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## **The Santal Pantheon of Supernatural Agencies**

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### **Abstract**

*The Santal Community is the largest tribe of India. They maintain a close affinity with various supernatural agencies called Bonga. Some of them are benevolent and some others are malevolent. The present article is an attempt to explore various kinds of Bongas of the Santal pantheon and the associated belief with them.*

**Key word: Santal, Bonga, propitiation, benevolent, malevolent**

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**1. Introduction:** The Santal is the most homogenous tribe of India. They are mostly found living permanently in Bihar, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal and Assam. A handful of them are also found in Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. As per the Census 2001 their total population in Assam is 2, 42,868. Though their heartland in Assam is Kokrajhar District but their presence are found mostly in Bongaigaon, Chirang, Baska, Nalbari, Odalguri, Darrang, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh and Nagaon District. They believe that their world is controlled by various invisible supernatural beings and powers called Bonga. Some of them are benevolent and the others are malevolent for their lives. The Santals believe that they are living, moving and having their being in this world of supernatural entities. The religion of the Santals revolves round their belief in these supernatural agencies and the practices to enter into relations with them. <sup>(1)</sup> These relations are of various kinds. Some are worshipped by each family in the sacred place of their house called Bhitari, some are the national spirits and worshipped by the Santal community everywhere, some are worshipped by the village priest called Naeki, some are worshipped by the deputy priest called Kudum Naeki, some are worshipped by the village headman called Manjhi and some are worshipped by the medicine cum magical man called Ojha.

**2. Belief in Supernatural Spirits and Powers:** In the background of the Santal religion there is a supreme deity called *Thakur-Jiu* who is the creator and sustainer of the universe and a benevolent spirit. He is worshipped every 5<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> year with a sacrifice of goat. Apart from *Thakur-Jiu*, there are some principal benevolent and malevolent Bongas (spirits) in Santal pantheon who are regarded as the spirits of the village community. They are the following :

**2.1 (Maran Buru (Great Mountain):** *Maran Buru* literally, the great mountain, is believed to be the leader of the Bongas with far-reaching powers by which he associates with both good and evil spirits. The Santal myth of origin reminds us how Maran Buru appeared in front of their first human pair Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi in disguise of Lita Gossain and instructed them to have sex and taught them how to brew rice-beer asking them to offer rice-beer whenever they invoke his name. Thus as a grandfather *Maran Buru* is regarded as a 'good old fellow' and is presumed to be a benevolent Bonga. As per his suggestion whenever the Santals drink rice-beer or take a meal, they first sprinkle a few drops of *handi* (rice-beer) or offer some rice as an offering to their ancestors and

to *Maran Buru* which expresses the close affinity between *Maran Buru* and Santhals' ancestors. He reserves a place at the village Manjhithan just by the side of the Manjhi Haram Bonga though no stone is erected to represent him.

The village *Naeke* or the priest worships *Maran Buru* on behalf of the village. Offerings are also made at the family worship in the *bhitar* (family worshipping place). He is the only *Bonga* who receives libations from every individual. In fact, *Maran Buru* is regarded both as a village community and family *Bonga* <sup>(2)</sup>

**2.2 Moreko-Turuiko (Five-Six):** The *Moreko-Turuiko*, literary means five-six, is treated as a composite single spirit. The Santals believe that this spirit presides over the welfare of the village. He has control over rain, crops and epidemics. This spirit is offered sacrifice at all the *jaher* worships. The whole village community offers collective sacrifices to the *Moreko-Turuiko*, especially at the time of an epidemic and cattle disease. Sometimes, some families perform sacrifices and libations in honour of this spirit in their *bhitar* at the time of sowing and flower festivals. Individual sacrifices to the *Moreko-Turuiko* are also known. It is generally offered by those families who make a promise or an oath at the time of illness. The most remarkable point is that the *Moreko-Turuiko* is the only *jaher* spirit which is revealed in the divination of the *ojha* ("medicine-man") and held as the cause of personal or general crisis. Most probably this spirit is a kind of *bahre-bonga* of some ancient habitat of the Santals <sup>(3)</sup>.

but C.L. Mukherjee states, 'Another village deity is Moreko Tureiko who is now a single entity but addressed in the plural. The Santal believes that there were five brothers (more-five) who were wedded to six sisters (turui-six) named *Dangi, Pungi, Hisi, Dumni, Chita, and Kapra*. They were supposed to preside over the welfare of the village. His younger sister, *Gosae Era*, constitute a separate deity of the *Jaherthan; Jaher Era*, another sister of *Moreko* is the goddess of the *Jaherthan* named after her' <sup>(4)</sup>.

