

Deconstructing Inter-religious Dynamics: A Critical Examination of Santal-Hindu Religious Traditions in India

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Abstract: Santals, the direct descendants of 'Proto-Australoid' race were living in India in most of Central and Eastern part of India. The archaeological and anthropological findings have established the fact that this Austric linguistic group who lived in Indus valley from 3, 500 B. C. to 2, 000 A. D. had led a kind of nomadic life until they settled in Sura Nai (Indus Valley) and Kandahar (presently in Afghanistan). These inhabitants historically known as non-Aryans (Anaryas) and later as indigenous tribes had shared a history of struggle with the Aryans who also came to India between 2, 500 B. C. to 2, 000 B. C. as nomads. After conquering the battles against Anaryas, the Aryans (harbinger of Vedic religion which continued as Hinduism in India) settled permanently. Both of the heterogeneous races assimilated and amalgamated their culture profusely. Researches show such acculturation impacted culture, tradition, religious practice, health care system, language and life-style of both the communities. However, in spite of the hegemonic power dynamics, and the caste consciousness between these two sects, they developed an inter-religious relationship. The present article seeks to explore how the indigenous tribe Santals, including some other tribes and the Hindu, deconstructed their inter-religious dynamics and reshaped them in their own accord. This article will also aim to trace how two different traditions of enriched, ancient inter-related cultures of India exchanged and influenced their each other's religious traditions glorifying India a power-house of mythical and cultural heritage.

Keywords: santal, hindu, acculturation, deconstruction, inter-religious dynamics

Introduction

The archaeological and anthropological finding have established the fact that the Austric linguistic group led a kind of nomadic life until they settled in Indus Valley from 3,500 B.C to 2000 A.D. Indus valley civilization was an unseen and unread chapter to the world until it was not discovered by a British journalist, John Marshall in 1900. Before the migration of Aryan community to Indus valley an enriched, glorified civilization had been

nurturing themselves for a long time, popularly known as Austric civilization. These inhabitants historically known as non-Aryans (Anaryas) and later as indigenous tribes had shared a history of struggle with the Aryans who came to India between 2, 500 B. C. to 2,000 B. C. as nomads. After conquering the battles against Anaryas, the Aryans, the harbinger of Vedic religion, settled permanently. Both of the heterogeneous races assimilated and amalgamated their culture profusely. Researches show such acculturation impacted culture, tradition, religious practice, health care system, and language and life-style of both the communities. However, in spite of the hegemonic power dynamics, and the caste consciousness between these two sects, they developed an inter-religious relationship. The Austric civilization (sometimes referred as Kheriwal Civilization) and the Aryan civilization in Pre-Vedic period started growing, influencing and enriching each other over a period of three thousand years. A fusion of Aryan and non-Aryan civilization since then made India a country of developed, enriched and amalgamated culture.

Early history of the Santals:

From 3500 B.C. to till date the Austric civilization had been contributing to the culture and heritage of India. When the nomadic, the Aryan, came to India around 2000 B.C. the Austric group of people known as Kheriwal civilization were living in Indus valley. The Austric people including Munda, Kolha, Ho, Birhor and Santals are believed to be the Anaryas, the founders of Indian civilization. After the settlement of Aryan, the harbinger of Hindu religion, in Indus valley, both of the heterogeneous races (Aryan and non-aryans) acculturated and amalgamated their culture profusely. Though there is enough unavailability of historical evidences still the existence of some oral narration i.e. the Bintiies and the other archaeological sources suggest that Adivasi or the tribal of India, often named as non-aryans, were enriched in every aspect – religious values, cultivation, rituals, craft and the livelihood. Very few evidence are left to justify the truth that the forefathers of tribal people in pre-Vedic period were much advanced and superior. But from the Vedic period onward the historical accounts always have tried to present the supremacy of Aryan race in this country. In his book, *Austric Civilisation of India*, Nityananda Hembram has validated this view. According to him:

From the Vedic period onwards, in all historical accounts, these non-Aryans have been 'defined as a race who are totally uncivilized and devoid of any cultural qualities. And therefore, it was taken for granted that the Indian civilization sprang and flourished from the Vedic period only and the Aryans pioneered the same. (Hembram, 2005, p. 44)

