

Santals at the crossroads of tradition and contemporaneity

Kumkum Bhattacharya, Professor, Department of Social Work, Visva-Bharati

I

Here I shall delve into a couple of major questions in connection with a community a) confronting modernity and the subsequent conflict with modernity and b) what the ground realities are at this point of time. The frame of reference is the Santal community with an added focus on the youth and the educated among this community. Just to briefly fill in some quick information about the Santals and their culture let me say a few words. Santals are members of a tribe that in the context of India has the privilege of positive discrimination and affirmative action to access which they need to have the necessary identity papers issued by government agencies. The fact that a large section may not possess these papers is largely absent from academic discourse or consideration. When, in academic discourse, tribes are discussed, it is assumed that they are naturally recognized constitutionally while the reality as mentioned is that a very large part of the tribes in our country do not have the necessary papers to prove their ethnicity and thereby denied the opportunities earmarked for them.

The Santals are spread over a large part of the eastern part of India displaying more or less homogeneity in terms of language and other markers of culture and society, but it is not common for Santals of any one area to interact with Santals far away from them. Santals are confined to their region; this can be ascertained through charting affinal and marital kinship links in terms of distance and interaction. This too is not always borne in mind – there are regional links that forge a kind of compositeness and the Santals take the dominant regional culture as the benchmark of comparison and also the yardstick by which they form ideas about themselves. Their ideas of themselves differentially vary from one region to another. Santals are listed under Scheduled Tribe in most of eastern India except in the states of the north-east, primarily Assam, where they are still seen as migrant population brought almost 200 years ago for the plantations. I have no idea what their identity will be if any of them decide to shift out of their present location to a place that recognizes their constitutional status.

Yes, the pictures that we have of ourselves, of others and of ourselves in the context of others are forged out of the interplay and interweaving of multiple factors of demography, level and pace of participation in the regional plurality, individual aspirations, quality of community life and the social/cultural distance of the community from the ‘centre’ or mainstream.

It becomes evident, that the Santals are variously and differentially placed in their experiences of becoming modern and these can be variously interpreted on the basis of the disciplinary slant – anthropology, social work or psychology.

II The anthropological perspective:

Santals as a community have been inhabiting spaces that are contiguous with the spaces occupied by the dominant communities of the Hindus and the Muslims in West Bengal for millennia. It is natural for the communities to form ideas and notions about each other, some of which are based on direct experiences with each other while some are indirect while many others may be inferences drawn from hearsay. The latter could be called as pre-conceived notions. Ideas and

notions of each other are generally accompanied by evaluation, comparison, ordering on hierarchic scales and understanding of power-play among themselves. Santals in such plural situations are bilingual, have economic interaction with the other communities, use the same facilities for health and education but rarely participate in the social and cultural spheres of any other community. However, in very subtle ways the Santals are absorbed in the rural Hindu social structure or hierarchy albeit towards the lower strata. The Santals also generally do not resist this absorption; reporting at times, their religious affiliation as Hindu during census enquiry; worshipping goddess Kali and Saraswati and in some places, Manasa; enthusiastically going from one Durga Puja *pandal* to another and all other Hindu gatherings like fairs and pilgrimage centres. In spite of these the relationship and interaction of the Santals with the other communities is unequal and loaded against the Santals.

The Santals are no longer able to ignore this negative bias – the pressure of population density leading to the steady decrease in the niches usually occupied by the Santals; the increased availability of opportunities of education and livelihood; the processes of comparison of one community with another that leads to the process of self-examination and re-arranging one's life-goals; the political drive to include even the smallest section within the 'idea of nation and nation-building'; and the awareness of the new social narratives being created by sections of the Santals themselves. It is clear that change is continuous and there would be individuals, families, village communities, regions that due to a variety of reasons, who seem to be participating in the change. However, history tells us also of incidences of mass movements that gave the entire community irrespective of their location, an urge to bring about or adopt newer responses and attitudes to their circumstances.

The Kherwar movement or the Safa-Hor movement starting during the 1870s that continued for a long time in small pockets till India's independence was one such movement that had a tendency towards incipient Sanskritization. During this movement, Santals gave up the rearing of pigs and poultry; consuming beef, pork and other meats; or in other words becoming Hinduized. During the Santal Rebellion or Hul in 1855, religious symbols of Santal belief and notions of 'purity' borrowed from upper Hindu order were used and Sidhu and Kanu, the two brothers who gave leadership to the Hul are reported to have had a dream (a religious experience in most faiths start from a dream); undertook various 'purity' or 'cleansing' rituals in order to fulfill the presages of the dream and also adopted a life of discipline. These are rituals of the Hindu order; this also shows the awareness of the Santals about their Hindu neighbours as well as their natural affinity with them over their Muslim neighbours with whom too they have economic transactions. The Hindu umbrella is large or inclusive enough to provide a place to a variety of communities albeit not advantageously to them; likewise and as mentioned earlier, the Santals too are absorbed in the Hindu order. Obviously, on a lighter note, the hierarchic order helps in accommodating a variety of people.

