

Baha Festival: A Cultural Identity of the Santal Ethnic Group of Nepal

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ABSTRACT: The Santal is one of the important Tarai ethnic groups of Nepal; mainly inhabiting the Jhapa, Morang and Sunsari districts of the Eastern Tarai. The total population of Santals in Nepal is 51,735. The nature of their celebration of festivals is primarily congregational and approach is collective which considered as the expression of their traditional custom and culture. In the present paper an attempt has been made to highlight the *Baha Parba*, the spring flower festival of the Santals. All the festivals of Santals are interconnected to the cultural identity and solidarity of the Santals society.

INTRODUCTION

Nepal is considered as an excellent repository of cultural heritage of diverse ethnic and caste groups. The country started to classify the caste and ethnic groups since the population Census of 1991, which tentatively recorded 60 caste and ethnic groups in Nepal. The Census of 2001 has listed 103 caste/ethnic groups including “unidentified groups”, whereas, the population Census of 2011 listed 125 caste and ethnic groups (CBS, 2012). The caste system of Nepal is basically rooted in Hindu religion. On the other hand, the ethnic system has been rooted mainly in mutually exclusive origin myths, historical mutual seclusion and the occasional state intervention (NESAC, '98). The country has identified 59 indigenous nationalities as indigenous/ethnic groups through the enactment of the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) Act, 2002. Among these, 18 ethnic groups inhabit in the mountains, 24 inhabit in the hills, 7 in the ‘Inner Tarai’ and 10 in the ‘Tarai region of Nepal’. The NFDIN Act 2002 defines the “indigenous” to those ethnic groups or communities who have their own mother tongue and traditional customs, different cultural identity, *South Asian Anthropologist*, 2013, 13(2): 193-197

different social structure and written or oral history”. The Santal is one of the important Tarai ethnic groups of Nepal; mainly inhabiting the Jhapa, Morang and Sunsari districts of the Eastern Tarai. The total population of Santals in Nepal is 51,735. Among the total population of Santals, a total of 49,999 live in the rural area, and 1,736 in urban area and who are primarily engaged in subsistence agriculture (CBS, 2012). They are usually known as Satars in Nepal. Now a days, they prefer to be known as Santals/ Santhals instead of Satars. In addition to Nepal, they also inhabiting in India, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar.

The Santals believe the universe inhabits by numerous invisible supernatural powers or beings in the form of *Bongas* (*Bongas* means deities/ spirits). They feel that the *Bongas* exercise power over the contingencies of nature and recourse to them through magical and religious practices in every festivals and rites. The incantation of nature for the welfare of the villagers, guests, relatives and sometime to increase their wealth and free from all the enemies is commonly practiced during the festivals. The nature of their celebration of festivals is primarily congregational and

approach is collective which considered as the expression of their traditional custom and culture. Each festival has two approaches, one is the magico-religious which covers the sacrifice and offerings to the deity for its appeasement and other is the recreational part which involves entrainment and enjoyment including drinking of liquor, dancing, singing, etc. (Ray *et al.*, '82). In all festivals the village headman (*Manjhi Haram*) presides over the ceremony. The village priest (*Naike*) performs the rituals and rites in festival such as purification, application of vermilion, invocations and sacrificing the animals. Most of the Santal's festivals are related to agricultural calendar. For example, *Erok Parba* is the first agricultural festival connected with the sowing of rice seeds followed by *Hariyar Parba* related to transplanting the rice seedlings, *Janthar Parba* related to first reaping of rice and *Sohrae Parba* related to a rice harvest festival. Presently attempt has been made to highlight the *Baha Parba*, the spring flower festival of the Santals. All the festivals of Santals are interconnected to the cultural identity and solidarity of the Santals society.

STUDY AREA & METHODS

The Santals of Nepal live as a heterogeneous community in the village. They have small, neat and clean house with well-painted walls by charcoal dust mixed clay which is easily recognized from the houses of other communities. The small houses are usually constructed by Sal woods, bamboos and roofed by hay straws. Majority of the Santals are landless. Agriculture and wage labour are the main way of subsistence. Bow and arrows are their traditional weapons. The Santal men usually wear a *dhoti* or *kachhad*, traditionally known as *panchi darhi* covering below the waist. The Santal women wear two pieces of coarse cotton *sarees* of bright colours, one piece wears below the waist, called as *paraha*. Other piece use to cover the breasts, called as *panchi*, it barely reaches to the knees, while the upper end is flung over the shoulders. The Santal women are also fond of to decorate themselves by brass and silver ornaments. They speak Santali, Nepali, Hindi and other local languages. A characteristic feature of the Santal village is a construction of *Manjhithan* (a shrine for *Manjhi Bonga*) near the house of *Manjhi Ha'am* and a sacred grove, known as *Jaherthan* at the

edge of village to celebrate the festivals and other ceremonies. The Santals had an organized system for the management of social and judicial system, known as *Manjhi Haram* system. They make every effort through this institution to solve the community problems including the celebration of festivals like *Baha*, *Sorhae*, etc.