Future generation approved the fact that the Aryans were superior to the non-aryans due to the lack of historical sources. We have conceptualized the fact that the non-aryans

being uneducated and uncivilized was not cultural enough and the Aryans after their arrival established an enriched and sophisticated civilization. The Mundas, Ho, Santals, and Birhor collectively called as Kherwals pioneered the path of developed culture in India. There are enough reasons to believe that tribal culture or the Kherwal civilization was much more advanced than the Aryan culture that came in around 2000 B.C' (Hemram, 1996, p. 70). This article will focus that how this tribal culture is adopted by the Aryans who came as nomadic in India and settled here permanently and how the contributions of Austric culture on Hindu religion gave birth to a great cultural heritage in India from 3500 B.C.

When two cultures reside side by side for long period it is inevitable that they start influencing each other socially, culturally and ritually. The acculturation and assimilation of cultures, rituals and traditions between the Santals and the Hindus were going on since the time immemorial. The Santals, 'the largest homogenous tribe in India' (Hemram, 1996, p.24) had contributed most on Hindus than any other tribe or Adivasis in India. To glorify the enormous and valuable impact of the Santals on Hindus in Eastern India Dr. Timotheas Hembram, a Santal theologian and biblical scholar in his book, *The Santals: Anthropological- Theological Reflections on Santali and Biblical Creation Traditions* (1996) has quoted the lines of eminent anthropologist, P.C. Biswas:

If there is any culture which still carries on the impress of the underlying philosophic speculation and order of the thought that was wide spread in India prior to the rise of Dravidian culture, it was very likely the belief and social order of pre-Dravidian Santals...so in the pre-Aryan and pre-Dravidian culture of India the Santals stand in the lime light. (Hembram, 1996, p. 8)

The Santals, constituting the largest numbers in Austric group of people presently live in Eastern India- West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, and in Bangladesh and in Nepal too. We can make a study of influence of Santals on Hindu people in following respects:

Impact on Dharma:

The word Dharma related to Hindu religion means religious and moral laws guiding the code of conduct of human being. In other words Dharma will help to understand and improve the inner self i.e. Atma within one. In ancient India the Hindus borrowed both the word and meaning of Dharma from the Santals. N. Hembram in his epoch-making book *Austric Civilization of India* (2005) has justified the impact of Santal religion on Hindu in the following lines: "The word dharma and its rituals were in vogue with the Austric people from the very beginning of their civilization and the earliest could be recorded as back as 5000 B.C to 3500 B.C." (Hemram, 2005 p.70) In Santal language (one of the Austric languages) Dharam originated from the word 'Dhat (meaning self-realization) and 'Orom'(meaning to understand) means self-realization to maintain a

discipline in society. The Aryans, who brought the Hindu religion in India “had no concept of religion when they came here and hence they had no word for it.” (Hemram, 2005, p.70) The concept of religion and religious practices of tribes were inherited by the Hindus from Santals. For learning the concept of religion, the Hindus are greatly indebted to Santals.

Karma is dharma

Hindu philosophy's one of the prime doctrines is 'Karma is Dharma'. In Bhagavad Gita, the Hindu Scripture, we see Lord Krishna convinces Arjuna to perform his duty as a warrior in the warfront against his kith and kin by advising Him that if one does Karma honestly, it will be treated as Dharma. God will be with him. This concept of Karma is Dharma has come to Hindu people from the Austric people like Santals. The primitive Indo-Aryan people did not develop the idea of doing good work and getting rewarded later by God. In his book “kirata-jana-Kirti: the Indo-Mongoloids, Their Contribution to the History and Culture of India” the great educationist and litterateur, Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee has said:

“The moral basis of the law of Karma was not yet developed among the primitive Indo-Aryan when they came to India. But in India, contact and comingling with the Dravidians and the Austrics and then with the Indo-Mongoloids brought in a new conception – a synthesis, in this matter, in the spiritual perception of the descendents of the Aryans pure and mixed; and the result was the doctrine of 'Karma' which appears to have become accepted among most classes of Indians during the first half of the first millennium B.C.” Chatterjee, 2015, p. 62)

But the Adivasis of India has a strong faith both in Karma and Dharma. For example the Adivasi like Santals have been celebrating a religious festival, Karam, to worship Karam gausain for the prosperity and material gain through hard work. In the book, The Folklore of Santal Parganas by C. H. Bompas, the folktale, Karmu and Dharmu conveys the simple philosophy of Santal life. Here two brothers Karmu, a farmer and Dharmu, a trader were the first to celebrate the festival. But due to Dharmu's dishonesty Karam God left him. Dharmu after all his suffering and leading a disciplined life owns the blessings of Karam Gausain. Dharmu's hard labour, exhaustion and dedication brought Karam Gusian to his home like before. So the belief in Karma to achieve Dharma is reflected both in Santal as well as Hindu philosophy.