History tells us that people en masse do rise to the occasions of severe deprivation and during moments of crisis for which the means are suggested by the environment or ambience to which they belong – they call forth their tradition; their self-pride; their myths and legends as well as their skills in order to drastically change the course of their hitherto lives; in a broader sense, a 'nativistic' movement. If in the process they borrow from their neighbours rituals, practices and beliefs, it only iterates that they are able to negotiate issues outside of their localized tradition. This itself is a kind of modernity – exercising their 'agency' in bringing about change. It was reported with appropriate wonder in the British press how more than 30,000

people armed with bows and arrows and burning torches gave the British army a fight not to be looked down upon even if finally lost by the Santals. However, it was this that permanently changed the administrative nature of the Santal Parganas from where the movement started and the British had to address some of the issues raised by the Santals during the rebellion. Thus change did come.

III The traditional narrative:

It has been widely recognized that in every community the young are the ones who are most responsive to social stimuli and willing to try new things. Psychology tells us of their naturally 'rebellious' nature and rejection of authority and these stances make the youth open to change. They find the unknown attractive and want to conform to what they see as models or their peer group opting to do around them.

In describing the growing up of a Santal, the developing years till the end of adolescence can be divided into three stages – the first five years of childhood are spent in the environs of the village around the home. They play various games, hunt small animals like frogs, rats, snakes, birds, fish while casually looking after their younger siblings. From the age of 6 onwards, boys and girls accompanying an older person are engaged in tending cattle during which time they hunt small animals that are roasted on small fires. This is a most enjoyable activity for both boys and girls giving them a sense of freedom. Santal parents often do not seek explanations of why their children are late in returning home or in enquiring if they ate anything; this is in some contrast with neighbouring communities who exercise more control over their children especially girls. The small girls are also expected to help their mothers in household duties; they also have the freedom to go to the forests with other women to collect natural fuel in the form of dry branches, leaves, cow dung etc. It is from the older women that young girls learn the songs sung on different occasions and the stories that enrich Santal culture. They continue to go to the forests for fuel when they grow up when they can go with their compeers taking other younger girls with them – these are the economic activities in household contexts. Boys and girls or men and women do not go to the forests together for collecting fuel; men may go separately for hunting or gathering of medicinal plants; men do not generally collect dried leaves and branches for the home kitchens. Boys are encouraged to engage in economic activities at ages when many of the mainstream boys are being supported through school and preparing themselves for higher education.

The first romances spring up between boys and girls that are continued during days of festivity when there is relative freedom from adult censure or notice. Boys of 14-15 are inducted into the community rituals of worship in which girls do not play much role. Soon after, the boys and girls move into the stage when they are interested in starting their own families or at least finding their life partners. This is the traditional life and one which moves the young to take on community responsibilities and roles whereas their age peers in other communities are still 'growing up'. The transition from one stage to another is in a way telescoped.

IV The contemporary discourse:

The present contemporary times are times of individual change; of individuals equipping themselves for adjusting to change that has its locus in the outside forces; the forces of development; of nation building; of politics; of growth of cities and urban services; the spread of

education and creation of job opportunities through industrialization and significantly, the changes in the primary sector or agriculture. All these require change in mind-set, in attitudes and repertory of behavior. For the Santals, this coming of age does not have a long history as some of the other communities who because of their dominance and other characteristics were used to confronting the larger issues outside of their particular traditions.

Apart from the fact of the Santals possessing an oral tradition; the fact of their homogeneity reinforced by common language and cultural attributes on one hand and on the other common life experiences of practising a subsistence level economy, makes a stronger case for tradition to be perpetuated across generations. Modernity is by its nature, for the Santals, an almost opposite pole and adopting one is seen to be at the cost of the other. Thus becoming tangibly modern while making an effort to remain traditional; is an-yet-to-be-mastered skill for the Santals. When there is a written tradition, one can go back to it or preserve it by other means or even resort to abstractions and create a philosophical discourse around it. But, when there is only an oral tradition, the 'discourse' is expressed in practice and deviation from it means a social-cultural loss.

When the individual's pace of change when traversing modernity is not in sync with that of the community there is bound to be a sense of alienation and discomfort – alienation from what is perceived as tradition and the discomfort that the bulwark of support is yet to be gained from modernity. In the case of the Santals the period of youth gets stretched while freedom gets curtailed; goals seem unattainable, and unrealized needs arouse tension and disequilibrium.

Observing the Santals employed in large industries as they are in Jamshepur in Jharkhand, Martin Orans (1965) has shown us the effects of push and pull of modernity and tradition in the shaping of responses. Even when parents seem to retain some of the community identity markers, their children are divested of them – they may not know the language; are not aware of their mythologies or interested in their traditions. However, they are forced to carry their community identity because of being a scheduled tribe. They face double unacceptability - from the mainstream as well as from their community. It is during the period of youth that there is a stronger urge to redefine one's identity over and again and to reflect and resolve some of the cultural issues.

Therefore for a Santal to pursue the ways of the mainstream life and livelihood means making a choice between 'natural'/traditional freedom and the relative 'bondage' to distant life goals that are viewed as somewhat 'alien' by his/her community members and even family strongly echoed by the person.