



# Santhal Community: The Nature-Preserving Souls Amidst the Cruel Human-Destructive Forces

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**Abstract**— Human beings are considered to be the offsprings of nature but this relation is paradoxical in my point of view. Though people argue that they love nature they are filled with direst cruelty. Nature and natural resources are mostly harmed by the human agencies. So, human day to day activities are more like an anathema to the mother nature. The mass destruction of the mother nature is serving as a global problem now a days. Amidst all these destructive forces Santal Community people are doing their best to preserve the nature. They are born and brought up in the lap of nature. Nature is worshipped and celebrated by these people whom we term as marginalized communities and think they are obsolete. The paper examines the Santhal communities' nature centered worldviews, practices and folk knowledge that majorly serves as living system of conservation. In addition, the paper also argues that Santhal ecological custodianship is neither romantic nostalgia nor a static tradition but an adaptable, collective governance ethic that persists despite systemic pressure.



**Keywords**— Santhal Community, Ecological Custodianship, Indigenous Environmental Ethics, Nature-Centered Worldview, Sustainable Conservation Practices.

Human progress, celebrated in terms of industrial growth and technological advancement, has often come at the expense of ecological balance. Deforestation, mining, industrial waste, and unsustainable agricultural practices have pushed the planet toward environmental collapse. We ourselves are destroying a planet that we inherit. Modern day's activities further have aggravated the situation. Human agencies themselves have unleashed the planetary crisis both knowingly and unknowingly in several cases. If we think critically a bit, we can understand that from the morning to night whatever we do is not at all favourable for our mother nature. Many Indian writings have dawned upon the issue and both in direct and indirect ways have criticized the actions of modern human beings which have reached its apex in harming nature. Gieve Patel's poem "On Killing a Tree" inculcates the relentlessness of human beings by cutting down the trees in brutal ways and presents the issue in a satirical way. We, in the name of development, are propelling our planet towards destruction and decay. Joyjit Ghosh and Sk Tarik Ali in their essay "*Can I become a*

*tree?*": *Plant Imagination in Contemporary Indian Poetry In English* quote several lines from Ayappa Panikkar's poem "Where are the Woods, My children?" and assert, "The lines mourn for the loss of woods, the meadows, and the wild expanse of nature as mankind has destroyed everything and defamiliarized the face of the earth" (6). Human agencies take no pity in ravaging their own planet as deforestation and urbanization become their first priority. Their cruelty against the nature has reached its culmination and it is the high time when we all should be aware of it to warn people and mankind as a whole against their thoughtless activity and exploitation of nature. Human beings do owe reparation to their mother nature.

Amidst this ecological crisis, indigenous communities like the Santhals (or Santals) emerge as exemplary models of coexistence with nature. Their culture, rituals, and livelihood are interwoven with natural cycles, ensuring sustainability and respect for ecological diversity. Indigenous people in India always have a close relation to

nature and they worship natural objects and celebrates nature. Ghosh and Ali again write, “Some Adivasi societies in India during the Karam festival (a kind of harvest ceremony) worship the Karam plant as a god” (2). We are living in a capitalist era where everyday we can experience the exploitation of nature and natural resources. The industrial expansion has led to the ecological imbalance and mineral resources are in a way plundered. This not only has brought destruction to mother nature but also the destitution of indigenous inhabitants. Indigenous people are closely connected to the forests. They have a harmonious bonding with the nature and their requirements and necessities are filled regularly by the natural resources which surround them. The city-centric people still term these people as uncultured and uncivilized but probably they bear more sense than us in preserving the nature. Suklal Saren in his essay *The Role of Santal Indigenous Knowledge for Environment Conservation and Global Integration* writes, “Indigenous communities like to live peacefully in the lap of forest” (470).

The Santhals are the largest tribe in the Jharkhand and West Bengal states in terms of population and are also found in the states of Odisha, Bihar, Assam and Tripura. They form an ethnic group of Indian subcontinent (“Santal people”). Santhal cosmology does not perceive nature as an inert resource but as a living entity. Trees, rivers, hills, and animals are not merely objects of utility but sacred companions in their journey of life. Their festivals, such as Baha Parab (flower festival), are dedicated to the worship of trees and blossoms, reflecting gratitude toward seasonal renewal. Marine Carrin, in his essay *Santal indigenous knowledge, cultural heritage and the politics of representation*, writes “The Santals continue to imagine their existence as linked to the flora around them” (1457). Santhal agriculture itself is guided by ecological prudence. Instead of commercial monoculture, they often practice mixed cropping, which maintains soil fertility and reduces the risk of depletion. Their non-exploitative hunting and fishing methods emphasize balance rather than dominance. Uttaran Dutta, in his essay *Protecting Sacred-groves: Community-led Environmental Organizing by Santhals of Eastern India*, writes “...indigenous people, particularly the Santhals, considered Nature as inseparable from their identity and worldviews” (1).