**2.3 Jaher Era (Goddess of the Sacred Grove):** The *Jaher Era* is the goddess of the sacred grove which is preserved in every village as the abode of the village *Bongas*. She looks after the interests of the villagers and presides over the sacred grove. She is always considered as a good-natured spirit who never does any harm to anyone. She is usually worshiped at all the festivals and specially during Baha or flower festivals for the general welfare of the village, especially for obtaining good crops and for the health of the villagers and their cattle. <sup>(5)</sup>

**2.4 Gosae Era (Benevolent Spirit of the Sacred Grove):** Her nature is strange among the Santal society. Though she also shared her place at the *Jaher than* or the sacred grove; little is known about this *Gosae Era*. She is also not represented by a *Sarjom* tree. Some informants conveyed the impression that she may be the sister of the *Jaher Era*. She is represented by a *matkom* tree (*bassia latifolia*) in the sacred grove. She even does not share the same shade with that of *Maran Buru*, *Jaher Era* and *Mureiko Tureiko*. A separate shade is erected for her during Baha or the flower festival of the Santal Community. During Baha festivals three men are possessed; one by *Jaher Era* and the other two are by *Marang Buru* and *Moreko-Tureiko* but no person is possessed by *Gosae Era*.

In the Santal pantheon *Maran Buru*, *Moreko Turuiko* and *Jaher Era* are very closely associated with one another; this is explicitly expressed by the three *sarjom* trees (*shorea robusta*) in the sacred grove. The close affinity of these three spirits can be clearly understood from the fact that during *Baha* (flower) festival two sheds or booths are erected in the sacred grove: one booth is meant for *Maran Buru*, *Moreko Turuiko* and *Jaher Era* and the other for *Gosae Era*. Whenever

there is a worship at the Jaher Than a white fowl is sacrificed to Gosae Era and the fowl is eaten by the priest him selves.

**2.5 Pargana Bonga (Spirit of the Pargana):** The *Santals* highly respect Pargana Bonga because he is considered as a kind of tutelary guardians of all the witches whenever a witch is in a mission she worships Pargana Bonga for proper training and proficiency in the art of witchcraft. The *Pargana bonga* is represented in the sacred grove by one of the *sarjom* trees and whenever there is a general disease in the village, this spirit is propitiated by the *ojha* (the minister of the 'white magic' and a medicine man) who implores the spirit to rid the village of all malady and misfortune (6)

*Maran Buru, Moreko turuiko, Jaher Era* and *Gosae Era* are considered as National spirits and sacrifices are offered during *Sohrae, Baha, Erok' sim, Hariar sim* and *Janthar* or *Aghar horo nawai*. They are propitiated by the Naeke or the village priest while the *Pargana Bonga* is propitiated by the *Kudum Naeke* through blood offering ceremony called *Bul mayam* where he offers drops of blood from his own thigh.

**2.6 Manjhi Bonga (Spirit of the Village Headman):** The *Manjhi bonga* represents all the village headmen starting from the founder to the present headman who is supposed to be particularly active in restraining other spirits doing harm to men, is the second in command to *Pargana bonga*. In every Santal village there is a Manjhithan for the *Manjhi Bonga* and he is represented by a stone at the foot of the central wooden post. During principal festivals of the *Santals* the *Manjhi* or the village headman offers sacrifice to the *Manjhi Bonga* at the Manjhithan for his blessings.. It is believed that this spirit acts as the adviser of the village headman and the spirits of the earlier headmen are a kind of tutelary spirits for the present headman who derives validation of his office from the ritual communication with his deceased predecessors. The *Manjhi bonga* is regarded as a benevolent spirit and is specially connected with the general village welfare. Above all, he is responsible for the welfare of the headman and his family (7).

