THE SANTALS IN A CHANGING CIVILIZATION

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While the process of civilizing the primitives is desirable in itself, the task of doing it is instinct with immense and intricate difficulties. On the basis of his research studies of the reactions of Santals to the new culture contacts, Mr. Mukherjea points out that many salutary changes are visible in the status of the Santal woman as well as in their religious and social customs. But this new culture transformation is also destroying some of their virile traditions and habits. Hence, the author suggests cautious procedure in reforming them.

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NOTHING has impressed itself with so much force on my mind during the course of my studies on the Santals, off and on, for the last twelve years as the effect of the infiltration of modern ideas into the primitive social-fabric of the tribe. As I intend to discuss here the various problems which the impact of civilisation has produced on the Santals, a brief ethnological note may be useful to those who are unacquainted with this tribe.

The Santals, a pre-Dravidian tribe, numbering 2,508,789 according to the Census of 1931, rank as the second aboriginal group so far as population is concerned. Their habitat lies roughly between 20° and 28° North Latitude and 83° and 92° East Longitude. The topography of the portions of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa falling within our purview will reveal large areas of rock, laterite and gravel bearing clusters of Shorea robusta, Bassia latifolia, Adina Cordifolia, Ficus religiosa, Butea frondosa and others and extensive forests containing tigers, elephants, Sambar deer, leopards and deer. Distributed throughout this wide area lives the Santal, a man of medium size but muscular and strong, possessing, as Col. Dalton says, "a blubbery style of face" and his ox-eyed merry women folk. The term 'Santal' is sometimes very loosely applied by the common-folk to other Pre-Dravidian tribes like the Mundas, Hos, Beer-hors and others. It should be remembered that the Santal calls himself "manjhi" (the honorific title of the village Headman) or "Kherwal". They are divided into twelve clans and their religion may be better described as Spiritism (the term used by late Rai Bahadur Sarat Chandra Roy) rather than as Animism.

The foregoing observations will serve the purposes of an introduction to our discussion on the various new forces that have worked on the primitive social frame-work of the Santal and the new mentality that has developed in the tribe as the result of education, conscious and unconscious. Although, speaking statistically, literacy figures do not make encouraging reading, it cannot be overlooked that culture contacts with the non-Santal population,
has produced a good deal of "looking before and after" and a ferment; hence a prelude to a new cultural adjustment is very much visible.

A note on the social environment of the Santals here will give the reader the background necessary for a better appreciation of the problem. There was undoubtedly a time when the tribe gradually receded into the backwoods with the approach of modern civilisation. But that time is no more. The Santals now live side by side with the general population, of what has been termed by the late Rai Bahadur S. C. Roy, the Central Belt of India, and although Santal hamlets are separate affairs, they cannot be said to be culturally cut off from the rest of the people. The most potent of the outside influence is the Christian Missionary. These missions are scattered throughout the Santal areas. They educate the Santal in rudiments of modern knowledge, treat him when ill in hospitals of their own, and even look after the lepers in leper colonies. Whatever the object of these missions may be, it cannot be denied that through these media modern ideas percolate through the Santal masses and result in a changed angle of vision in the tribe.

Secondly, in places like Rajmahal and Dinajpur, the Hindu Mission tries to 'reclaim' the aboriginal to the Hindu fold, acting on the theory that the Santals are already Hindus, as they follow a religion of Hindustan. The religious workers of these institutions, try to infuse into the Santal, ideals of clean living, eating pure food and thus win them back to the worship of Hindu gods and goddesses. This is not altogether a new thing. We have historical evidence to say that there was, in 1871, a movement in the Santal Parganas, known as the Kharwar movement, when some Santals declared themselves as Safa-hor (the pure men) after eschewing fowls, pigs and intoxicating liquor but taking ganja (hemp, *Ganabis Sativa*) and tried to bring their social customs on a level with Hindu practices. It led at that time to some local ferment and had also a political aspect. (Ref. Dt. Gazetteer of Santal Parganas, 1910, page 145). The result of all these is noticed in the fact that 586,499 Santals returned themselves as Hindus in Bihar and Orissa in the Census of 1931 and in the State of Mayurbhanj, they numbered 254,596 out of a total of 258,195 Santals (Census of 1931).

