

Socio-cultural, Educational and Medicinal Practices of Tribals



Dr. Ashis Kumar Gupta,
Prof. (Dr.) Bishnupada Nanda

Two Day International Seminar
on

**SOCIO-CULTURAL, EDUCATIONAL
&
MEDICINAL PRACTICES OF TRIBALS**

Date: 26th & 27th August

Edited by

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Organised by

SEVAYATAN SIKSHAN MAHAVIDYALAYA

(M.A in Education & Teachers' Training Institution)

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RENOVA INTERNATIONAL PUBLICATIONS

B-39, First Floor, Aruna Nagar,
Civil Lines, New Delhi-110054
Cont no-9953776001/9910465522
Email: renovapublications@gmail.com

SOCIO-CULTURAL, EDUCATIONAL & MEDICINAL PRACTICES OF TRIBALS

Year of Publication: 2022

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PRINTED IN INDIA

Published by Renova International Publications, B-39, First Floor, Aruna Nagar, Civil Lines, New Delhi-110054.
Typeset by Renova Graphics Delhi and Printed at Milan Enterprise, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, Delhi.

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Religious and Supernatural Beliefs of the Santals: A Reading of the Select Santali Folktales

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Abstract

The Santals are the indigenous tribal community chiefly living in West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha, and other neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar. The Santals have a rich cultural tradition and they have an impressive number of folktales, which were orally transmitted from one generation to another among the people in the Santal community until recorded and translated into English by the Christian missionaries in the late nineteenth century. The Santal folktales, widely divergent in themes and narrative style, are the repositories of the socio-cultural values of the Santals as the folktales describe their customs, beliefs, superstitions, and religious practices. Despite the fact that the folktales are fictional narratives, and hence pure figments of imagination, the importance of these literary texts in reflecting and embodying the social-cultural reality cannot be underestimated. The objective of this paper is to study the select folktales in Cecil Henry Bompas's Folklore of the Santal Parganas and to show how the folktales faithfully record their religious and supernatural beliefs.

Keywords: Santal Folktales, Religion, Supernatural Beliefs, Tribal Culture, Literature.

West Bengal is the age-old habitat of a number of tribes such as Lodha, Kharua, Bhumij, Birhor, Munda, Mahali, Santal, and Kora. Santals are the majority among these diverse tribal communities of West Bengal. As per the census report 2011, 5.5% of the total population of West Bengal is tribal. Among them nearly 51.8% are Santals. The statistics clearly show the strong dominance of the Santals among the tribal communities in the state of West Bengal. Although the Santals are scattered all over West Bengal, they are particularly concentrated in Paschim Medinipur, Jhargram, Bankura, Birbhum and Burdwan districts. The Santals have a rich cultural tradition and they have an impressive number of folktales, which were orally transmitted from one generation to another among the people in the Santal community until recorded and translated into English by the Christian missionaries in the late nineteenth century. The Santal folktales, widely divergent in themes and narrative style, are the repositories of the

socio-cultural values of the Santals, as the folktales describe their customs, beliefs, superstitions, and religious practices. The objective of this paper is to study the select folktales in Cecil Henry Bompas's *Folklore of the Santal Parganas* and to show how the folktales faithfully record their religious and supernatural beliefs.

A folktale, as defined by M. H. Abrahms, "is a short narrative in prose of unknown authorship which has been transmitted orally" (104). The term "folktale" is broadly used to describe any traditional, dramatic, oral narratives, usually with moralistic overtones, and which have been transmitted from one generation another among the people of a particular community. Although it is universally acknowledged that the folktales are the products of pure fantasy, and composed mainly for entertainment, the function of the folktales in recording the socio-cultural values of a particular community can never be underestimated. This is chiefly because folktales are usually found to be the most popular cultural forms in the preliterate communities. While defining the general characteristics of the folktales, M.H. Abrams remarks: "Folklore developed, and continues even now, in communities where few if any people can read or write" (104). In the absence of other literary forms, folktales become significant tools for analysing and understanding the sociopsychological realism of a particular community.

Folktales reveal the cultural values of a particular community. In the essay entitled "Folktales Reveal the Cultural Values of the Community: A SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) Analysis", Lekau Eleazar Mphasha argues:

Every folktale, from its point of view, is a lesson. It may be of a principle of law, civilized manners as they understand them or religious dogma. They give interpretations in line with everyday life. Folktales are reflections of the minds. They show aspects of culture of the society to those who show the least awareness of it. As a result, they are part and parcel of people's life. Their value cannot be taken for granted. By ignoring their value, we are ignoring the complete expression of the feelings, ideas and ambitions of the people concerned. They are pearls of wisdom handed down from generation to generation and will continue to be traditional pillars on which the community can lean. (295)

This observation highlights the importance of folktales in the preservation of the cultural values of any community. Folktales play important function in transmitting cultural values from one generation to the next and thus help people to enhance their awareness of their shared historical knowledge systems. Even though many folktales are told with the avowed objective of amusement, they have their unmistakable moral lessons, and they throw light on the social realism of any community.

