

# Identity Formation among the Santal Ethnic Group of Nepal

SEETA SIWAKOTI (OLEE)

*Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Tri-Chandra Multiple Campus,  
Tribhuvan Univeristy, Kathmandu, Nepal  
E-mail: siwakotiseeta@gmail.com*

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**ABSTRACT:** Ethnic identity of Santals has been based on shared symbols such as language, religion, traditions, culture, etc. The political changes of Nepal on 1990 and 2006 as well as the formation of Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) brought great changes in the ethnicity of various ethnic groups of Nepal. The Santal elites also started to make efforts for forming their identity and realized the importance of modern ethnic organizations for maintaining it. They have been conducting different identity forming programs under the umbrella of modern organizations including Nepal Adivasi Santal Utthan Sangha (SIUN) which has been working to maintain their identity by promoting Santali language, *Sarna* religion, traditional dresses, economic profiles, etc. However, their traditional homogenous cultural identity has been rapidly threatened by the modernizing forces including the influences of alien culture over their traditions, further the poverty and illiteracy speed up the rate of disintegration of their traditional homogenous culture. The paper discusses the various efforts of the Santals of Nepal for forming socio-political space in the contemporary identity politics of the country.

## INTRODUCTION

Identity formation is a complex, fluid and multifaceted process and a person may invoke different identities in response to different situations. Here, identity is primarily concerned with ethnic identity. The ethnic identity refers to one's sense of belonging to an ethnic group and the part of one's thinking, perceptions, feelings, and behavior that is due to ethnic group membership. The ethnic group tends to be one in which the individual claims heritage (Phinney, '96). Ethnic identity refers the self-identification to the ethnic labels or it constructs a set of self-ideas about one's own ethnic group membership. Ethnic identity includes the personal ownership of ethnic group membership and its correlated knowledge, understanding, values, behaviors, and feelings that are direct implications of that ownership. Ethnic identity is an important domain

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of the self-concept (Bernal *et al.*, '93). Ethnic identity is based on one's perception of "us" and "them" and not on objective reality that actually exists "out there" in the real world. Ethnic markers, such as language, religion, or rituals serve to identify these subjective ethnic "boundaries." Since these can be changed, hence ethnicity is not fixed but situational and subjective (Barth, '69).

The ethnic identity also defines the traits of solidarity and uniqueness, as well as seeks differences with other groups in the larger society around. The Santal ethnic group of Nepal is one of the important groups with unique culture and traditions. They live mainly in Jhapa, Morang and Sunsari districts of the Eastern Nepal, Tarai, and their total population is 51,735 (CBS, 2012). They are usually known as Satar in Nepal but they prefer to be known as Santal. The Santal society has its own unique characteristics, value

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systems, language, religious belief, mores, life-attitudes, culture, customs, and traditions, etc. They have their own approach to life and death, disease and sickness, individuals and community, and above all, a sense of solidarity. They have also a rich traditions and history of migration. The exact date of their migration to Nepal is not known but it is considered that they immigrated during early 19th century from the Central Eastern part of India (Santal Praganas). They still have a close relationship with the Santals of India (HMG/N, '74). They, many of them, left their original home when the various unfavorable situations aggregated including illegal deprivation of tribal lands in their homeland (Central Eastern India) by the land lords and money lenders since the periods of British and Mughal rulers. The administrations of that period also were not supportive to them as well as the natural calamities also added to some extent forcing them to leave the native place in search of livelihood. They thus migrated to different parts of India including neighbouring countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Bhutan (Siwakoti, 2013).

As the time passed on, the Santals in Nepal were becoming more and more marginalized — struggling for mere survival without having any proper direction to move forward or improve their life situation. Still in such situation, they have not completely disintegrated their ethnic identity through the influences of the mainstream culture of Nepali society. The Santals have been maintaining several unique traditional belief and cultural practices which are seen in their different festivals and other ceremonies. They observe different rituals during the various stages of life-cycle of an individual, including birth, marriage and death. These are directed to secure active help of benevolent spirits and impeding the action of the malevolent ones so as to ensure the safety, well-being and prosperity of the individuals and their family. As an individual proceeds from one stage to another in the course of life cycle they feel themselves as a part of the society where they live. In this way, the individual Santal cultivates his/her personality in the process of socialization through several occasions, situations, modes and means, which markedly uphold the ethnic integrity and solidarity of the Santals.