Worshipping of Natural Object:

Love and respect for nature and natural objects in tribal people's life is an unique perspective of their life. Since the unknown time the Santal people including all other tribes in Austric group have been worshipping Nature as their controller and guardian

being. The Aryans didn't know the concept of worshipping natural forces. The Santals have a great devotion for Marang Buru worshipped in the form of Sun, Fire, Earth and trees with a realization that the whole world is created and shaped by the supreme power –Sun and Earth. Sun God is addressed as Barma and the devotees of Barma is called Barmhaun (Hemram, 2005, p.76).('haun' meaning children in Santali language) during the festival of Mag-Moreh. So "it is their proud privilege to address themselves as Barmahauns to the Aryans during the time they are praying to Lord Barma." (Hemram, p.76). From their neighbours the Aryans learnt ways of worshipping nature and very soon the Barmahauns become the Brahmins (supreme class in Hindu religion) in Vedic period. Many Sun-temples are established in Hindu culture like – Konark Sun temple in Odisha, Mdhera, Gujrat etc to worship Sun. Besides that the Hindus do Surya-Pranaam during sun rise, Makar Sankranti, Chat Puja, Ratha Saptami and Samba Dasami many other rituals in India to worship Sun God and to get His blessings. As the Sun –god is a symbol of purity for both the Santals and the Hindus, they perform many rituals during sunrise. The Hindus do Ganga puja and offer homage to Earth (called 'dhartipuri' by Santals) by doing 'homeyagna'(fire-worship) to please the departed spirit too like Santals.

Hindu Mantras:

In Hindu religion the use of the mantra, Om Swaha in any rituals, pujas or in any other customs is very sacred and is often used as a way of offering to God. Even any Mantra could not be uttered without pronouncing Om. This word Om did not belong to Hindu religion but to Santals and in Santal religion Om is recognized as "supreme power". The sacred word Om is used by 'spiritual personalities' in the community to evoke the Supreme, the Marang- Buru and to save the person in need. Therefore" Om Swaha in Santali means let the supreme power Om drive away all the evils; and the human beings be free from all the sickness and worldly miseries of life "(Hembram, 2005, p. 80). Om is an Austric word and was used by them long before the Vedic era starts. The Hindus were indebted to the Santals for mantra Om which belong to the Austric culture and has been highlighted and enlightened later through the Hindu people.

Marriage Rituals:

People of Eastern India coming in close contact with the Austrians adopted, and assimilated their culture and rituals in their lives and fashioned their own way of living. Putting Sindoor (vermilion) on forehead among tribes and non-tribes of Eastern India is very common. The Dravidian now living in Telengana, Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu, Kerala and Karnataka refrained themselves from using vermilion during marriage. N Hembram in his book said that the Hindus did not apply vermilion when they first came

to India, as this ritual was unknown to them. Living with the Austric people influenced their marriage ceremonies, and the customs related to solemnize it. According to him:

“However in Vedas there is no mention of use of vermilion (Sindoor) amongst married woman in Vedic period. Use of vermilion, therefore is not considered as a Vedic ritual. But the married women of Bihar, Bengal and Orissa and also Hindu women of other states who are living within the zone of influence of the Austric people are using vermilion after marriage” (Hembram, 2005, p. 85).

Now both the Santals and the Hindus treat this ritual very sensitive and solemn in their life.

