



RELIGIOUS LIFE OF THE SATARS OF EASTERN NEPAL

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ABSTRACT

Satar, also known as Santhal are the terai people of Nepal. They mainly live in eastern Terai. They have different kind of cultural identities. They perform only three kinds of rites in their life- birth, marriage and death sacraments. They make unique types of house and perform different kinds of rituals. They have their own kind of social organizations that manage for all necessities. Majhihadam manages for the festivals and other types of rituals. In the same way, Ojha is there to fulfill the needs, related on health. They have their own kind of culture and traditions. They have different kinds of cultural products both tangible and intangible. The article is prepared to highlight the religious life of the satars of eastern Nepal especially their religion, festivals and religious beliefs. The article is based on field study and secondary sources.

KEYWORDS : Santhal, religion, Majhihadam, Ojha religious festivals

1. INTRODUCTION

Among the one hundred twenty six cultural groups of people of Nepal, Satar is a culture group living in the low land of Nepal known as Terai. Their traditional residences are found in eastern Terai of Nepal. According to CBS data of 2011CE their total population is only 51735. Out of this only 1731 reside in urban area whereas rest of others resides in rural areas. More than 97 percent of Satar people reside in eastern Nepal. The Satars of Nepal are believed to be the same people as the Santhals of India. In India They are found in different states of India, Bangladesh and Bhutan also. They are categorized into the backward cultural groups like Kol and Bhil in India (Pant, 2041: 11) and they are included in Dravidian group of people like Uraun, Hon, Munda and Khariya (Krishna and Balram, 1961: 52). We do not have any concrete evidence to know their origin and migration to this region. Different kinds of legends are popular concerning their origin. According to a view, Satars got the name Santhal from a place named Soant, a village of west Bengal. In the process of migration they reached at Soant and when they again left Soant and migrated to the new place they got the name santhal, to address people coming from Soant (Dalton, 1978: 210). In the same way at the last decade of sixteenth century, they were seen in residing in Samanta Bhumi and the people residing there were called Soontar. Sutherland had given them the name Soontar at first and later addressed as Santhal and Satar (Dalton, 1978: 386).

2. RELIGION AND WORSHIP

Traditionally, **Satar religion** was characterized by a belief in a pantheon of supernatural beings as they had more than hundred spirit deities. But now days they think that they are pure Hindus. The Santal pantheon includes mostly spirit deities. If to study the nature of their different gods they represent the nature worship groups. Some scholars have described the religion of *Santhal* community to be animism. But if we study the religious activities of this community their claim to be a Hindu seems to be correct. They are image worshippers and they are rich in their customs and traditions. *Jaheryera* is the main god, which is worshipped to be prevented from its bad effect. It is known the protector of sorrow, sickness, and divine disaster. This *Puja* is done outside the village. In reality, it is worshipped in the month of *Magh*. *Gosaiyera* is another god of Satar community, which is worshipped as *Gram Devata*. *Gosaiyera* is worshipped once in a year in *Majhihadam* *Than*. It is a carnivorous god and cocks and pigeons are massacred in his name. As a common festival and worship, people of the village collect necessary goods and cashes from the villagers from the side of organization. Their willing of this worship is also common. This worship is done for collective peace, prosperity, and

happiness of the villagers. They hope to become free from different kind of diseases from this *Puja*. They believe that their crops and clothes also remain healthy and good from each house of the village.

Nagi Puja is also a kind of common *Puja* which is organized at the time of harvesting newly ripen grains. *Jaheryera*, *Gosaiyera* and *Majhihadam* are worshipped with the offering of newly harvested grain in this occasion (Panta: 2041: 35). Food grains and animals are collected from the villagers to organize *Nagi Puja* in *Santhal* community. After that, the collected foods and other materials are distributed equally to the villagers after completing this *Puja*. Such food grains are offered to *Pinchubudhi* and *Pinchuhadam* also as their ancestors. As their family gods and goddesses, these *Budha* and *Budhi* are offered the food each day, which is cooked at their house. However, they do not have different occasions to worship these gods and goddesses.

