

## প্রতিধ্বনি the Echo

A journal of Humanities & Social Science  
Chief Editor: Bishwajit Bhattacharjee  
Published by: Dept. of Bengali  
Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India.  
Website: www.thecho.in

# THE BIRTH AND DEATH RITUALS AMONG THE SANTALS OF ASSAM

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### Abstract

*Santal is the largest homogenous tribe of India. They entered Assam as the labourers of the tea gardens established by the British and as a part of the Resettlement after the Santal Revolution during 1885-87 more than a century ago. Though they came into contact with their Aryan, Dravidian and Mongolian neighbours since time immemorial, most of their traditional customs and rituals along with religious practises have been unaffected by the influence of their neighbour. The life cycle of a Santal is marked with birth, initiation, marriage and death. Where birth in a Santal society is regarded as the most important and crucial event, death, to them, indicate that the soul, after leaving the body, becomes a bonga (spirit) joining the abode of its deceased ancestors.*

### INTRODUCTION

The life-cycle of an individual Santal is marked by several different rites and ceremonies connected with various stages of life. These rites are mainly concerned with Santal traditional beliefs and practices concerning both the benevolent and the malevolent spirits. The rites and ceremonies are performed to secure the active help of the benevolent spirits and the passive forbearance of the malevolent ones so as to ensure the safety, well-being and prosperity of the individual and his family at different stages in the life-cycle. The turning points, in the life cycle of an individual Santal, are the critical occasions of birth (*Janam Chatiar* or *Nim dakmandi*), initiation (*Caco Chatiar*), marriage (*Bapla*) and death (*Moron*). As O' Dea (1969) points out, 'In such crises men are potentially exposed to the dangers involved in the contingency and powerlessness inherent in the human

condition'<sup>(1)</sup> and to control these dangers and to have emotional need of restoring hope and confidence, these life crises moments are set off by various socio- religious rituals and festivals.

Shift from one stage to another e.g. from pregnancy to child birth, from birth to initiation, from initiation to marriage, from marriage to funerals etc. disturb both the life of the individual and the life of the society. Danger always lies in transition. The person who passes from one stage to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others and the functions of these celebrations are to reduce the harmful effects of the disturbances.

### JANAM CHATIAR (BIRTH)

The birth of a child is a great event among the Santals. The birth of a child imposes on the family a new set of rights and duties. The child becomes a fresh claimant to family property<sup>(2)</sup>. At the birth of a child,

both the village and the family are considered unclean. As a matter of fact, no sacrifice or other religious ceremony is performed. The purification ceremony after childbirth is called *Janam Chatiar*. *Janam* means 'birth' and *Chatiar*, a word connected with the Hindi word *chut* which means 'polluting' <sup>(3)</sup>. Until this ceremony takes place, no one is even allowed to eat or drink with the family. The cleansing ceremony in which the whole village community as well as the relatives and friends of the family participate usually takes place five days after the birth of a boy and three days after the birth of a girl. In the cleansing ceremony, the child is given a name <sup>(4)</sup>. The name-giving ceremony is the essential part of the *Janam Chatiar* ceremony because in giving the child a name, the father recognizes the child as his own and the child acquires a definite status in the village and among its kinsfolk. In fact, the child is recognized to be a Santal. The name-giving also imparts the social obligations of the household to the newly born child. This cleansing ceremony has mainly a three-fold function: 1) to purify the house and the village from the defilement caused by the birth of a child; 2) to name the child, thus formally admitting him/her into the father's clan and sub-clan and giving the protection of father's spirits and 3) to incorporate the child into the 'outer fringes of the tribe'.

One of the greatest things that a Santal couple fears is to have no offspring. A man can legally divorce his wife for not having child and the vice versa. And he can even have a second wife with prior consent from his former one. If a couple cannot get any child, they first consult a Raranic' (medicine man) who prescribe medicine. If this is unsuccessful recourse is made to supernatural aids. The woman approaches an *Ojha* (medicine man) who devinises whether Bongas are obstructing the way. If so, a fowl is sacrificed in the name of the Bonga responsible. The Santals believe that human beings are more exposed to the supernatural evils when they are in their mother's womb

and at birth. As such various precautions are to be observed by the mother for the protection of her womb.

