deliberation, the side that is found to be right is handed over the rabbit. In this process of deliberation, the people of the villages or regions support the Dihri, while the Dihri only gives the final decision.

When there are no witnesses, or if the witnesses are unreliable or tampered with, the Dihri buries both parties' arrows on next day in the time of sunrise at the hunting field and applies vermilion on them, and, holding a water pot in both hands, offers a prayer:

“Oh Lord, Thakur of the heavens, with your blessings we have deliberated, but neither of the two agreed. You are in the heavens, and we are here on the earth. There was no new resolution, so we the people of the land are not at fault. Therefore, you alone judge these two” (Skrefsrud, 2010, p. 193).

After this, the Dihri and the village elders say to both parties: “Perform the Bonga service (ritual), and lift your arrow. Do not fear us—fear only Thakur (God).” The person who picks up the arrow is then made to swear: “Thakur, if I am doing injustice, let the lion of this mountain devour me. But if I am truthful and just, let me return home safely” (Skrefsrud, 2010, p. 193).

If the second person also has the courage, he must take the same oath; otherwise, the first person is considered justified, and the second one is assumed guilty.

After that, the Dihri pours water from the pot over the spot where the arrows were buried and says: “Thakur, you now decide what is right or wrong between these two”. If both parties take this kind of oath sincerely on that day, they are then left to live freely. Suddenly, lions will appear in the jungle, but they will go first to the one who spoke the truth—he will remain unharmed. Then they will go to the one who spoke falsely and devour him. And even if he somehow escapes the lions, he will eventually fall prey to something else and die (Skrefsrud, 2010, p. 193).

After resolving disputes related to hunting, the Dihri turns to the assembly and asks about other matters or grievances the people may have. One by one, individuals step forward to share injustices they have faced within the community. Some report being unjustly punished by the village Majhi; others raise issues concerning land disputes, marital conflicts, or accusations of witchcraft. In this way, countless petitions are brought forward, often by those who have been wrongfully exploited by their Majhi or Pargana.

Each case is deliberated upon openly by the gathered community, and a clear, collective verdict is reached. The ancestors of the Santal people used to say, The hunting meeting is our Supreme Court. Here, no Pargana, Des Majhi, or Majhigan can level false accusations against anyone. The people themselves, in both small and large matters, deliberate and, if a deceitful person is found guilty, they are punished (Skrefsrud, 2010, p. 194).

Truth and falsehood are examined in a transparent manner. No Majhi or Pargana can intimidate or coerce a common person into an accusation. This is why the poor and distressed have long placed their trust in the Lo-Bir—the traditional forum of communal judgment.

This traditional process reflects a deep faith in the moral fabric of community and divine justice. It emphasizes truth, courage, and the belief that nature and the divine will ultimately separate right from wrong. Through symbolic rituals and sacred oaths, justice is entrusted to higher spiritual powers rather than human prejudices. Such customs reveal the spiritual and moral foundations of the Santal community's judicial systems.

### **Sharing of hunted meat among hunters and the community**

**Chagad Phadi:** During hunting, if someone shoots a large animal with an arrow or kills it with any weapon, and at that very moment someone from any group cuts off the front leg of that animal, then that part of leg becomes his.; this is called Chagad Phadi. However, this is not for an individual — it is meant for the entire hunting group. In Chagad Phadi, only one front leg of the animal is cut and the person (or his group) who cuts it first becomes its rightful owner.

**Madal:** The person who kills the animal is honoured by giving him a portion of the meat; this is called Madal. For example – a part of the animal's head, a piece of the spleen, and a portion of the liver are given as a mark of respect.

From the community's share, a portion of the meat and liver is offered to the village Nayake Baba (priest) to present to the deities. As a mark of honour, a portion of the meat given to the hunter is also ceremonially given to the village Majhi Baba (headman). The first part of the thigh of large animals is given to the Majhi of the village, the next portion is given to the Paranik, and the last share is given to the Godet. A separate portion is given to the drummer;



the remaining meat is equally distributed among the hunters, and those who didn't go for the hunt are given the Chapo Judu share — which is distributed to every household of the village.

Only in the hunt of big animals are the Nayake Baba, Majhi Baba, and Godet Baba given meat as an honour; in the case of small animals or birds, only the person who killed the animal is honoured with Madal, and the rest of the meat is shared among the hunters themselves. The hunters who carry the hunted animal are given the stomach portion of deer or rabbit and the gizzard of the birds.