Isher Chatepate is their ancestor or the creator of *Santhal* people, according to a legend. However, there are not any occasions to worship him. According to a legend popular in *Santhal* people, *Isher Chatapate* was a son of *Chandra* and *Surya*. Therefore, he is worshipped in the form of the sun and the moon. Both the sun and the moon are saluted after taking a bath each day. They are remembered and the essence is burnt in their name. They are not offered or massacred animals. *Marang Bru*, *Mode*, *Buru*, *Godipyra* and *Rangarujho* are other gods, which are worshipped in *Santhal* society. Among them, *Morang Bru* is a single god, which is worshipped with the other. Like *Ganesha* of Hinduism, *Morang Bru* is worshipped in each month of the year. The numbers of gods and goddesses that the *Satar* people worship are different locations in number. They are said seven in number but their pairs are not worshipped. Most of their gods are male. The gods are different in different family also. In some occasions, they worship other Hindu goddesses and gods also. In present day, some *Satars* have adopted the religion of Christianity.

3. RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

Santhal people celebrate different kind of feasts and festivals in a year. They are farmer and nature worshippers. Therefore, most of their festivals are related with agriculture and nature. Among others, *Soraye* is a kind of famous festival in *Santhal* community. It is *Kalipuja* and *Gaipuja*, which is celebrated for the long time. In traditional way, *Soraye* begins from the *Tyohar* of *Kartik* and ends at *Makar Samkrinti* festival of *Magh*. However, it is harder to manage such festivals for long for three months. Therefore, now a day it is celebrated only for some days or a week. *Soraye* festival begins from the house of *Majhihadam* and reaches in each villages and Toles. This

festival is for singing, dancing, eating, and enjoying. Therefore, they enjoy with liquor or alcohol and other kind of food in this occasion. Meat and other kind of delicious foods are also eaten. The youths of the village remain busy with singing and dancing activities.

Sakrat is another festival of Santhal society that was used to be celebrated in occasion of Fagu Purnima up to some years ago. However, it is not compulsory to celebrate it on occasion of Phagu Purnima. It is celebrated in a suitable date, which is fixed by Majhi Hadam. In such a situation, Phagu Purnima is also celebrated. Therefore, the numbers of their festivals are increased. Sakrat is a festival of for worshipping Bandevi. According to their old tradition after worshipping Bandevi, they organize a function of hunting in the forest. In the case of not getting the chance to hunt in the forest, they need to kill the animal from the riverside. It is their old tradition, which shows their cultural relation with the forest. They use arrow and bow and walk in a big group to hunt the animals. Sakrat is a group festival in which a group of village people participates to celebrate this festival. Role of Majhi Hadam is also important to celebrate village festivals like Sakrat. Majhi Hadam fixes the date of this festival. In the same way, all the villagers participate for this function. The animal killed from the forest is eaten in collective way.

Baha is another festival that is celebrated after the flowering of plants in the forest. Flowering plants is the symbol of coming spring season. As Santhal, people reside at the side of forest and hunt the animal in traditional way. Spring symbolizes the abundant of wild animals of hunts in the forest. In the same way, it symbolizes the ending of long cold and draught season and arrival of warm spring season. The flower of Saal is very much important for Santhal people in this occasion. New husking plate, mob and a bangle of iron is also used as worship goods. Different kind of gods and goddesses are kept in a Gosaiera and they are worshipped commonly in this occasion. In the beginning, a person penetrates as a god and starts to move the body as trembling. Only a person of priest group can perform this duty. He is responsible to order the necessary goods for this function. He becomes capable to tell the future. The villagers become ready to manage everything that is necessary and that is asked by the priest. Most of Santhal people think that in the case of not fulfilling the promise that is made in front of the god is very dangerous. They think that the person can also die in such a situation.