She is not allowed to take any life nor is she allowed to see or touch a human corpse. She must not weep when a death occurs. She must not go near a river or stream where curins are believed to dwell. She must not walk over the straw rope used for binding *bandis* (bundles of storing grains). She would not be allowed to lie down in the courtyard or any other open space lest Bongas and a particular type of bird called *Puni-cere* might fly across her body. She must not put a flower of Jackfruit in her hair otherwise the child in the womb would shrivel as the jackfruit flower does when it dries. There are some other precautions also to be strictly observed. At the time of thunderstorm a pregnant woman should stay indoors and put her fingers in her ears so that the child does not hear the sound otherwise the child would be born coward. She is not allowed to make bread herself because it may wrinkle the child's ear. She, in any circumstance, be allowed to plant or break a turmeric root, lest the fingers of her child be forked, or the child might get an extra finger. She cannot make leaf cup; if she does so, her child will be born with split lip. If she looks upon an elephant during pregnancy her child's tongue would be very long and the ears would be large and flappy. Certain restrictions are imposed on the father also. He must not take any life and should not come into contact with dead bodies. He should restrict himself for eating the flesh of the head of an animal sacrificed or slain in the hunt.

The Santals believe that if all the precautions are observed carefully, the birth of the child become easy and in case of any difficulty, the *Ojha* is called for to find out which bonga is offended. And once it is found, a vow is made to make proper sacrifice for a speedy delivery. When the child is born, the umbilical cord is cut off by the midwife with the help of a sharp iron arrow. At the time of delivery though elderly women of the village gather at the house, no

male is allowed to attend the same. The placenta and the afterbirths are buried near the main door of the room where the delivery took place. Santals believe that if it is not buried and eaten by dog or any other animal, the mother may fall sick. It is also believed that if afterbirth is buried deep so that the next birth is delayed. And if it is buried near the surface, it will bring the next child soon. The Santal do not tell their birth place but refers only to the village where his/her after birth is buried.

After the birth is taken place, the father is informed by the womenfolk present there and he, with a large stick, beats the roof of the house to drive away the *bhuts* or *curins*. Villagers on hearing the birth ask for whether the child is *dipil* or *bharia* means girl or boy.

A ceremony called *Met' halan* is held on the same day of the birth. The mother and the midwife sit on the floor facing each other. The mother fills a leaf cup with rice beer and gives it to the midwife who throws away its content on the left hand side. The process is repeated thrice. By doing so both the child and the mother become immune from any imminent danger as per belief.

If the child delivered is a dead one, the child's body is buried under the ground and not burnt in fire to ashes. On the other hand if the mother dies during the pregnancy or during child birth it is believed that her spirit will turn into a *curin*. Hence such women are buried deep into the ground after inserting iron nails on the sole of the feet to stop its escaping.

As said before, the ceremony is usually observed five days after the birth of a boy and three days after the birth of a girl. But in some special cases this time rule is not strictly followed and the ceremony is anticipated if a festival is imminent. If the birth is taken place on the eve of a wedding or on the day before the new moon then also the ceremony is anticipated because the Santals believe that it is not good for the child to be named in a different month than that of his birth month.

Paternal blood relatives are invited for the Janam Chatiar ceremony. The villagers also gather at the courtyard of the house of the new born baby on the fixed day. The menfolk so gathered get shaved by a barber starting from the Naeke and ending with the father of the new born. The midwife brings the new born baby to the courtyard where the barber cuts some locks of the child's hair and put in a leaf cup. There he pours some oil in the leaf cup and gives it back to the midwife who after mixing the same with turmeric rubs the child's head. Then the males present there left for taking bath. In their absence the midwife winds two pieces of cotton thread around the arrow used to cut the umbilical cord and collects the child's hair in a small bundle. On the return of the menfolk, the midwife carrying the child leads the women folk along with the mother of the baby to take bath. Reaching the spot, the midwife unwound one of the string around the arrow, ties the bundle of the hair with that thread and invoking Maran Buru and the ancestral spirit of the child's father to take care of the child let the bundle of the hair float in the water.

On returning home the child's mother is made to sit at the veranda with the baby. The midwife unwound the other string from the arrow, soaked in turmeric oil and ties around the child's waist as loin string. She mixes some rice powder with water and let it trickle into the left hand palm of the child's mother who rubbed it on her forehead and sips a little. Then the midwife takes the baby on the *parkom* (bedstead) where the child was born. The midwife sprinkles *adwa caole* flour mixture with water on four legs of the bedstead and also on the child. Then she sprinkles the *adwa caole* flour water mixture to child's mother and the assembled people. Once it is over, the midwife takes out the baby to the courtyard and announces the name of the child. Giving the name is very important to the Santal community because it formally admits the child into his/her father's clan and sub-clan thus protecting the child by the father's Bonga. In this way the father removes all the traces of illegitimacy, if any,

by recognizing the child as his own. Thus the child is considered to be a Santali.