Contrastingly, dominant human civilization has sought to “conquer” nature. Colonial exploitation of forests for timber, followed by post-independence industrial projects, uprooted Santhal communities and devastated their environment. Mining in Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Odisha has displaced countless Santhals, leading to deforestation, soil erosion, and pollution of rivers. Mega-dams have submerged their lands, severing their ties with

ancestral landscapes. In this context Suklal Saren again mentions Ramachandra Guha’s article in the book *Forestry in British and Post-British India* and interpolates that his article “describes the exploitation of forest for railway expansion and industrial development in the colonial era depredated indigenous forest dwellers by both Indian and European private contractors” (471). Global consumerism adds to this destruction: plastic pollution, fossil-fuel dependency, and rampant deforestation have pushed ecosystems to the brink of collapse. Unlike Santhal restraint, mainstream development rests upon extraction and commodification of every natural element.

Sacred groves, known as *Jaher Than*, are central to Santhal villages, preserved as untouched forest patches where no exploitation is permitted. These practices ensure the conservation of biodiversity and the protection of ecosystems. Carrin asserts, “each grove comprises a wide range of ecological diversity. It is forbidden to cut trees from a Jaher, seen as the abode of the village deities. Even the dead branches should not be used and the place must be protected from any polluting intrusion, such as pregnant and menstruating women” (1458). The sacred groves play a crucial role in the lives of the Santhals. These groves have an excessive medicinal value. So, the groves must be protected by any means. Generally Sacred Groves are constituted of trees and shrubs that are of rare variety. Not only the community people but also any other people from other society are not allowed to cut trees from this grove. Sacred Groves are linked to the identity of the Santhals and they perform their rituals and festivals, such as weddings and birth rituals there. They consider that the Sacred Grove is the abode of their deity and no ritual should begin without the blessing of the presiding deity. Parikshit Chakraborty in his essay *Socio-Cultural Aspect of Sacred groves: The Study in a Santhal Village* writes, “since the local santal people believe that their idols or deities to be present in the Grove and displayed by the trees, shrubs and stones for which they want the sacred grove remain intact. These beliefs give the idea of bonding between the people and nature” (51). The belief that disturbing Sacred Groves angers deities, functions as a social mechanism for ecological preservation. Santhal songs often portray rivers as mothers, forests as protectors, and land as the embodiment of life.

The stark contrast between Santhal ecological ethics and modern destructive forces invites a rethinking of development paradigms. The Santhal worldview critiques the anthropocentric arrogance of mainstream society and highlights an alternative rooted in reciprocity and reverence. If industrial civilization represents exploitation, the Santhals represent preservation; if the former thrives on alienation from the natural world, the latter flourishes in intimacy with it. Thadeus Hembrom in his essay *A study of*

*Santals as children of nature in the light of Santal folktales* describes the Santhals as “the children of nature” (131) and his research expounds the fact in detail shedding light upon Santhali folktales. He further describes that the Santhals leads a very simple life and their necessities are fulfilled easily by the natural objects. In their folktales they are describes as simple and happy people. The idea is further invigorated as Saren asserts, “Their non chemical approach to life fosters a balanced ecosystem” (474). Koustab Majumder and Dipankar Chatterjee in their essay *The Cultural Dimentions of environment: Ethnoscintific study on Santhal community in eastern India* depicts, “They (the Santhals) are the followers of the Sarna religion, which is the worship of nature-based Gods; therefore their culture is highly associated with nature/environment” (5). Their perception of nature is very much different from the modern mainstream people as they see environment as a system consisting the combination of living beings or alive (jiwit) and non-living objects or (Goyet). Majumder and Chatterjee again inform, “The natural elements include plants, sky, fire, water and plant resources etc” (7). Thus, it is intelligible to us that nature plays a crucial role in Santhali culture and their nature-centric life leads to the conservation of the mother nature.

Several cultural and religious festivals, such as Sorhae, Sharul, Sarna, Makar and Durgapuja, are nature centric and greatly connected to nature. Majumder and Chatterjee again write, “Santhals considered the environment as a source of food, medicine (traditional medicine) and shelter; therefore government enacting external laws they adopted various customary resource conservation practices at the community level” (9). They think that as they highly use forest resources it is their primary duty to protect it and take care of it. In Santhali point of view the natural world is perceived as the supreme. Hence forest resources and water resources are considered as an integral part of their lives. In this regard Saren inserts several names of Santhali activists such as Chami Murmu (The lady Tarzan of Jharkhand), Jomuna Tudu, Puspo Murmu, Naren Hansda and Boro Baski who are struggling and trying their best to protect the environment from the human-destructive forces. Chami Murmu has planted and protected forests and wildlife in the local 500 villages of Saraikela Kharsawan district. She has been awarded ‘Padmashree Award’ for that. (473)

The Santhals stand as “nature-preserving souls” amidst the overwhelming tide of human-induced ecological destruction. Their worldview is not a relic of the past but a vital lesson for the present and future. By learning from Santhal ecological ethics, modern society can cultivate a sustainable relationship with the planet. Without embracing such indigenous wisdom, humanity risks accelerating

toward environmental catastrophe. The Santhals fight for their survival and also for biodiversity and the ecosystem. Saren again inserts, “They play a significant role in protecting the forest land and water against illegal loggers, companies and miners” (474). They have fall victim to the capitalist mode of production where exploitation of natural resources has become a common phenomenon. Their lives have been threatened as they are mostly dependent on forest resources. Amidst all these destructive forces the Santhals are playing a remarkable role in preserving the ecosystem. The survival of the earth depends not on destructive progress but on communities like the Santhals, who remind us that nature is not an object to be consumed but a life force to be revered.

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