Added to these, it must be remembered that the Santals do not live in water-tight compartments of their own. The Hindu Kamar makes implements for them. The Tantis weave their clothes and this culture contact saturates the Santal society with modern ideas.

Language.—The first striking point is that the Roman script is used in writing Santali, a language belonging to the Munda family of languages, which in its turn is a branch of what Peter Schmidt terms as the Austro-Asiatic sub-family. It may be mentioned perhaps that it is not a written language,
and Santal traditions are orally handed down. The question of a Santal script engaged the attention of the early European missionaries and they used the Roman script. So it is that we have now got some Santali literature due to the efforts of the Christian missionaries and the education imparted to the Santals in the Santal Parganas has been through this medium. Side by side with this, the Bengali script has been used by some Santals in their publications and by the Hindu Mission, Rajmahal, in their Santali literature. In the Mayurbhanj State, I noticed Santali being written in the Oriya script. While Roman, Bengali and Oriya are now trying to exert themselves as far as possible, Mr. Raghu Nath Manjhi, a Santal teacher of Rairangpur Mayurbhanj, has invented a new script for Santali. This was shown to me by its author, and the evidence at my disposal goes to show that a section at least of educated Santal opinion advocates its acceptance. Like all pioneers, Mr. Manjhi has a rare courage of conviction. His friends have taken up the cause and educated Santals of Mayurbhanj and the neighbouring areas are now using the script in their correspondence.

Mr. Raghu Nath Manjhi's efforts deserve more than a passing notice, for, it brings us to the new thought-currents in the present day Santals. They have a language and want to have a script of their own. A language without a script of its own, according to this section of Santal educated opinion, lacks dignity. In vain one pines for the Roman script to unify the interminable jargon of Indian scripts. One tries to draw a parallel from the New Turkey favouring Roman script, and tries to argue on the basis of the unity of the Mundari languages on the basis of the existing Roman, while the educated Santal at Mayurbhanj coolly masters the new script with a new pride. The urge for self-determination in the choice of scripts gives the on-looker mixed feelings of admiration and confusion. But it is a sign of the times.

Religion.—Santal religion presents the next problem. With efforts all round to 'redeem' the 'heathen', there was a time when the advanced Indian religions felt the shock of disruption. No wonder that the aboriginals mixed up education and economic and social advance with Christianity and took to it in large numbers. Thus in the Census of 1931, Santals numbering 13,279 were shown as Christians out of a total of 586,499 Santals in Bihar and Orissa. Due mostly to the activities of Christian missionaries, Bihar and Orissa reported 8,899 literates out of a total population of 1,304,034 Santals over seven years of age (1931). Except in the State of Mayurbhanj, the educated Santals (properly so called) are mostly Christians. If we recall the first fruits of English education in Bengal during the time of Michael Madhusudan Dutt, the new ideas giving rise to new conceptions of God and religion with Ram Mohan Roy and Keshab Chandra Sen and the general ideological revolution in
the thoughts and ideas of the nineteenth century Bengal, it will not be difficult to understand why some educated Santals, even though they are not Christians, are dissatisfied with their religion.

Here some points on Santal religion may prove useful. There was a time when they were called Animists and the scholars who termed them so had their own reasons. The Santal peoples—his world with numberless spirits, mostly mischievous. There are spirits in the hills, the household has its own, the village has its presiding deity and so on and so forth. The question now naturally arises if the religious practices of the Santals are not some form of an active worship of some deities and lesser spirits, together with a vague belief in souls and a future existence connoted by the term Animism. One is puzzled to think, as Sir Herbert Risley was, as to what is the exact idea of the Santal when he thinks of the spirits, say of the hills. Whatever may be the answer, it should not be forgotten that the conception of an abstract power in itself independent of a material vehicle is difficult for the aboriginal mind. Thus to the Santal, Thakur Jiu (Supreme deity) is not an abstract conception but a real entity, with feelings and desires akin to those of man. For his Ancestor Spirits in particular, the Santal exhibits filial devotion which may be likened to the Hindu worship of the Pitris. That is a religion not simply of undiluted fear in the presence of the mysterious powers of the dark. There are indications of a moral order of things and emotion, and thrill play a conspicuous part in the religious practices of the Santals.