Traditional systems are there to assign the name of a child. The first born child is named after the paternal grandfather, the second after maternal grandfather, third paternal grandfather's eldest brother and fourth maternal grandfather's eldest brother and so on. Daughters receive the names of equivalent female relatives in the same order. In the case of the father being a *ghar jawae* and *ghardi jawae*, names of the maternal side come first. In the case of twins the names are normally borrowed from Hindu mythology. E.g. If both the child are male they are named as Ram and Lokhon. If both the child are girls, they would be named as Chita and Khapra and if one child is boy and the other is girl, they would be named as Ram and Chita etc.

The Santal do have two names, one *cetan nutun* (outer name) and the other *bhitri nutum* (inner name). The inner name corresponds to the relative after whom the child is named and normally the child is not called by that name. The *cetan nutun* is a kind of nick name which is replaceable.

The ceremony is concluded with the drinking of gruel made of rice boiled in water with Nim leaves. That is why the Janam Chatiar is sometime called as *Nim dak'mandi* ceremony. The household offers some some rice gruel to Maran Buru and ancestors' spirit invoking them to give the baby long and progressive future life. After taking *Nim dak'mandi* the villagers as well as the relatives return to their home.

When a child is born to a Santal girl out of a wedlock, the girl's household is temporarily outcasted (*pante beggar*) till arranging a father for the child. This is done in two ways. First, if a person is proved to be the genitor whether he accepts the paternity or not, he either has to marry the girl or pay for a husband. Second, if the village cannot prove who the real father is then a suitable father is arranged. In both the cases *Nim dak'mandi* ceremony removes the traces of illegitimacy and the child takes the Bongas of his father.

## DEATH RITUALS

The Santals believe that when a person dies, his social personality is not annihilated but rather transformed. Some of the expressions used to denote the death of a person indicate that the soul, after leaving the body, becomes a *bonga* (spirit) joining the abode of its deceased ancestors. Thus they have the expression: *nitok' doe hapramena*, meaning 'he has become ancestor'. The belief in the soul of a person becoming *bonga* and joining the abode of his ancestors is explicitly evident in all the rituals and ceremonies connected with death. The Santals' notion of death may be summed up by the following passage of W. G. Archer (1974):

“Death is a victory for all those anti-Santal forces which are represented by hostile *bongas*. It is as if the dead Santal has betrayed his trust, has failed in his main duty-to go on living. To die is therefore to pollute and for the moment the whole village is bereft of its tribal guardians and deprived of ghostly care. At the same time death subjects a man to violent unnatural change. He remains a Santal. He is still a member of his family but until he has safely reached the country of the dead, he is a man with a grievance. He can no longer do the things which Santals value most for he is abruptly deprived of sex and the company of his children. He is 'out of position'. He no longer 'belongs' and only the most careful conduct by his family can ensure his due demission. He is now much more a *bonga* than a man - a ghostly force invisible but intimately real. The danger which killed him still infects his person and until the funerary process is over, he must remain a source of menace to all the members of the family. When he has achieved the final status of ancestor, he has still a *bonga* nature and can

on no account be ignored. He is not as obvious as living Santals but he is something to be reckoned with, a power with whom it is even more necessary to be on good terms that when he worked and went about the village”<sup>(5)</sup>

The Santals do not recognize the possibilities of natural death. They opine that the death is never due to accident but it is caused due to enmity of certain *bongas*, impersonal powers and withcrafts. They believe that an individual has to fight throughout his life against malignant agencies that have put an end to his life. They also believe that on the death of an individual his social personality is not destroyed but transformed. A Santal become a hapram bonga only when all the funerary rites have been performed in respect of the deceased. Full rites are not performed in case of an unnatural death of a person or in the case of a woman dying in pregnancy or child birth. They believe that their ghost souls hover around the world as *bhuts* and curins.