Information about the *Baha* festival and its rites for celebration was taken from both primary and secondary sources. Primary information was taken from the field study conducted during 2010-2012. The Santal villages of Jhapa and Morang districts, mainly Garamani, Jalthal, Haldibari, Darbesa, Sijuwa, Rangeli areas of the Eastern Tarai of Nepal were selected as a study area. Interviews and discussions were held with the senior and knowledgeable Santals including village headmen, ojas, school teachers, etc. The secondary information was also taken from the published relevant literature of Nepal, India, and Bangladesh (Archer, '74; Bista, '67; Mukherjee, '43; Murmu, 2004).

DISCUSSION

Baha, the spring festival is celebrated during the *Sal* blossom period, is one of the largest festivals of the Santals of Nepal. It is a colorful festival of wild flowers for welcoming the spring season and is celebrated in the month of *Falgun* (February-March) for 3 days when *Sal* tree start to flower (*Baha* means flower in a Santali word). The Santals of the study area informed that the *Baha* festival is being celebrated usually at the same time or little before when *Holi* festival of Hindus is going on. The Santals do not collect any wild flower, similarly, they don't construct a new house or thatch the houses until the *Baha* festival is over. During this festival, they worship the major *Bongas* to ensure the safeguard of children as well as to promote prosperity. Since the previous night of *Baha* festival, the *Naike* and an unmarried boy (assistant) take fasting and sleep on the floor of the *Naike* house or at the *Manjhi Haram*'s house using straw mat until the *Baha* is over.

The first day of festival (*Jaherda*) dedicates to purification (*Um*). In this day, everybody takes bath in the morning and assemble at the *Jaherthan* (sacred grove), they clean the area and build two sheds as abodes for the deities. For example, one shed is for

Jaher Era, *Moreko-Tureiko* and *Maran Buru*, and another for *Gosain Era*. The sheds are cleaned with cow dung then the priest worships and offers prayers. During worshipping, the *Naike* cleanses bamboo made winnowing fan, basket, broom stick, bow and arrow as well as pick-axe and a hunting horn then anoints all these things with mustard oil and a powder of aromatic spices like *Methi* / fenugreek. After cleaning and building of the sheds at *Jaherthan* they return to their houses. Jairam Murmu of Jhapa had informed that the Santal boys are who involve in cleaning and construction of sheds at *Jaherthan* visit every house of the Santal village and they receive some rice food from each house. Sometimes, the foods from each house are collected at one spot of the village and then they eat together. But Lukhi Ram Hasda of Morang had informed that instead of visiting every house sometime they take the food in their respective house. During day time, they practice hunting ceremony to hunt or catch the birds, rats, fish, turtle, crabs, snails etc. Some elder Santals of the study area explained about the *Bongalageko* or spirit possession ceremony held during the *Baha* festival. Some authors have described the *Bongalageko* or spirit possession ceremony in much detail (Mukherjee, '43; Umashanker, '66; Murmu, 2004). Accordingly, during spirit possession ceremony, three young persons of the village shaking their heads have entered in a trance impersonating *Jaher Era*, *Maran Buru* and *Moreko-Tureiko*. One of them believed to be possession of *Jaher Era* (Goddess of sacred grove) enters the priest hut, putting a lady's ornament (bracelets, etc.) and carrying a basket on the head and a broom in hand. The next in possession of *Maran Buru* takes a pick-axe and third believed to be in possession of *Moreko-Tureiko* carries a bow and arrow. The actor deities then run to the sacred grove (*Jaherthan*) where they are followed by villagers. When they reached at the *Jaherthan*, the *Jaher Era* sweeps the shrine area and other two actors supervise it. After that they return to the village and the priest asks them to sit on the mat and keep the things whatever they have brought, then he serves a handful of rice as propitiation to the three deities and questioned about the auguries such as the happenings of the coming year, they also give answer vaguely, sometimes, he asks them to hold every evil afar and they answer no bad event will come. The priest then washes their feet one by one pouring the

water during this moment they utter some word and cry loudly. The actor *Jaher Era* also washes the feet of *Moreko-Tureiko*, and the *Maran Buru*. All the villagers also do the same mutually; and it follows by village head and others. After that, the spirit possessed men return to normalcy then the villagers entertain them with a rice meal and rice beer.