But these are features hardly noticed by the educated Santal; he is either apt to look upon his religion as a lower form of Hinduism or as something the missionaries called 'heathenism'. These are the immediate results of Western education and were seen prominently in the nineteenth century India, specially Bengal, till the advent of Raja Ram Mohan and the new interpretation of Hinduism and other Indian religions by Vivekananda. So I was not surprised, in the course of my travels in the State of Mayurbhanji, when I was asked by an educated Santal, "Do please tell us if we have any religion at all." Such a query shows the influence of advanced ideas on the Santal thought-world. Educated non-Christian Santals now speak in terms of Hindu ideas, mention God (Ekamebadyitiam) in their speech, and are no longer content to live under the protecting wings of their mostly malevolent tribal deities. This explains the mass conversions to Christianity or satisfaction at being counted and declared as Hindus in census reports.

The earlier ethnologists have invariably called the Santal a jolly good fellow who seems to carry out to the logical conclusion the principle, "eat, drink and be merry, and care not for the morrow". Evidences of such an epicurean philosophy may even now strike an observant eye during a good har-
vest or on the eve of one of their tribal festivals. But at the present moment it is distinctly noticeable that increasing association with the out-side world has checked the spontaneous overflow of the fullness of their heart. Such a difference struck us at Mayurbhanj, where the Santals live mixed up with the general population. They now seem to have acquired the consciousness that they were so long living in a fool's paradise of songs and dances, whereas, life on the earth is after all a grim struggle and has meaning deeper than their religious practices can hope to measure or fathom.

This discontent is an indication of a future readjustment. If the Santal pines for a script, it only means that thinkers and philosophers in the tribe are in the making. And we look forward to a day when a Santal reformer will give a new interpretation to Santal ideology and religion, and give the advanced section the spiritual food they hanker after. That will give the tribe self-respect to stand before New India.

**Position of Women.**—The position at present enjoyed by Santal women in their tribal polity provides an interesting study inasmuch as it reveals how their rights are slowly, and sometimes indirectly, being recognised by a conservative society. The myths and legends of the Santal associate witchery with the female sex. In the very dawn of creation, it is narrated men saw that they had to deal with wives who, however useful, proved too wily for them. So they went to the Chief Presiding Deity and requested Him to teach them how to subjugate women. The God agreed. But when He gave men the lesson in witchcraft, He discovered to His embarrassment that He had taught women who had come disguised to 'steal' the art. To counterbalance it, the angry deity taught men the art of discovering witches among men. Santal folk-lore is full of stories depicting the life-long struggle of men with women whose only vocation is to exercise continuous spell over men in the garb of wives, sisters or mothers. Even now, almost all murders, committed by the Santal, result from the belief in witchcraft. It is not surprising, therefore, that their customary law should proceed from the assumption that women are potential witches and, as necessary chattels, they should be bought for matrimony and progeny. Another factor that contributed to this position was the perpetually migrating, semi-hunting life of the early Santals in India before they took up the position of settled agriculturists. But when they became tenants, in the real sense of the term, possessing properties, the question of providing for children, who were sometimes female ones, took a different aspect to the Santals tied down as they were by the hide-bound rigidity of social customs. The various denials of rights, especially to the Santal woman, have remained to this day. She has no right to property as such recognised for her; she has no right to sit in the tribal assemblies although her evidence is admissible there. In one word,
she belongs in her minority to her father as a chattel, she is bought as such by her husband, and when her coverture ceases on her husband's death, she reverts to her original owners. But if her father is dead and none of her relatives kindly takes charge of her, she drifts as a piece of *res nullius*. It is now clear that having converted the Santal woman into property, the tribal customs could not logically endow her with any rights to hold property.