However, there is a confrontation between the ritual-based sense of traditional culture and the forces

of change and modernization, represented by the socio-political changes and socio-economic factors allied to these changes. The Santals are badly caught between the mythological past of glorious traditions and the present with its ever degrading poverty situation caused by their ignorance, exploitation and oppression by others as in the past had happened even after their arrival in Nepal. Presently, the Santals are now more divided than united due to the fact that there are two religious groups among Santals, those who have embraced the Hinduism and those of Christian faiths. However, still the vast majority of Santals follow the old traditional pattern of culture and religious practices. The paper discusses the various efforts of the Santals of Nepal for forming socio-political space in the contemporary identity politics of the country.

#### METHODOLOGY

Qualitative approach was followed to collect the data. Data collection techniques were ranged from interviews, participant and non-participant observations to literature review. Information was collected during 2010 to 2012 from the Santal community of Garamani, Haldibari and Jalthal Village Development Committees (VDC) of Jhapa district, and Sijuwa, Rangeli and Drabesah VDCs of Morang district. Most of information was taken by interviewing with several elders or knowledgeable persons including village heads (*Manjhi Haxam*) and members of village councils, school teachers, political/ethnic activists, as well as leaders of ethnic organization (*Nepal Adivasi Santal Uttan Sangha*).

#### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Prior to the 19th century, discussing the ethnic issues of exclusion and inequality from a political angle was restricted and discouraged in Nepal (Lawoti, 2010). However, after the restoration of democracy on 1990 discussion on the ethnic issues of exclusion and inequality was speeded up. The indigenous peoples' movement from the year 1990 had been started for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against indigenous peoples. They had started to bargain with the state for the political and economic advantages. Similarly, the peoples' movement of 2006 ended the 240 years of long

monarchy and transferred the country as a republic democratically. The people of all sectors including endangered and highly marginalized groups like the Santals had anticipated a new constitution of Nepal and making space for inclusion in the local and central level decision making processes.

The Santals of study area informed that before the arrival of hill people, they had maintained their cultural homogeneity because they were not interested to interact with other people except their own community. The people living in hills are called 'hill people'. They are the Nepalese hill people that lived in mountain areas of Nepal. They belong to different castes/ ethnic groups such as Brahmin, Chhetry, Magar, Gurung, Rai, Limbu, Tamang, etc. Before 1960, they were not interested to live in Tarai land due to the fear of malaria disease. During 1960s, Malaria Eradication Program was launched by the government which made the Tarai area suitable for settlement. Being suitable for staying many hill people from north and Indian side, from south, migrated to the fertile land of Tarai land which exerted a population pressure on the Tarai region of Nepal.

As the hill people started to settle in Jhapa and Morang, gradually the tenure of land cultivated by the Santals go to the hill people. The Santals by now have learnt to speak Nepali and the Santali culture has now got assimilated greatly with the new culture of their neighbouring communities who are dominantly represented by the Nepalase. Some internal division among the Santals have also been seen due to the influences of the Nepalese religions customs. It is found that religion has closely integrated the life of the Santals, and their religious beliefs have also changed due to the Nepalese influence and that have impacted on the culture of the Santals. The traditional followers who worship the supernatural powers (*Bongas*) are known as *BongaHor* or *BidinHor*. They believe that the universe is inhabited by numerous invisible supernatural beings and powers (*Bongas*) and they are benevolent at times, but must often malevolent and bring trouble and misery to the people sometimes, and so always the Santals try to appease them by sacrificing animals and offering food for ensuring their protection and prosperity. However, the religious belief was started to change in their life before they arrived in Nepal. Many Santals adopted

Hinduism (still believe in their traditional religion- *SaphaHor*) and Christianity (totally changed their belief - *Um Hor*) in their native place and this process is still continuing. The elite group, mainly traditional believers (*BidinHor*), considered that the *Sarna* is their tribal religion and the Santal without a *Sarna* religion is not a pure Santal. However, there were many traditional Santals, even the *BidinHor* who considered themselves as Hindus. Most of the traditional followers of the study area informed that during the Population Census of 2011, they mentioned their religion as Hinduism, because, they were not clear about the origin of the *Sarna* religion and as that it was not mentioned in their sacred document ("*Horokoren Mare Hapramko Reak Katha*"). Similar views were also expressed by many other Santals who considered themselves as *SaphaHor*. But the ethnic elites who were involved in Nepal "*Adivasi Santal Utthan Sangha* (SIUAN), a modern ethnic organization, considered that their traditional religion is a *Sarna*. The Christian followers mentioned that religion is a personal belief and not a boundary of ethnic identity.