Folklore of the Santal Parganas by Cecil Henry Bompas is a collection of Santal folktales. The Santal folktales are a faithful reflection of the cultural beliefs of the Santals. The Santal folktales, included in the aforementioned volume, are the reliable literary documents for an understanding and interpretation of the religious and supernatural

beliefs prevalent in the Santal community. Baffled by the mysteries of the world, Santals have taken recourse to philosophical speculations, which they believe, will help them to find solutions to the mysteries of this world through spiritual consultations. Apart from this, they perform elaborate ceremonials to propitiate their gods and goddesses, so that the malevolent powers may be shorn of their malign influences and the benevolent may protect them. The folktales entitled "How to Grow Rich" and "The Monkey Boy", for instance, describe the divine power of Chando Bonga, sometimes believed to be an alternative form of "Thakur Jiu", the Supreme God in the Santal mythology. The folktale "How to Grow Rich" narrates the story of an unfortunate woman who lost her husband when she was pregnant. Naturally, she was very unhappy and used to pray daily to Sing Chando to give her a man child in place of her husband. Due to the due course of time, the woman was blessed with a male child, obviously this was the consequence of the woman's devout prayer to the God, who retaliated her with divine blessings. In the later section of the story also there is a description of the miraculous operations of the God who instructs the pious Santals to lead a simple and humble life for peace and happiness in life. The story thus narrates how the Santals show their unflinching faith on the benevolence of the Supreme Creator who protects them from dangers and teaches the lessons of leading a pious and moralistic life on the earth. That the Santals obey the dictum of their Supreme God is also established in another folktale entitled "The Monkey Boy", which narrates the story of an unfortunate poor couple. The crux of the story is: "There was once a man who had six sons and two daughters and he died leaving his wife pregnant of a ninth child. And when the child was born it proved to be a monkey. The villagers and relations advised the mother to make away with it, but she refused saying "Chando knows why he has given me such a child, but as he has done so I will rear it" (37). Such a conviction in the essential goodness of the intention of God is the hallmark of the religious beliefs of the Santals that is faithfully narrated in the folktales.

Closely linked to the religious beliefs of the Santals is their beliefs in supernatural powers. In the Preface to *Folklore of the Santal Parganas*, Bompas remarks that the religion of the Santals is "animistic, spirits (*bongas*) are everywhere around them: the spirits of their ancestors, the spirit of the house, the spirit dwelling in the patches of primeval forest preserved in each village. Every hill tree and rock may have its spirit. These spirits are propitiated by elaborate ceremonies and sacrifices which generally terminate in dances, and the drinking of rice beer" (9). Like other tribal communities of India, the Santals believe that "evil spirits are everywhere and they always harm human beings" (Baskey 212). Beliefs in supernatural powers is so strong among the Santals that there is frequent reference to *bongas* in a large number of folktales collected in the aforementioned volume. In the folktale named "Bajun and Jhore" there is a description of elaborate funeral ceremonies, sacrificing of goats and fowls in memory of Bajun's wife and brother. Bajun smeared the floor of the house with cow dung

cooked a great basket of rice, stewed the flesh of the animals he had sacrificed, and offered it to the spirits of the dead with the dedication "My wife I offer this rice, this food, for your purification" (Bompas 14). This is done with the belief that the spirits of the dead persons can be propitiated by elaborate ceremonies and animal sacrifices. A number of folktales such as "The Pious Woman", "The Wise Daughter-in-law" refer to the practices of magic and witchcraft, which the Santals believe as a part of their belief in super-normal phenomena. Regarding magic, L. P. Vidyarthi and Binay Kumar Rai remark: "Magic is an integral part of a religion of tribal dimension. ...Untoward natural events, inadequate technical means and situations full of danger and uncertainty lead to belief in the magical practices" (244). Magic and witchcraft are thus an essential part of the belief of the Santal tribe which have been recorded in the folktales.

The Santals are the dominant tribal community in India and their culture is marked by distinctiveness in so far as their customs and rituals, religious and supernatural beliefs are concerned. The Santal folktales are invaluable literary documents for analysis and understanding of the social realism of the Santal people. The diversity and richness of the Santali folktales not only suggest the dynamic and vibrant cultural life of this tribal group but also the cultural diversity and richness of the Indian folk tradition.

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