

Saharay Serenj: A Study of Santali Folk Music

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Abstract— The present article entitled “Saharay Serenj: A Study of Santali Folk Music” explores one of the most significant genres of Santali traditional songs associated with the Saharay festival. The study is based on qualitative fieldwork conducted in selected Santali villages, where data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and observation of ritual practices. Secondary sources, particularly Dr. Rajib Murmu’s book “Hor Saonhed”, have also been consulted.

The paper examines the origin, structure, performance, and cultural significance of Saharay Serenj. It argues that Santali folk songs are not merely aesthetic expressions but serve as repositories of myth, history, ecological ethics, and collective memory. Through textual analysis of songs along with their English translations, the study highlights how these songs reflect agrarian life, ritual practices, and the worldview of the Santals.

Index Terms—Santali Folk Music, Saharay Serenj, Oral Tradition, Adivasi Culture, Folklore, Ritual Songs.

1. Introduction:

The Santals are one of the largest tribal groups in India, and Santali is their language, belonging to the Munda group of the Austro-Asiatic language family. According to the Census of India (2011), Santali is spoken by approximately 7.4 million people. They are mainly concentrated in Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Assam, and West Bengal, and are also found in Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh.

The Santals claim their original homeland to be Hihiri Pipiri, a mythological place described in their oral traditions. Historically, they were nomadic and moved in search of agricultural land. Over time, they developed a distinct socio-cultural identity with unique customs, traditions, and kinship structures.

Music and dance play a vital role in Santali life. From birth to death, every stage is marked by ritual performances. Santali songs often narrate myths of origin and the history of human creation. Thus, these songs are not merely artistic expressions but carry historical and cultural significance.

Among various Santali folk traditions—Baha, Saharay, Dasay, Lagre, and Dong—this paper focuses on Saharay Serenj, the songs associated with the Saharay festival.

Theoretical Framework:

This study is grounded in theories of oral tradition and performance. According to Alan Dundes (1980), folklore functions as a “mirror of culture,” reflecting the beliefs, values, and social structures of a community. Similarly, Richard Bauman (1977) emphasizes that oral traditions must be understood as performative acts, where meaning is created through context, audience, and ritual.

Jan Vansina (1985) further argues that oral traditions serve as historical sources, preserving collective memory across generations. In the context of Santali culture, Saharay Serenj can be seen as a form of oral archive, encoding mythological narratives, ecological ethics, and social relationships.

Thus, this study interprets Saharay songs as:

- Performative cultural expressions
- Historical narratives
- Carriers of indigenous knowledge

2. Literature Review:

Scholarly works on Santali folklore highlight the importance of oral traditions. Dr. Rajib Murmu’s Hor Serenj documents various Santali songs and rituals, providing a valuable foundation for this study. P.O. Hembrom (1996) discusses Santali language and culture, emphasizing the role of songs in preserving tradition.

Dundes (1980) and Vansina (1985) have shown that folklore and oral traditions function as cultural texts. However, specific studies on ‘Saharay Serenj’ in his book “Hor Saonhed” remain limited. Most existing works are descriptive and lack analytical engagement with songs and their meanings.

This study attempts to fill that gap by combining fieldwork with textual analysis.

3. Methodology:

The study follows a qualitative research approach:

- Fieldwork conducted in Santali villages
- Questionnaires administered to 'Majhi' (village head), 'Paranik', and villagers
- Collection of oral songs during Saharay festival
- Participant observation of rituals
- Use of secondary sources such as 'Hor Serenj'

The songs were transcribed, translated, and analyzed in their cultural context.

4. Origin of Saharay:

According to Santali mythology, Thakur Jiu created Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi, the first human beings, and sent them to Earth. Humans cultivated land with the help of cattle. When cattle were neglected, they fled to the forest. Humans prayed to Marang Buru, who mediated and restored harmony. Humans promised to worship cattle annually, leading to the origin of Saharay Parab.

The term Saharay means Sarhao in Santali language. It means admiration. In the tradition of Saharay the cattles are admired for their labour in the cultivation works. It is often interpreted as "affluence," reflecting the harvest season.