**2.7 Abge Bonga (The Clan Deity):** The *Abge Bongas* are the most sacred tutelary spirits to safeguard each household of a village. They are the sub-clan Bongas on different sub-clans of the Santal community. Whenever a distress or disease befalls on a family these Bongas are propitiated believing that on propitiating the distress or the disease will disappear. It is also believed that the spirits look after the crops and other belongings of their worshipers. Their names are not divulged under any circumstances and only his name is passed to the eldest son of the family by the head of the household only before his death. His name is not disclosed to any female under any circumstances he may be contaminated by the sex of a woman or a witch which may result in disaster in a family. If it is suspected that the the *Abge Bonga* is contaminated, the *Ojha* (medicine man or the magic man) is called and sacrifice is made to him to save his family.

### **3. Malevolent Spirits:**

**3.1 Sima Bongas (Village Boundary Spirits):** The *Sima bongas* are a group of Bonga which form a category of themselves. They are believed to be very furious as such they are often propitiated by the human blood.so they are propitiated by the *Kudum Naeke* (Asstt. Priest) pricking blood from his own thigh which is called *Bul Mayam*. They are considered to be dwelling at the outskirts of the village and are propitiated in some definite occasions. They are feared by the villagers because it is believed that they caused animals and serpents to attack human being while working in the field and if it is revealed by the oil divination of the *ojha* that they are the cause of the misfortune of a family or of the whole village sacrifices are made by the *ojha* to the *Sima Bongas*. They are propitiated twice in a year at the village boundary with proper sacrifice and incantation with sun dried rice on a

Sarjom leave soaked with blood in front of the dedicated to the Sima Bonga as some trees at the village boundary are dedicated to them.

**3.2 Bahre Bongas (Spirits of the Surroundings):** The *Bahre Bongas* are the spirits of the outskirts living in the area surrounding the village. The traditional Santal belief conveys that the abodes of the *Bahre Bongas* are pools, ditches, streams, ponds, deserted places (house, land, grove, tree, etc.), tree stumps, old funeral sites, holes in the ground, hillocks, pits, mounds, etc.. They are considered to be very furious and are believed to misguide thirsty men with mirages of water reservoirs. When a thirsty man approaches this imaginary reservoir the *Bahre Bonga* cause the water vanished, torturing the thirsty man. On vowing to offer sacrifice the reservoir is caused to appear in reality enabling the man to quench his thirst. So their abodes are generally avoided by the villagers and they are often shared by the nearby villagers also.. A collective sacrifice is offered by the *Naeke* at the time of the *Jaher* worship<sup>(8)</sup>.

During some *festivals* fowls are offered in their honour and the villagers present, except women, have to partake with the food cooked. Sacrifices are made by the Kudum Naeki offering his own blood mixing with *adwa caole* (unboiled rice) called *Bul Mayam*. In case of sickness, the *ojha* through divination finds out whether *Bahre or Sima Bongas* are the cause of the evil and once it is found he offers sacrifice on behalf of the sick man's family. In such case also the *ojha* perform the *Bul mayam* ceremony.

**3.3 Buru Bonga (Mountain and Hill Spirit):** The Santal belief that the surrounding hills are the abode of some Bonga called *Buru Bonga* who can be responsible for ruining the crops and various accidents if not propitiated properly. So whenever a Santal planes a long journey he worships these Bongas offering sacrifice mostly fowls and goats so that no misfortune happens to him or his party. Similarly when there is draught these Bongas are worshipped for rain.

**3.4 Dak'bonga (Water Spirit):** These Bongas are considered as the female Bongas to be residing in hollowed water holes, rivers. It is believed that these Bonga, in disguise of beautiful Santal girls, mislead young boys with an idea of marrying them.