But the influence of modern times has softened the rigid old Santal tribal jurisprudence. One can notice change with regard to the ownership of personal properties. Women can now own money, cattle and goods, and this is a completed legal right of usufruct and disposal. When property is divided, a loving father is seen to bestow on his daughter some heads of cattle or some money to be her property. Her ornaments are her own. She has full powers of disposal over them. A woman divorced without fault now gets a cow, some paddy and utensils. The paddy, which a Santal girl reaps during the December harvest, becomes her personal property, and she has powers of disposal also over the money she gets, should she sell it. The money earned otherwise by a Santal woman, in excess of providing for her food, is also her own now according to tribal customs.

In the domain of immovable properties, the position is far different. As the woman has no social or religious duties to perform, the tribe recognises no rights of inheritance for her. But human ingenuity has all over the world defeated the law by the creation of legal fictions. And our aboriginal tribal customs can be made to illustrate how fond fathers have provided for their daughters and children indirectly by settling lands for their benefit. It is done thus: the daughter is married to a "ghardi janwane" (a domesticated son-in-law, if such a translation is permissible). He is not required to pay for his bride in cash. He serves on his term, say for five years, at the house of his father-in-law and is free to leave at the end of the term. Although marriage gives him the *prima facie* status of a son of the family, in the eye of Santal customary law he is entitled to nothing but his wife. He merely transmits the inheritance to the children of the marriage. The mere fact of the marriage does not endow him with any right to property. If the house-holder, who 'domesticates' such a husband for his daughter intends that he (the husband) should inherit, a public declaration during the marriage investing him with the right, is legally necessary. Otherwise, it is the daughter who is the *de facto* owner of the inheritance and should the "ghardi janwane" leave his father-in-law's protection, his rights in his father-in-law's lands vanish forever. His relatives have no rights to the inheritance.; the children of the marriage are the only beneficiaries. But if the wife dies during her husband's life-time, tribal customs recognise a life-interest for such a son-in-law.
Thus we see how Santal women are being indirectly benefited in the face of the hard customary laws.\(^1\)

The influence of civilisation has made itself felt on the Santal social fabric in other ways too. Settlement courts have on many occasions recorded daughters as *raiyats* in agricultural lands and provided them with a life-tenure. Reformist Santals are trying their best to remove the legal disabilities of their women, specially widows. According to customary law, she is not entitled to any land, although she may own personal property. If children do not look after their widowed mother, she has no rights recognised for her. And if she has no children, she is thrown to the charity of the members of her husband's family. Educated Santal opinion now wants that the widow should have her rights of maintenance out of her late husband's properties till she remarries. The whole question came up before the Santal Parganas Enquiry Committee whose Report was published in 1938. The Committee, while discussing "Transfer by Gift or Will ", observes that there has been for many years a slow trend towards a change in the law which would give Santal women a recognised position. However, there is no unanimity among the Santals with regard to this matter. The Committee examined a number of witnesses on the point, among others, the President of the Santal Malko Sabha. But even this body which represents more advanced opinion, was not in favour of permitting a Santal to transfer by will anything except his self-acquired property; and the President admitted that this change would have little practical effect, since the laws against alienation practically limit self-acquired property to such land as the *raiyat* has himself reclaimed. Taking into consideration all these, the Committee did not think that a change ought to be enforced by legislation and hoped that the customary law would develop 'naturally-and gradually'. Finally, they recommended that civil cases, involving Santal law of inheritance, should, wherever possible, be referred to for arbitration to facilitate the growth of a convention. These facts at least show clearly, the tendencies of the times and the inroads of civilisation into the tribal customs to suit modern conditions in the Santal Parganas.

The status enjoyed by Santal women in the State of Mayurbhanj is, however, a far different one due to the application of the Mitakshara branch of Hindu law as regards the disposal of properties of the Santals. Thus, should a householder die without leaving any male issues, the daughter will succeed in preference to all agnates and the widow inherits her husband's share, in case the only claimants be the separated brothers of her husband. The widowed mother has her rights of maintenance recognised at the hands of her sons. The son-less widow becomes the sole owner of her husband's property,  

\(^1\) With acknowledgements to Rev. P.O. Bodding.
but like the Mitakshara widow, cannot alienate without legal necessity.