Death customs:

The Indo-European people and their descendents in this world follow the ritual of burying the dead in the graveyard instead of burning them after death. Only the Aryan people are found to follow the custom of burying the dead body like the Austric people of India. The Aryans after coming to India as nomadic saw the existence of both burying and burning. The liberal rules and rituals of the neighbours of this land attracted them. The influence of the enriched Santal culture including other tribes was so huge on them that the Aryans changed their system. N Hembram has justified the claim in the following lines:

“...the burial system of the Aryans got influenced at a rapid pace and ultimately the Aryans changed their system from burial to burning as per the tribals. Therefore, all the social rites performed by the Vedic people for their deads were by and large nothing but the same as that was followed by the Tribals at that times. (Hembram, 2005, p.83)

Like any other race the Aryans had also the practice of giving offerings in memory of the dead and deceased which has been mentioned many times as *choru* in Vedas. But in India the same ritual is followed by the Santals as *pindidan*. Due to the impact of Santals, the Hindus borrowed the new word, and *choru* became gradually obsolete. The Hindus and the Santals followed the same ritual of satisfying the spirit of dead by the name of *pindidaan*.

Except the sphere of rituals, custom and religion of Santals make their presence felt in social, political and administrative locale of Hindu which gave birth to a modern advanced country, India. The conversation with a Santal community man, Mr. Bablu Kr. Murmu in Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal helped to get some examples justifying Santals as an advanced community. According to him the evil practice of Hindu society, Sati was prohibited in Hindu society only in the Nineteenth Century after the great Indian social reformer, Raja Rammohan Roy's protest against it to British East India company. Till 1829 the Sati system i.e. the burning of widow after her husband's death

was a wound in Hindu society, but the Santals being very progressive and liberal had been persisting the custom of remarriage of widow since the beginning. (Personal communication with Bablu Murmu, a Santal community man, December 20, 2023)

Like Raja Rammohan Roy, another reformer of India in Nineteenth century, was Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar who lived a part of his life amidst the progressive people like the Santals by being attracted to their simple honest lifestyle and accomplished in support of widow re- marriage. He also objected against the social injustices meted out to women of Eastern India to the Council of British East India. The progressive and enlightened custom and life style of Santal community had a great impact on the pioneers of Indian Renaissance as well as on Hindus of East India.

Thus, the primary tenets of advanced Indian culture are still prevalent in the Santal community which indicates their supremacy from the Indus valley civilization till now. Lack of literary and historical sources portrays the Santals as the “uncivilized” and “devoid of any cultural qualities” and the Vedic sources confirm in their writing that the great Hindu religion suddenly sprung up and flourished by the Aryans ‘from the Vedic period onward’. Santals had a lot of influence on Hindu people since they started living together like neighbours in Pre-Vedic period. The close contact between them has been recognized from the above mentioned sources. The great Indian epics- Ramayana and Mahabharata also suggest the assimilation of two different cultures. In this context, we may quote the lines from Vidyarthi and Rai’s book *The Tribal Culture of India*: “Tribal people of India have been in almost continuous contact with Hindus since the days of Ramayana and Mahabharata, for in them there are references to tribal communities who are referred as Jana.” (Vidyarthi & Rai, 1977, p. 26) . Recently, we are also witnessing the evidence of the impact of Hindu religion on the new generation of Santal community. Presently, they are observing the popular Hindu festivals like Kartick Puja, Saraswati Puja etc. though they don’t believe idol worshipping.

Sontheimer’s Concept of Vana (Forest) and Kestra (well-settled place)

Sontheimer is an expert in contemporary literature in Marathi, Hinduism and folk religion of Maharashtra. What has come to be known as Hinduism, through multitudes of permutations and incorporations, need to be focused on a line of thinking i.e. inter-religious dynamics between Tribal, here contextually Santal religion and Hindu religions. It’s the comprehension that the inter-dynamics between “Hinduism” and “tribal cultures” have to be brought to the discussion.

Sontheimer’s discussion in *The Vana and Kestra* on the tribal Vana background of some famous cults of Brahmanical ideology- dominated ksetras is still regarded as a milestone in the making of a new Indology that is the South Asian studies. Vana and Ksetra, the two domains, where the former is wilderness in the forest and the later is