The Santals believe that their future life is decided by the deeds performed in his earthly life. A good man will be rewarded while a bad man will be punished by *Jom Raja* along with the *Hudur Raja* who governs the nether world. It is believed if a man, while living in this world, called *naopuri* has treated others unjustly, after death, in the place called *hanapuri*, he is made to carry rotten meat on his head, fight with huge worms or sit emerged in excrement. Same fate will happen to those defying the tribal code of morality and also those who fail to show the traditional tribal mark of *sika* and *khoda* in their body. On the other hand a person who leads an honest life in this world will be rewarded in *hanapuri*.

On death of a person his house and his village becomes polluted. The village *bongas* lift their protection and the household is also deprived of their *Orak bonga*. No marriage, festival, or public worship can take place in the village till the funerary rites have been performed. Besides these, as long as the funerary rites are not

performed, the soul of the departed person will remain as manace to the living members of the family. Hence on death of a person in the village, family members and village community co-operate in performing the funerary rites.

On death occurring in the village the *Godet* inform all the villagers starting with the *Manjhi*. The relatives of the deceased persons who live in a reasonable distance are also informed. They all gather in the house of the deceased. The body is then prepared for cremation or burial.

The body is anointed with oil and turmeric, dressed in new clothes and laid in a *parkom* brought out to the courtyard. In case of a woman whose husband is still alive vermilion is put on her forehead by a female relative. A piece of cloth containing some money, a brass plate, drinking vessel and other gifts donated by relatives as token of mourning is placed on the bedstead. The cot on which the deadbody is placed is carried thereafter by four relatives or friends on their shoulders to the junction of roads at the end of the village street; here the *parkom* is downed for a while and all the women of the house and of the village anoint the body with oil and turmeric, and they put a sindur mark on his/her forehead and the roasted cotton seeds and paddy they drop down in small heaps at the four bedstead legs. Thereupon an *ojha* exorcizes the dead one with a fowl waving round over him. From this junction, no woman is allowed to accompany the dead boby. And the man folk carry the dead one on their shoulder to the burial place.

On reaching the outskirts of the village, the cremation pyre is prepared by the villagers in North- South direction fixing four poles in the ground. Offered materials on the cot are removed and auctioned to be purchased by the villagers. But in case of a death by T.B, Small Pox or Leprosy, the offered materials are not auctioned and therefore these are buried. The nails of both hands and feet and forehead hair are cut and enveloped in a new small piece of cloth which is called *Jan baha*. The dead body is taken around the cremation pyre three times

anti-clockwise direction and then put in the pyre keeping the head towards south. In the head side west pole a fowl is tied. The chief mourner then puts burning fire with the help of a *nol* stick in the mouth of the deceased three times and then the dead body is burnt into ashes.

### **BURIAL**

On reaching the outskirts of the village a grave is dug in the North- South direction deep into the ground by the villagers. The dead body on the *parkom* is taken around the grave three times in anti-clockwise direction. The nails of both hands and feet and forehead hair are cut and enveloped in a new small piece of cloth which is called Jan Baha. The chief mourner then put fire three times into the mouth of the deceased. A cloth is laid into the grave and the dead body is lowered in the grave with its head towards the South. The *parkom* is broken. The chief mourner followed by others throws water into the grave till filled up and a mound is then raised on the grave. An earthen ware pot filled with water and a winnowing fan containing some paddy is placed beside the grave after purifying by sprinkling of water mixed with cowdung.

In either case the mourners go for purifying bath after which they anoint themselves with oil mixed with turmeric. The chief mourner has to save his head completely.

As per community rule the eldest son is the chief mourner in case the deceased being a man. If the deceased does not have any male children then the right of placing the burning ember into the mouth of the corpse is given either to father, brother or a senior kinsman on the male side. In case of a woman, it is the husband who carries out the rituals. If she is a widow her eldest son does the ritual.

The funerary ceremony known as *Jan Baha Um* or 'oil washing' which is also known as *Umul ader* or 'bringing in the shadow' is most important and is performed on the fifth day after the death. It is believed that the death body of the person's soul will remain in the clutches of hostile agencies

which is a manace to the household and the village till this ceremony is performed. Through this ceremony the villagers are guarded against any dangers while the soul of the deceased is get released from the clutches of evil agencies who caused his death.

It is believed that by *Tel Nahan* ceremony performance the village bongas become clean, the village is purified and festival and other worship can take place once again. The deceased's immediate family members still remain 'in the shadow' but other relatives are free to perform wedding and other sacrifices.