In addition to religion, the Santals realize their identity such as Santali language and traditional culture are over shadowed by the influence of main stream Nepali language and Hindu culture. They feel as an excluded group from the national mainstream and so are united for forming contemporary ethnic organizations to promote and recognize their identity. They formed some modern ethnic organizations to protect their language, traditions and culture. In this regards, for the first time, they formed a *Nepal Santal Bhasha Sanskriti Bikas Parishad* (Santal Language and Culture Promotional Council of Nepal) on ad hoc basis under the leadership of Mr. Tursa Hembram in 1990. They believe that Santali language is an important identity because all the Santals live in different parts of the world can speak the same Santali language, it means, language is an important tool for connecting the Santals of the world. The *Bhasa Parishad* (in short) was registered in the Jhapa district in 1992 as a non-Government Organization (NGO) under the chairmanship of Mr. Jairam Murmu of Haldibari with the objective to protect the Santal's language and culture. During that period an International Santal Council was formed by the

Santals of Jharkhand state of India with an objective to promote the Santali language. The Nepali Santals also made an institutional linkage with this International Santal Council based at Jamshedpur, India. According to Mr. Jairam Murmu of Haldibari, some of the members of the *Bhasa Parishad* such as Tursa Hembram, Jairam Murmu, and Sundar Besra participated in the first International Santal Conference held at Jamshedpur during 1991. The *Bhasa Parishad* also organized an International Conference of the Santals at Kalbalgudi (premises of then Panchayat Training Centre) of Jhapa on March 13-14, 1993. It was the second International Conference of Santals which was organized in Nepal with their own efforts in collaboration with the International Santal Council.

The Santals of Nepal also formed a *Nepal Santal Bhasha Sangha* (Santal Language Association of Nepal) under the chairmanship of Mr. Obi Lal Hembram (a school teacher) of Haldibari at Anarmani VDC of Jhapa during 1999. Mr. Badri Ram Hembram played important role to develop this organization. Initially, it was supported by the Nepal Federation of Nationalities (NEFIN). It also bought a piece of land for the construction of office building at the Garamani VDC, Jhapa, however, due to economic crisis including the management problem, it is almost functionless.

In course of time, the migration of hilly people swollen up the Jhapa and Morang districts and started conflicts, particularly related to boundary of land between the hilly people and the Tarai people including the Santals. During the interaction with the Santals of Sijuwa (Morang) the informers said that an unpleasant ethnic incidence had happened between the people of Tarai origin and the hill origin people at the Govindpur VDC of Morang district during 1970. Such incidences created much insecurity to the Santals and they felt the necessity of an ethnic organization for uniting the whole Santals of Nepal under one umbrella and decided to form "*Nepal Adivasi Santal Utthan Sangha*" (Santal Indigenous Upliftment Association of Nepal) during 1993. The Santal respondents at the Sijuwa informed that different concepts were developed by the Santal elites about the modality of the organization. For example, Babu Lal Murmu wanted to develop the organization by

promoting their traditional *Majhi Haṛam* system, while Suresh Hasda emphasized on the traditional cultural organization but more effective than the *Manjhi Haṛam* system, and Praganna Murmu wanted a modern ethnic organization as the country emerged in a new democracy phase after 1990. The consensus was found on the concept of Praganna Murmu and they formed the *Nepal Adivasi Santal Utthan Sangha*. Laxman Soren of Bhatigachha VDC was elected as a first president. Since 2006 the organization has been led by the present president Lukhi Ram Hasda. The *Nepal Adivasi Santal Utthan Sangha* (SIUAN) is a registered member of Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) since 1996. The Central Committee of SIUAN is formed with 11 members; it also formed 11 members' district level committees at Jhapa and Morang. Any Santals can be eligible to become a member of SIUAN after paying rupees two only.

The respondents informed that there was no active participation of the Christian Santals in the central and district level committees of SIUAN, because they have no faith on their culture and traditions, as they were totally converted towards Christianity. Mr. Shem Lal Hembram (an educated Christian Santal) said that they are also the Santals by birth, and has same dresses, language, food habit and many other things common except the faith on traditions. SIUAN has organized various cultural programs such as dances, dramas, etc. in Santali language. In addition, SIUAN has been working for the protection of tenant right of Santal farmers. SIUAN also provided the training to the poor and marginalized people including the Santals for mainstreaming in the local governance and community development programs, so as to seek their participation in the planning and decision making processes including local development activities conducted by the local government organization (VDC). SIUAN is strengthening the capacity of the Santals by organizing workshops, interactions and also exposure visits to Jharkhand state of India.