**As offerings of hunted meat:** The hunted meat is not eaten just like that; First the Nayake Baba of the village makes offerings of hunted meat to the gods and goddesses (Modenko Turuyko, Pargana Hadam, Majhi Hadam and Marang Buru), then eats it. Hunters also offer meat hunted in their homes to their ancestors. After that, all the members of the house are also divided from little by little. Even sisters and daughters are taken to their in-laws.

From the Santals' hunting culture, we can understand that the unity, brotherhood, social bonding, and sacrifice for their own people are unwavering and indelible among them.

**Historical Incident and Ethical Values:** In Santal society, every person who has gone on hunting is considered equal participation. Whether old or child, even a dog accompanying is given the same share as a person. No person is ever neglected. A historical example of this is the incident that happened with their ancestors. It is said that a poor man went hunting with the villagers. When all the people returned to Gipitij tandi in the evening after hunting, the people of the village were collecting food brought from home. But the poor man had only 'Lova lathe' (food made from sycamore fruit) to eat. Seeing this, they refused to include him and made fun of him. The poor man fell asleep after eating 'Lova Lathe'. The next day, they went hunting again, but no one hunted a single creature. But that poor man killed a blue cow and did not call the name of the village and named it after himself. On this, the people of other villages asked him why did you do this that instead of taking the name of the village, you made the hunt your own? On this, he narrated the whole story to the people of the country. "Yesterday evening, the villagers separated me because I did not have good food other than 'Lova lathe'". The people of the country reprimanded and punished the people of his village. From that day till today, no hunter has been overlooked (Skrefsrud, 2010, p. 190-191).

**Respect for hunters in society:** In ancient times, hunters were given great respect. While the hunters returning from the hunt, the unmarried girls of the village mohalla from which their group used to go, used to wash the feet of those hunters and the hunters used to offer Champa flowers to those girls and bow to each other. The people of the village used to give those hunters 'Matkom Lathe', a type of food made of Mahua and water to drink. But today the shortcomings of this prestigious culture are visible in Santal society.

When the hunters reach their respective homes, the family members also wash their feet and bow to each other. After that, he is made to enter the house and given food to eat.

**Now hunting as a tradition and festival:** Now hunting is considered as just a tradition and festival in Santal society. Because Article 48A of the Constitution of India provides for the protection of environment and protection of forests and wildlife. Article 48A of the Constitution

of India clearly states that, the State shall endeavor to protect and improve the environment and to safeguard the forests and wildlife of the country (Constitution of India, 2015, p. 28). Believing this, the people of the society do not hunt wild animals. They worship and preserve the tradition just to preserve their tradition and to celebrate the gods and goddesses of the forests. Even in ancient times, the aim of people was not to kill wild animals, they used to drive them away through weapons and musical instruments to get protection from them. People lived in the forests. The forest was the main source of livelihood. They built their houses in the forest and ate the root of the forest, the flowers, leaves and fruits which were their main food items. They also cultivated in the slopes of the mountains. They used to drive away wild animals to protect themselves and to protect the grains in their homes and fields. The Santal community worships stones, trees, water and forests because they depend on these things. They consider the things on which they depend on them as God and worship them. That is why these people are called nature worshippers. Regarding the tradition culture of Santals in today's day, Soren (2017) says that times have changed today. The forest is shrinking. Along with the number of trees in the forest, the number of wild animals is also decreasing. Wild animals have almost reached the brink of extinction. So now the tribal people go hunting to preserve the tradition of celebrating their hunting festival, but only the tradition is performed by the hunters (p. 38). There is no doubt about it because the tribal people depend on water, forest and land and never allow the water, the forest, the land animals and the plants to perish. They work to maintain the balance of the ecosystem.

### Conclusion:

The hunt for animals by the Santhals is a tradition practiced by men. In ancient times, wild animals were driven away by playing musical instruments like the nagara and sakwa to protect the crops and they used arrows, bows, spears, sticks, etc. for defence. During the fights with wild animals, they would also kill them. This is how the hunting tradition began. To protect themselves from wild animals, they worship wild deities and drive the animals away from their surroundings and hunt them. The male hunters who fight wild animals and protect crops and people are respected by society. There is unity among the male hunters, who support each other during the hunt. In Santhal society, hunting has now become a tradition. The male hunters now perform the hunting tradition by worshipping the forests to preserve the ancient practices. They do not hunt wild animals in accordance with Article 48A of the Constitution of India.

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