In second day, early in the morning, the *Naike*'s wife grinds rice flour. The *Godet* visits every house to collect chicken, rice, salt, turmeric and other spices. The Santals of the village both men and women once again gather at the *Jaherthan* by singing, dancing and playing musical instruments. While they are proceeding towards the *Jaherthan*, the *Naike* (priest) carries a bamboo basket containing wild flowers, ornaments (chain, bracelet, etc.), broom, bow, arrow and horn, along with rice grains, oil and vermilion, pick-axe, etc. The unmarried boy carries a small pot full of water. The priest, once again cleanse the *Jaherthan* by diluted cow dung. The wild flowers, mainly Sal, are collected, if available; otherwise, any wild flowers are used. After that, the priest sits on a mat to perform various rituals in honour of the deities and their ancestors and sacrifices the hens or pigeons to the spirits. The priest offers prayers for the prosperity of the villagers. Regarding the prayer, Murmu (2004) wrote "we make for you our offers that no evil strikes us to the feet and the hands, to the head and the abdomen; that we don't faint in the road. We can enjoy good health" (Murmu, 2004). Traditionally, the three spirit possessed men (*Bongalageko*) once again take their respective tools and move towards the trees around the sacred grove, while the other people follow them. If they see a Sal (*Sarjom*) tree with flowers, the actor *Moreko-Tureiko* throws an arrow and the actor *Maran Buru* climbs the tree to detach the flowers and leaves. The actor *Jaher Era* collects the flowers and leaves in a basket and brings to the *Jaherthan*. The actor *Jaher Era* gives the flowers' basket to the *Naike*. However, the Santals of the study area informed that they have only heard or read about the *Bongalageko* or spirit possession ceremony, now a days, it is not-performed so elaborately as was done earlier in Nepal. After the sacrifice of the chicken, they prepare the *Sudo* (sacred food) to offer to the deities and ancestors and then serves to the villagers. The meat of a hen sacrificed to *Jaher Era* (*JaherSim*) is cooked mixing some rice,

and that cooked item is eaten only by the *Naike* and his Assistant. Similarly, the *Sudois* prepared using the head of the sacrificed chicken to other *Bongas* of *Jaherthan* is eaten only by the male members. The *Sudo* prepares with other parts of chicken, sometimes also pigs and pigeons, are eaten by all the villagers including women. They enjoy with family and guests with meal and *Handi* (local liquor).

The *Naike* and the unmarried boy remains in the *Jaherthan*, while others return to their houses to worship the household *Bongas*. In the afternoon, the Santals go to the *Jaherthan* to receive the priest and the boy with beating of the drums and playing the flutes and the horn to announce that the *Naike* is returning to the village. They inform all villagers to become ready for receiving *Baha* (flowers) from the *Naike*. The *Naike* puts flowers in the winnowing fan (*Hatta*) and the boy carries water in an earthen pot over his head and follows the *Naike*. The priest later visits all the houses in the village where the women wash his feet and he gives them Sal or other wild flowers as per tradition. Sal flowers have a special significance for the Santals. The boy spills some water to the village ladies and the village ladies helps to fill the pot over the boy's head, if water is low. Usually, the *Naike* and his assistant, first visit the *Manjhi Haram's* house where one of the female members welcomes them, the *Naike* delivers a handful of flowers and the woman washes the *Naike* feet while the boy pours some water. The lady gives best wishes to the *Naike* and mutually they spill water over the head or over the body, the lady also repeats same thing to the boy. If the priest is younger than her, he will be bowed before her respectfully. In this way, they visit house to house to distribute the flowers. The *Naike* before entering in his house pours some water and flowers over the roof and door of his house then he enters inside the house along with some guests. The guests are served with rice beer in the evening. The boy does not put the earthen pot on the ground until the *Naike* enters his house with flowers to complete this ceremony.

On the third day, *Da du lceremony*, the Santal men and women assemble in the village road and rejoicing with sprinkling water each other just like a *Holi* festival of the Hindus, but in *Santali Holi*, they didn't use colour as in the *Holi* of Hindus. Everybody enjoys with rice beer and food, a special *Baha* songs,

dance and merry making of youngsters continue in the courtyard of the *Naike*. In the evening, the *Kudam Naike* (assistant priest) together with the *Godet* goes to the nearby jungle and makes to himself some scars with some thorns in the thigh or on the chest and he offers rice mixed with some drops of blood to the spirit of the *Pargana Bongas*, and to all the small spirits (*Bahre Bongas*). Now a day, this practice is not common. Mr. Jairam Murmu of Jhapa informed that in some villages, the Santali *Holi* also celebrated in the second day while distributing the flowers, the Santals boys, girls and elders have enjoyed by sprinkling water among them. At the time of mid-day, they assemble at the *Naike* house to declare the *Baha* festival is over for the year.

CONCLUSION

The Santals have a strong belief in supernatural beings and powers that exist in nature in the form of *Bongas*. They are convinced that their material life is protected and guarded by the *Bongas* and for this they perform appropriate rites and rituals during the festivals to appease them. *Baha* is one of the most important festivals of the Santals, which is celebrated to welcome the spring season, the season of Sal flower. The Sal tree has a great cultural value in the life of Santals. The new year of Santals starts with *Baha* festival. They start every new work after the emergence of spring season or celebration of *Baha* when Sal starts to flower. The *Baha* festival is celebrated in a collective way by gathering all community members at a sacred grove called *Jaherthan*. The collective worship during the *Baha* festival stimulates the community feeling to strengthen their social solidarity, also helps them to be in touch with their spirits upon whom they depend. The *Baha* festival also helps to keep intact their cultural identity by minimizing the huge pressure of different forces to disintegrate their solitary. Further, it helps to forget the daily stresses on their life by means of different entertainments like liquor drinking and making dance and songs during the festival time.

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