As the information received from the respondents, many Santal youths of Nepal are interested to learn the Santali script, and further the International Santal Council also encouraged the Santal people of Nepal to learn this script. The council

also supported the Nepali Santals to provide the teachers with short term training course. The Santals of Nepal has also organized two training course programs for writing and reading the *Olchiki* script. For example, the first program was organized for a week at Rajghat VDC of Morang in 2010 with the support of Rajghat VDC where 24 Santals learned to write and read the Santali script. Similarly, a month long another program was organized at Majhare VDC of Morang during the last week of December 2011 to the beginning of January 2012. The program was organized by the Santals of Morang to promote reading and writing and to acquire knowledge of the Santali script, from this training course 30 Santals became literate through the Santali script (*Olchiki*). The International Santal Council arranged four Santali teachers from the Jharkhand state of India to support this training course. Mr. Lukhi Ram Hasda (president of SIUAN) informed that Christian Santals did not participate in the Santali language and script trainings programme, because the Christian Santals are more interested to promote the Roman script rather than the *Olchiki* script.

Mr. Hasda also informed that with the efforts of the SIUAN, many Santals have been involved in different committees at the local levels which were related to development activities, such as user's groups, school management committees, health post management committees, etc. SIUAN also engaged to protect and recognize their cultural identities. For example, the Santal leaders (except Christians) of Jhapa and Morang gathered at Rangeli Bazar of Morang in 2009 and decided to write their religion as *Sarna* during the Population Census of 2011 instead being Hindu. But according to some respondents, many Santals did not support this decision. During interviews, the respondents said, that those who were convinced and adhere the religion as *Sarna*, wrote their religion as *Sarna*, and those who were not convinced identified themselves as Hindu. However, the Santal elites are making more efforts for the *Sarna* religion as their traditional religion. They are also making effort to strengthen their *Manjhi Haram* system, and have planned to make 3 regional *Manjhis* (*Chhetra Manjhi*) in Morang and 3 in Jhapa as in the *Parganas Manjhi* of India and a central (*Kendra*) *Manjhi* to control or regulate the *Chhetra Manjhi*.

However, their plan has not materialized due to the poor economic condition of their organization .

Mr. Jairam Murmu of Haldibari informed that they conducted a capacity strengthening project with the support of 'Action Aid'. Under this project, some Santal students were benefitted by getting scholarship. Similarly, they got support to raise pigs and install shallow tube wells for drinking water with the support of NEFIN. The Santal elites have been encouraging to wear their traditional dresses (*Panchi Paharay*) and traditional ornaments at least during the festivals and ceremonies. As a result, the Santal people have started to wear their traditional dresses during dance and music organized at different festivals including *Dashainmela*. The arranged marriage system (*Kirin Bahu Bapla*) in the Santal society takes a very long time and expensive too, now they are trying to make it short and less expensive. SIUAN also attempted to bring a change in marriage system. In the past, there was a system to offer about one quintal rice (100 kg) and 60 kg pork meat and lot of rice-beer on the name of *Jamyu* feast by the father of groom to the bride's father during *Takachal* ceremony after completing the *Gonom Taka* (bride-price) ceremony. A few years ago, with the initiation of SIUAN the Santals of Morang decided to pay only Rs 325.00 to the bride's father on the name of *Jamyu* feast during *Takachal* ceremony. In Jhapathe decision of SIUAN, was not effective, but the Santal of the Jhapa also decided to give only 50 kg rice and 30 kg pork meat to the bride's father on the *Jamyu* feast. The items collected on the name of *Jamyu* were used to arrange a feast to the relatives and friends of the bride's side. They also completed the marriage on the same day instead of a week-long time by exchanging the flower garland (*Swyambhar*) between the bride and the groom and the bride goes to the groom house on the same day.

They realized that the low literacy level and poor economic condition were the main reasons for their backwardness and for being a marginalized group in the Nepali society. They initiated cooperatives in different villages to get relief from poverty. Presently, there are over 270 Santal women in saving credit groups in 21 VDCs of Jhapa (11 VDCs) and Morang (10 VDCs) but these have not been found very effective. The Santal elites felt that the belief on the witchcraft and superstition was one of the reasons for

the backwardness of the Santals. Hence, in the preamble of SIUAN's constitution, there is stress for the abolition of illiteracy, bad practices of culture, witchcraft and superstition from the Santals society. SIUAN also organized the Fifth International Conference at Biratnagar, Nepal, during April 23-24, 2010 in collaboration with the International Santal Council of India with a theme "protect the Adivasis and save the earth". The Conference was participated by nearly 1000 Santals, inhabited in different parts of the world and the major participation was from India. The language of the conference was Santali. The conference gave the message to remain united in the world and promote fellow feelings among themselves through their own Santali language and culture. The conference called for the promotion of Santali language after establishing more Santali language schools in Nepal.