well-settled space of hierarchically structured humans in urban areas (Sontheimer, 1994, p.121). They are apparently binary poles of Indian culture. But Sontheimer delving deep into the inter-religion dynamics between Hindu and Tribal religious traditions, identifies that Brahmanic hegemony is the peak of India's cultural development but the various layers of tribal traditions and folklore as the foundation of India's genuine "Great Tradition" i.e. the Hinduism. The development of the ksetra deities passed through several phases. Sontheimer brings into discussion a large number of important Vana birthplaces of Ksetra deities, ranging from Krishna's origin in the Govardhan mountains to Biroba's in the forest of Maharashtra. The deities have often two shrines, one in the forest (Vana) and one in the ksetra. As he opines that the continuous interactions between the vana (tribal habitat in forest) and ksetra (well settled upper class) have two significant reasons. First, since ancient times, much of Hinduism had its roots in the space of the Vana and its tribes. And second, the ambiguity of the Vana as a place of chaos and spirits and as a source of creation and renewal of life inspires the inhabitants of the ksetra and attracts saints.

What featured most in Hinduism from tribal cultures was not a set of codified beliefs or faiths. Rather the geographical locations in which these two cultures had been residing.

Thus, for Sontheimer and some other scholars, Hinduism is a confluence of the Vana and Kshetra, with varied incorporations between each other. This scale is reflected in the incorporation of tribal deities, rituals myths within the spaces of Hinduism, such as the worship of Jagannath, who was earlier worshipped by the Shabar tribe or the story of Chenchu Lakshmi of Andhra Pradesh.

S L Kalia found in Jaunsar-Bawar (now a part of Uttarakhand) in Uttar Pradesh and in the Bastar region (now in Chhattrishgarh) of Madhya Pradesh traces of culture of tribalization of caste Hindus who settled down for the time being in the tribal regions, where they were fast adopting tribal customs, rituals, and culture (Chakraborty, 1992, p.132). This tribalization is conceptualized by S L Kalia in counterpoint of Sanskritization (Srinivas, 1977, p.7). This phenomenon is found in various regional and supra-regional cults, where the tribal elements of the culture within the fold of Brahmanical Hinduism are still in practice. An example of such inter-dynamics of tribal and Hindu religions have already been set as the cult of Jagannath in Odisha.

Robert Redfield's Little Tradition and Great Tradition

A similar feature came from Robert Redfield, an American anthropologist and ethnolinguist who tried to put forward the dynamics of Indian civilization as an interaction between the Great Tradition of the Indian civilization, that's the Sanskritic

traditions, and the Little Traditions, which were constituted of various regional and local traditions. “Great tradition and little tradition have long affected each other and continue to do so” (Redfield, 1958, p.71). Both are thought of as two currents of thought and action, distinguishable, “yet ever flowing into and out of each other”. He adds-

“Great epics in any civilization have their origins in tale-telling by many people and returned again to them for incorporation into local cultures. The ethic of the Old Testament arose out of tribal peoples and returned to peasant communities after they had been the subject of thought by philosophers and theologians” (Redfield, 1958, p.72).

He cites examples of Ramayana and Quran as they arose out of an incorporation of great traditional culture and little traditional cultures. The Great Tradition that is Hindu Sanskritized tradition built on modification, absorption, and universalization of little traditions that is the local and first people's i.e. the tribals' culture, and in gradual process, both the Great and Little traditions influenced each other. Kunal Chakrabarti defines on the basis of his analysis of the Puranic literature, that the Puranic religious syncreticism (amalgamation) was a necessity for the Brahmanas (Elite class Hindus) at a critical juncture when the socio-cultural picture wasn't favourable to them. Thus many regional and tribal cults became assimilated into Hinduism.

Conclusion:

The above discussion gives us logical evidence that many tribes including the Santals belonging to Austric Civilization are not 'a nomadic nor an uncultured nor an uncivilized race' as depicted in our history of today. Before the arrival of Aryans who developed and expanded Hindu religion in India, the Austric civilization was at the peak and can be delineated as "the most advanced civilization the world had before the Christian era". The tribals are the first peoples or the first nations peoples, the natives of the land. So are the Santals, the son of soils and their culture is essentially the mother culture in India establishing the real foundation of enriched and improved civilization. When the Aryans came and recognized the supremacy of Tribal culture they open-heartedly embraced them. The proximity and intimacy of both the homogenous races caused the acculturation and amalgamation of the enriched, refined and sophisticated country like India. Thus, the discussion in a deconstructive way brings in a conclusive evidence that the Santal and the Hindu culture in respect of worshipping or deities or beliefs, share various inter-religious dynamics.

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