**3.5 Rongo Ruji Bonga:** In the past annual hunt for the Santals was a great event. This hunt was headed by *Dihri*, the hunt priest. It continued for three days. Prior to the actual day of the hunt he offers sacrifices of fowls to some Bongas imploring them not to cause any harm to the hunter. One of the *Bongas* so propitiated is called *Rongo ruji Bonga*. The abode of this Bonga is a tree called *Terel* amidst the forest and is represented by a stone at the foot of that particular tree. It is a female Bonga and is obsessed with sex. So it is important to please her with obscene songs and acts. It is believed that that if is is not satisfied she may cause terrible harm during the hunt. During *Bitlaha* or social expulsion, which is now obsolete, she is also propitiated along with *Maran Buru* and *Manjhi Haram Bonga* by the *Dihri*. Sometimes she demands menstrual blood by way of offerings. This Bonga is also propitiated in case of impotency or sterility. If no medicines work the woman goes to an *ojha* who divinises whether the *bongas* are interfering.

**3.6 Baghut Bonga (Tiger Spirit):** It is believed that of a person is killed by a tiger his spirit sometimes become a Bonga who if gets angry may cause diseases. He may also sometimes attack person in disguise of a tiger. So he is propitiated during *Dasae* (Hindu Durga Puja) festival every year by the person who is trained in *Ojhaism*. During *Dasae* festival one person is possessed by the Bonga and when he is possessed he walks on all four. A fowl is let loose before him and he kills it by biting it with his nail and teeth.

**3.7 Hapram Bonga (Ancestral Spirits):** The spirits of the ancestors are called *Hapram Bonga* in a Santal society who is worshipped by every Santal household. Probably this is a borrowed ideology of transmigration of soul from Hindu religion. They believe that the existence of a person does not

end with his death rather transformed and become a Bonga. He becomes a Hapram bonga only after his funeral rites are performed. The persons who die unnatural death like death without performance of *Caco-Chatiar*, leprosy, small pox, women die from pregnancy or at child birth are not given full funerary rites. They do not achieve the full spiritual status and their ghosts become *curin* or *bhuts*. They are believed to live with living family member of a household and to see to the welfare of their living relatives. Their blessings are invoked in every social ceremony and festivals whether it is private or public. While drinking, a fresh *Handi* (traditional rice beer) libation is performed in their honour. During offerings and sacrifices to this Bonga the eldest male member of the household acts as a priest. If there is no male member in the family an agnate of the departed is asked to offer sacrifice. On the day of the sacrifice the *bhitar* (*private shrine inside the house*) is cleaned and plastered with cowdung. The officiating performer is not required to follow specific taboos but he should remain on fast on the eve of sacrifice and take a purificatory bath. In the morning the wife of the person who is to officiate the sacrifice grinds some *adwa caole* into flour. Half of it is handed over to her husband and the other half she keeps with her for making cakes. All the family members gather at *bhitar* and the *khond* is prepared. No vermilion is used and the sacrificed fowl is not beheaded but it is slain by a blow on the back of the head so that some blood may sprinkle on the rice on the *khond*. The ancestral *bongas* are offered the sacrificial meal and drink of the *handi* together with the other living relatives present. Leaf plates containing *sura dak'* and leaf cups containing *handi* are first offered to each of the ancestral spirits prior to starting eating and drinking. Outsider's entrance is strictly prohibited.

All the above mentioned *bongas* are worshipped in public and they are regarded and believed to be the national tribal and village spirits. Besides these *bongas*, each family has their own *Orak' bonga* (household God). H. H. Risley has recorded that no Santal will divulge the name of his secret God to anyone but to his eldest son. It is as follows:

“Men are particularly careful to keep this sacred knowledge from their wives for fear lest they should acquire undue influence with *bongas*, become witches and eat up the family with impunity when the protection of its gods has been withdrawn” (9).

Along with these *bongas* they also believe in *sim bonga*, *saket bonga*, *curin*, *bhut*, *rakoos*, etc.

**Conclusion:** The lives of a traditional Santals are surrounded by these supernatural spirits or Bongas shaping the course of nature and of human events. These intimate relationships between the Santals and their spirits are manifested in their different phases of life cycles, different agricultural cycles and in seasonal rites and festivals. The Santal life cycles are divided into four main phases i.e. *Janam Chatiar* (birth), *Caco Chatiar* (initiation), *Bapla* (marriage) and *Moron* (death) and these phases are marked with various rites. The main purpose behind these rites is to protect them from the malevolent Bongas and to ensure security and protection given by the benevolent Bongas.

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