For *Jan Baha um* ceremony the chief mourner after collecting a handful of earth from the grave mixing with *Jan baha* burnt it and put into a leaf cup. On returning with the villagers to the deceased's house *Jan baha* is purified by sprinkling of turmeric water by the women gathered there. The chief mourner carrying the *Jan baha* followed by the relatives and villagers go to bath. There the chief mourner is completely get shaved and few others get shaved their beards only and have bath and oiled. The chief mourner in presence of all offers oil cakes and *sal* twigs to *Maran Buru*, *Pilchu Haram* and *Pilchu Budhi* and to the departed soul. He implores *Maran Buru* to lodge the soul of the deceased in the shadow of the house while he invokes the departed soul to accept his new temporary abode.

Every one then return to the deceased house for *Umul ader* ceremony. Two persons are possessed; one by *Maran Buru* and second by the spirit of the deceased. After taking rice beer and water, one of the relatives ask the spirit of the dead person the cause of his death. Once the villagers are satisfied with the replies, the impersonate person return to normal. The sacrificial animals are offered to the soul of the deceased by blowing on the back of the head and the flesh after cooking with rice is fed to the assembled. Rice beer is also given. The head's flesh of the slain animal is kept reserved for the deceased's family.

It is believed that the departed soul

has been released from the clutches of the underworld through the *Tel Nahan* ceremony and is on the way to his final abode. Through a ceremony called *Bhandan* the deceased's relative bid their final farewell to the dead. By performing the *Bhandan* the deceased's immediate family member once again is free to offer sacrifice to their Bongas, attend festivals and celebrate marriages.

#### **BHANDAN**

On the Bhandan day the deceased's relatives and villagers once again gather at the deceased's house. The chief mourner's head is once again completely shaved while the beards of the villagers present are also shaved and all of them go for purificatory bath. On their return, they are fed with *taben khajari* and rice beer. Three persons are possessed again by the spirit of the deceased, the founder of the village and Maran Buru respectively. The dead man is made to identify himself. The three spirits are asked whether they are satisfied with the ceremony performed already in honour of the deceased. On assenting, the three men emerge from their roles.

A goat, given by the chief mourner, is made to eat rice of the *khond* prepared. He invokes the dead man's spirit to protect his relatives and to keep away any misfortune. The animal is slain by heating on the back of the head by the Jogmanjhi with the help of the blunt end of an axe. The side on which the animal falls is retained by the deceased family while the other side is used by the

villagers. Rice beer libation is also offered to the deceased. The fowls are offered to the ancestors mentioning each one of them by name followed by rice beer libation. After the beer libation the assembled drink rice beer.

Thereafter the sacrificial offerings brought by the relatives are offered mentioning the giver's name. The lower side of the slain animals's flesh is retained by the deceased family and his relatives while the upper side of the flesh is divided into two parts, one part to be cooked while the second part is divided among the villagers who take their share to their homes. Before the food is served the chief mourner offers some food to the departed soul invoking to accept it and to purify the household completely. The whole night is spent feasting, dancing and singing.

Thus the funerary ceremony comes to an end. The dead man's family is now free to resume relation with the world of human beings and of spirits.

If an infant die before the performance of *Janam Chatiar* or *Caco Chatiar*, he or she is not cremated but buried. The last rite called *bhandan* is also not performed. In case of a woman died of pregnancy, the foetus is cut out and buried separately. The woman is not cremated but buried with the soles of the feet being pinned with iron nails. In case of an accidental death the dead body is not cremated but buried and *bhandan* ceremony is performed.

#### **NOTES & REFERENCES:**

1. C.f... O' Dea, Thomast., 1969, *The Sociology of religion*, Prentice- Hall of India Pvt. LTD, New Delhi, P.40
2. Cf. W. G. ARCHER, *Tribal Law and Justice ...* ,p.363
3. *Janam Chatiar* or Birth ceremony has a very critical importance because it bestows social parentage and clan status on the new-born child. It also brings the child into relation with a particular set of family spirits and deities
4. According to an immemorial custom, the first son is named after the paternal grandfather and the first daughter after the grandmother. The second child takes the

name of the maternal parents. Every child bears two names: *bhitri n'utum* (inner name) which is never pronounced in the family and *cetan n'utum* (outer name). The outer name is given to prevent *bongas* (evil spirits) from knowing the inner name due to the belief that such knowledge would tempt evil spirits to harm the child.

5. W. G. ARCHER, *The Hill of Flutes* ..., pp. 328-329.