Dasahara and *Ero* are other festivals that are celebrated by Santhal people per year. *Dasahara* is *Dashain* and it is believed that this festival is borrowed from other communities. Therefore, they do not organize different functions for this festival. They simply buy the new clothes and eat tasty and delicious foods. They manage the food and other necessities for this Parva from the long time. In occasion of feasts and festivals, they eat, drink and enjoy a lot. They do not prefer to go in work in occasion Parvas. They take loan for feast and festivals in the case of being unable to collect food and expenses to celebrate such festivals. They worship in *Gurusthana* in *Dashain*. They do *Guru Puja* in *Dashain* and they chant mantras then. Success and unsuccessful event of chanting mantras is also calculated in this occasion. Teaching and learning of mantras are also done. In the case of errors in learning, corrections in mantras are also done. In this way, *Dashain* is an occasion of teaching and learning of Mantras.

Like *Dashain*, *Tihar* is also celebrated with eating, drinking, and enjoying in Santhal community. They do not have the system of doing worship of Laxmi, Gobardhana and Bhai Puja in this community. Simply they oil the horns of their cattles and enjoy by eating meat and delicious food. Now a day, they have started to celebrate *Tihar* festival with more management from the influence of other people. They have started to

worship their cattle and lit the lamp in this occasion. Their agricultural tools are also worshipped in *Tihar*.

Ero is another kind of festival that is celebrated in Ashadh. It is a kind of Bali worship. This festival is organized to manage a puja for the gods and goddesses of rain and grain. A couple of pigeons are massacred in Majhi Hadam. It is a collective festival and celebrated in collective way. They manage necessary goods of worship from the villagers collectively. They have their own kind of Kuldevata, which are worshipped. Simdadi, Khewtkharai and Yamyung are some Kul Devatas of Satar people. They offer newly harvested grain to their Kuldevata per year. They have different kind of Kuldevatas in different groups.

In short, we can say that Santhals have their own traditional festivals, which are celebrated per year in their society. Sorae Sakrat, Buhe and *Ero* are their own traditional festivals. Among them Soharai is celebrated for six days in Magh. These six days are divided into the day of cleaning, eating, tying cattle, sharing happiness, fishing and hunting. Kali, Ram, Mahadev and the cows are worshipped at that day. Santhal people have great influence of Hinduism. Therefore, they say that they are Hindus. They worship both kinds of gods like Hindu and their cultural origin. Their festivals are also mixed. Hence, some of Santhals are the followers of Christianity. However, they have not left their traditional festivals. Both Hindu and Christian Santhals have continued to celebrate Soharai feast. This is known as a festival of cattle.

Baha, *Ero*, *Palamela* and *Dasahara* are other festivals of Santhal community. Most of their festivals are common and they are celebrated after worshipped in Majhihadam Than. Among others, Patamala is celebrated at the end of Chaitra and beginning of Baisakh. In short, it is a New Year festival, which is celebrated for three days. A Than of Mahadeva is made to celebrate Patamala festival in Santhal villages. Plain Shivalinga is made there from the mud. Shiva's concert is also established at its both sides. In this concern, there remains Parvati in one side and his helper in the other side. After worshipping it the *Than* is broken again.

4. RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

As in other Nepalese society Satar people have also different kinds of beliefs on the origin of gods, birth, death, diseases, and other physical and non-physical objects. Their culture has given the possible way to become secure and earn something for livelihood. Among them *Ojha* is their cultural post which helps this society to remain healthy. He has several functions. General believe about *Ojha* in Satar society is that he can drive away the malevolent deities, can divine the causes of disease and can expel pain from the body. This means that *Ojha* is considered as a doctor in Santhal community. According to their traditional belief, *Ojha* is responsible to do treatment for the sick people. Therefore, they think that *Ojha* should go to the houses of sick person and should help them continuously. He should not take cash and other remunerations for his services. *Ojha* is a learnt person, who knows Mantras. They are taught in different ways. In the one process, a Santhal youth can become *Ojha* from the dream that he sees at night. In the same way, they believe that the god and goddesses kidnap them, keep them for many days secretly with them and teach the knowledge of *Ojha*. Then, he is left again in his places. The last process of becoming an *Ojha* in Santhal community is to get Mantra by Guru. At the time of *Dashain*, interested youths are taught Mantras by an old *Ojha* and the successful learner becomes *Ojha* for this society.