SIUAN suggested the following points for the fundamental rights of minorities, marginalized group, indigenous communities and dalits including Santals to the Special Subject Committees of the First Constitutional Assembly of Nepal. They stressed for the following: (1) Implement the provision of ILO 169 for the protection and recognition of the fundamental rights of indigenous communities as described in the declaration of the United Nations Organization 2007; (2) Ensure and protect the fundamental rights of settlement and migration in any parts, regions, and constituency of the country for the minorities, marginalized group, indigenous communities and dalits including Santals; (3) Make a policy to secure a Nepali citizenship to the Santals of Nepal as per the recommendation made by SIUAN; (4) Correct the ethnic name as *Santal* instead of *Satar*. *Satar* is written in government documents including Nepali literature, magazines, newspapers, academic curricula, citizenship certificate, registration card of land, etc.; (5) Inclusion of the minorities, disadvantaged and excluded groups with their identity in the mainstream of nation building such as Santals living in Jhapa since ancient times but with lack of citizenship, they are not felt not being included in the national mainstream; (6) Secure the land and tenant rights of the Santals of Nepal, as they are being deprived by other communities without alternatives; (7) Ensure the rights against untouchability, exploitation and ethnic discrimination.

SIUAN further, suggested for promotion and recognition of the Santal culture and traditions as fundamental rights. Recognize the traditional *Manjhi Haram* system of the Santals in the local governance system and ensure its effective implementation as per their customary laws. Promote and protect their Santali language and *Olchiki* script of the Santals by incorporating in the curricula of the schools. They also suggested for ensuring a provision in the state rules and regulations for the protection and promotion of the Santal religion (*Sarna*), and the religious document (*HapdamPuthi*), religious places (*Manjhithan* and *Jaherthan*), traditional dress (*PanchiParahaṛ*), traditional weapons (bows and arrows), traditional arts and skills (*Parkam*, *Janam Gandu*, *Patiya*, etc.) as well as hunting traditions. SIUAN also demanded the holidays to celebrate the Santals' traditional festivals.

For the recognition of identity of indigenous peoples including the Santals, the country has not made any specific legislation; however, the constitution of 1990 and the Interim Constitution of 2007 accept caste, ethnic, linguistic and religious diversities of Nepal. Nepal passed the first legislation on indigenous people in 2002. But, it was not about indigenous peoples' rights; rather, it was about the establishment of the Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) as an independent organization working as a link between the Government and indigenous peoples. Similarly, the country has ratified the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169, in 2007. In addition, the government of Nepal has made a reservation policy for the disadvantaged groups (women, Dalits, Janajatis, Madhesis, others), there is a provision of 45 per cent reservation for the disadvantaged groups (GoN, 2009). In the spirit of the Interim Constitution 2007, and ILO Agreement 169 and other International Agreements, the Government of Nepal has introduced minimum social security allowance to endangered races since 2010 (GoN, 2012). Despite these policies and regulations related to the rights and needs of the indigenous peoples, the Santals, recognized as highly marginalized group of people by the government, are not being getting any significant benefits.

## CONCLUSION

The Santali tradition or culture is the main identity marker for the Santals of Nepal. However, the poor economic condition and low literacy rate in the rural set up bring the Santals as a subordinate group, despite a rich cultural heritage. In addition to the influence of Hindu and Christian religions, they have a great belief and faith in traditional deities (spirits) and perform different rites and rituals to appease the spirits. They realize the necessities of the modern ethnic organizations to protect the language, traditional institutions and traditions. They have formed some ethnic organizations including the *Nepal Santal Adivasi Utthan Sangha* (Santal Indigenous Upliftment Association of Nepal, SIUAN). SIUAN is a national level ethnic organization of the Santals which focused the preservation and promotion of their identity and social and cultural institutions. They are trying hard to make their distinct ethnic identity by conducting different cultural and linguistic programs to raise awareness among their community members. This highly marginalized group of people have not much succeeded in influencing the policy and decision makers of the country to protect their language and culture. However, in the contemporary ethnic identity discourses and restructuring processes of the state, the Santals of Nepal are also taking an active role through the modern ethnic organization development process for preserving their culture.

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