The Santals of Mayurbhanj do not resort to the tribal personal law and the improvement in the position of their women in the eye of the law is solely due to the wholesale application of the Hindu law of the Mitakshara school. This is possible because the Santals of the State are mostly Hindus and have, although maintaining their tribal customs, declared themselves as such before the Census authorities.

_Social Customs._—It is not difficult for the social anthropologist to understand the reasons and the correct implications of many Santal social customs and look sympathetically upon such institutions, based as they are upon the special culture and tradition of the pre-Dravidians. But the modern social worker is apt to view them in a far different light, calling for urgent and immediate reforms. The first point that strikes our attention in this connection is the problem of murders arising from a belief in witchcraft. That "there are more things in heaven and earth" than is dreamt of in one's philosophy is the conclusion of puzzled humanity at large; if the orthodox witch-finder, the Santal Jan-guru, tackles supernormal phenomena by magical practices and by spirit communication attains curative results for the benefit of the tribe, it has a definite social meaning. But the position calls for a remedy, when the criminal courts reveal that whenever the witch-doctor pronounces someone a witch exercising a malevolent influence on a patient, the result is a murder or at least an attempt at removing the witch in disguise of a woman, generally a near relative. To a detached observer, witchcraft murders call for more than a passing notice and perhaps for cautious legislation to reform existing conditions. Whatever the Santal belief on the subject may be, such ignorant murders do not stand a moment's scrutiny of one who has the welfare of the tribe in his mind. Educated Santals feel strongly on the point. But apart from arousing public opinion, the co-operation of the State is extremely necessary in dealing with so delicate and dangerous a problem, linked as it is with the basic ideas of their society.

A second custom baffles the executive officers of the Santal Paraganas with its disturbing repercussions on public peace. The institution is known as _Birlaha_ or social purification of those who break the Santal marriage laws. The tribe enjoins certain methods of purification for such offenders which assume the form of an ostracism. When this is carried out, huge crowds of Santals gather together, singing lampoons, dancing with war-drums and others brandishing logs of half-burnt wood and broomsticks, and make the lives of the accused unendurable. Sometimes infuriated mobs commit excesses requiring police intervention. Whatever the original institution may be, no educated Santal now thinks that assault, intimidation, trespass and defama-
tion should be indulged in any more, and no wonder that a propaganda has been set on foot to impress upon the Santals of the Santal Paraganas that they are perfectly within their rights to non-cooperate with such social offenders, but the *assemblage en masse* and the associated primitive practices punishable under the Indian Penal Code can be reasonably given up.

Another strange belief is that whenever any foreigner is seen loitering in any Santal village, he is sometimes taken to be a kidnapper of children (*Ondga*) who would offer their blood as propitiatory offering to blood-thirsty deities. Instances are not rare when innocent persons have under such impressions been stoned to death by infuriated Santal villagers. It is always the innocent who thus suffer. Some time past the Hor Malto Maran Sabha of the Santals requested its brethren to disabuse their minds of such unfounded suspicions of foreigners. Apart from these, some minor customs, like the practice of some Santals deserting their wives when they become incapacitated, either through illness or infirmities, and that of requiring in Santal marriages that even the dead and deserted members of the bride's family should be counted for the purposes of the bride-price (*gonong*), have been considered as oppressive by the advanced Santals under modern conditions.

The above account gives one some idea of the problems the social worker meets with in dealing with the Santal. One wishes that the Santal would, with increasing enlightenment, take stock of his social life and devise measures for his betterment. The objective scientist may enable the Santals to rise to a higher cultural level so that they may take their place in the commonwealth of mankind. The tribe has its own set of values and its own ideas should not be rudely disturbed. But educated Santals should be helped to ponder over these problems. It was no surprise to us therefore when a manifesto, calling upon the Santals of Midnapore, Bankura, Manbhum and Singbhum to engage in social reforms, was signed some time back by the prominent educated Santals of Bengal and some parts of Bihar. It stated that for the maintenance of their tribal honour, the Santals had firmly resolved that:

1. No Santal, man or woman, should drink *pochoi* (rice-beer) in shops as the tribe had been ruined by drink while the grog-shop owners and mahajans were becoming rich. Temperance would help the Santals financially.