Santhal *Ojha* identifies the diseases and its reason through Mantra, symptom of the sick person, counting the rice grains and putting mustard oil in Saal leaves. Lines of the Saal

leaves and the spots on it also help to identify the reasons of diseases. Guru Mantras help to identify such diseases to their Ojha. It helps to control the diseases also. Therefore, diagnose and treatment both is done from Guru Mantras. Ojha gives herbs also to treat the sick person. Herbs are collected by Ojha and it is given to the sick person. Dysentery, diarrhea, headache, infection of the worm, common cold, cough and fractures are treated by Ojha using different kind herbs. Different kinds of gods and goddesses are the main reasons for different kind of diseases. Ghosts and unseen spirits are believed as other reasons of sickness in their view. Badabanga, Kalis, Bhoot, Preetta, Mashan and other different kind of powers are responsible for different diseases in their view.

Satars do not beg for food. It is their traditional custom. They believe on work. A group of people does not eat nuts and the women of other groups do not drink milk given by the people of this society. They can do the marriage function even after the birth of their grandson. In the same way they can do their death sacraments up to after many years of the death event. Satar is a female dominated society. However, the females are not allowed to participate in hunting and assembling for justice. They do not prefer to quarrel each other and with other groups as they settle their disputes by themselves. They have a system of buying bed for a person in the occasion of its birth. At last, their essentials are buried with the dead body in the death case. They use lots of alcohol, but they do not know how to make it. They are popular to make clothes and ornaments. Santhals have their own kind of social, cultural and political organizations. Therefore, their society is more organized and disciplined than the others. They have their own kind of rules and regulations. They are disciplined in their social values, norms, rules and regulations. To maintain the social rules and traditions they have a leader, who is called *Majhihadam*. He is elected inside from their community in each village. His character and activity is the main criteria for selection in this post. Once selecting into *Majhihadam* he can remain in this post for the long time. His character, activity and capacity are some factors, which help him to remain in the post for the long. The old *Majhihadam* passes through the responsibility to the lower generations.

A small temple of *Gramdevata* is made at the compound area of *Majhihadam's* house. It is a kind of *Gramthan*, but it is also said *Majhihadam*. All kind of worships, Pujas and festivals start from there. At first the Puja of *Gramdevata* is done then the people can get permission to worship their *Grihaddevata*. Establishment of *Majhihadam* Than or *Gramthan* at the house helps to identify his house in the village. In the case of changing *Majhihadam*, the *Than* is also transferred in a new *Majhihadam's* house. In some villages a small temple for the *Than* is made, where as simply a small compound without any temples also are found. The *than* is kept clean with cows dung, water and soil. They like to follow the tradition as the culture. The new generation wants to change it whereas the old generation wants to keep it in original form.

We can find a team of *Majhihadam* to administer the village. *Paranik*, *Jagparanik*, *Jagmajhi* and *Gudit* are other posts under *Majhihadam*. Among them, the post *Majhihadam* is the highest one. He decides most of the cases in the meeting of these peoples. Village assembly also can make decisions in important issues. The decision made by *Majhihadam* becomes final in this society.

5. CONCLUSION

As we explained in previous paragraphs Satar are the terai people of Nepal. They are found mainly in eastern Terai. They have different kind of cultural identities. They worship different gods. They have great influence of Hinduism but they worship both kinds of gods like Hindus and their cultural

origin. They have very limited number of sacraments. They perform only three kinds of rites in their life- birth, marriage and death sacraments. They make unique types of house and perform different kinds of rituals. They have their own kind of social organizations that manage for all necessities. *Majhihadam* manages for the festivals and other types of rituals. In the same way, Ojha is there to fulfill the needs, related on health. They have different kinds of cultural products both tangible and intangible. Santhals have their own traditional festivals, which are celebrated per year in their society. In this way Santhals have their own kind of culture and traditions.

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