2. Carrion should not be eaten. The signatories refer to this custom with feelings of shame.

3. Santals should not dance or sing anywhere except in their own houses or villages. The manifesto reminds the tribe that the Europeans, Hindusthanis, the eastern hill-tribes sing and dance, but they avoid the hill-sides and public places. The ancient Santals had no public dancing.

4. Force should not be resorted to without proper reason as it
slackens the marriage-tie and gives rise to various vices.

5. Santals should wear coarse cloth and their women should give up wearing glass-bangles. A note on this point advocates cottage industries and dissuades the people from using mill-made articles.

During my last visit to Mayurbhanj, I found the air thick with these ideas. How successful they were in stopping the drink habit I do not know, but there was a noticeable tendency on the part of the Santals to give up dancing and singing in public. And the effect of the propaganda on the other points was also felt. It is, however, difficult but interesting to comment on these reformist moves. One thing is remarkable on the surface. The tribe is fast losing its joie de vivre. We have fully conceded the right of the educated Santal to remedy existing conditions. But they should remember that rice-beer is a food and stimulant to millions of underfed Santals. Dancing and singing in public have been going on for a long time and a sudden reversal to the standards of the neighbouring civilised races, may bring in a morbid condition of the mind by stopping the spontaneous overflow of the tribal joy for which the Santals were envied by the so-called civilised races.

But what has the reformist Santal done? He saw that there were abuses and his plausible answer was to reform the tribe by increasing education and enlightenment. This seems to be the easy solution of the missionaries working to improve the mind and the soul of these primitive tribes. So the air is full of ideas of reform, and many are the bold spirits who with zeal and earnestness are seeking to raise the level of the Santals to that of the civilised races of India. But a word of caution is necessary to the reformist. Here is a class of people who are simple and credulous. They flourish well in their native seats and in the cradle of their own institutions. Disturb them forcibly, and they become suspicious and angry; or if they submit to it, they do so at the cost of their original vitality and source of inner joy.

So legislation dealing with aboriginal customs has been considered as tantamount to inviting rebellion. And a plea for extreme caution while launching reforms for the aboriginal has been advanced by Dr. Rivers, the late Rai Bahadur Sarat Chandra Roy, Dr. Hutton and many other eminent anthropologists. Civilisation, they say, is a questionable blessing to the aboriginal. It carries, paradoxically enough, the germs of its own destruction so far as the aboriginals are concerned. So we find that Dr. Rivers refers with regret to the depopulation of the native tribes of Oceania as they could not withstand the diseases of civilisation and adjust themselves to the social and economic changes that came in its train. In a quite similar strain, Dr. Hutton has raised his voice of warning against moves to stop head-hunting amongst the Nagas. He fears that the forcible suppression of the custom may ultimately
lead to the total extinction of the tribe as happened to the Dayaks of Indonesia. That there is a good deal of truth behind this opinion cannot be doubted for a moment. What is best for the tribes must be left to time, their choice and to the natural laws of absorption. The capacity, however, of taking kindly to factors of civilisation vary greatly with different tribes. But the Santal has one special feature in him that he has learnt to adjust himself to the varied influences of civilisation and has continued to be one of the most prolific of tribes so far as population is concerned. The modern times are hard; they produce a deterrent effect on witchcraft by inflicting capital punishment on all murderers. Human sacrifice to deities is not tolerated by the State and meets with swift modern justice. Santal personal law supplanted by the Mitakshara in Mayurbhanj merely unifies the castes and tribes culturally. All these have not produced a noticeably adverse effect. These are results of a slow and gradual absorption of new forces. But when everything has been said, the note of caution uttered by Dr. Rivers and Hutton should be borne in mind by all reformers engaged in social work amongst the Santals and other aboriginal tribes since it will serve as a timely brake against hasty measures of reforms.