5. Songs of Origin and Identity: Saharay songs narrate myths of origin, agriculture life, and social values. One traditional song reflects the shared origin of the Santals and Saharay.

Original Song:

"Toka redam janam lena
Sari Saharay parab do,
Toka redam busar lena,
Sar bhatu sari Saharay do?
Hihiri re janam lena
Sari Saharay parab do,
Pipiri re busar lena
Sar bhatu Sari Saharay do."

English Translation:

Where were you born and brought up, O Sari Saharay?
Where did you take your origin and upbringing?
Sari Saharay was born in Hihiri
And brought up in Pipiri.

The song suggests that both the Santals and Saharay originated from the mythological place, Hihiri Pipiri, emphasizing the inseparable bond between identity and tradition.

6. Saharay and Agriculture:

There is another song raising the question of whereabouts of the Saharay parab. Where the Saharay has been personified.

"Umin din do Sari Saharay oka redam tahekan?"

Oka reda, oka redam oko tahelen?

Bet beyher talare, horo gachi danang re,

Horo gachi danang riginj oko tahelen.”

English Translation:

For so long, where were you, O Saharay?

Where did you remain hidden?

I was in the paddy fields,

Hidden among the crops.

The very song describes the connection between the tradition of the Santals and cultivation which they transform from generation to generation over the ages.

7. The Five days of Saharay Parab: The Saharay is celebrated over five days each marked by specific rituals, songs and communal practices.

7.1 Um Maha (Day of Purification): The first day is dedicated to purification. Houses are cleaned with cow dung, and ritual bathing is performed. Community worship takes place and cattle are honoured. During the night ritual of Jagao (Awakening of cattle) is performed with traditional instruments. A song sung during this ritual.

Song:

“Ahi re...

Dasai chando parom ena, Saharay chando bolyena, Seter ena umas nida do.

Jol pese ego ayo gora re sulti sengel, Kuidi sunum te jol angai pe.

Gora renich marang dangra uni laha jagao e pe,

Ona tayom gey ko, pethar ko,

Ona tayom jagao kope mihu merom ko.

Muched redo kada bitkil ko,

Jagao jagao abon umas maha do,

Mid nida bon jagao angaya.”

English Translation:

Dasai month is over, Saharay begins.

Light the lamp in the cowshed and keep it burning all night.

Awaken the biggest bull first, then the others.

Let us awaken them throughout the night.

This song invokes the awakening and care of cattle, emphasizing their sacred role.

Another Song of Um maha:

“Tehej dole um ena

Dol badol pukhri re;

Gapa dole bongaya,

Dara hara chatom bakhol re.”

English Translation:

Today we bathe in the sacred pond,

Tomorrow we worship in the great palace.

This song reflects purification, preparation for worship.

Another Song for the day:

“Okoi ren gaey ko, gaey ko borod borod,

Okoi ren bitkil ko, bitkil garum garum.

Abo ren gaey ko gaey ko borod borod,

Unku ren bitkil ko, bitkil garum garum.

Jhij ako redo ayo soner karhar,

Ladah ako redo ayo rupegarh silpinj.

Gaey ko bohog redo ayo sonegarh dhaowa,

Bitkil bohog redo ayo rupegarh madowa.

Johar ako abo ayo beohar ako abo,

Serenj ako abo ayo durang ako abo.”

English Translation:

Whose cows and heifers are these?

They are beautifully decorated with gold and silver.

Let us welcome them with respect and songs.

7.2 Bongan Maha (Day of Worship)

The second day focuses on household worship of deities, specially in the cattle shed (Gora). Offerings are made and feasting begins.

A Song expressing festive joy:

“Buru buru parom khon

Gelbar buru parom khon,

Marang daday neota akadinj.

Mid chupud daka lagit,

Mid kuti jil lagit,

Marang daday barte akadinj.”

English Translation:

My elder brother has invited me from far away over the hills

For food and celebration.

This song highlights familial bonding and the joy of celebration.

Another important Song :

“Naowa hatah, naowa kirinj inj me,

Inj dunj chalah ayo kulhi daran;

Kulhi daran ayo Majhi ko orah,
Majhi ko orah ayogo gaeyko chumaira.
Inj dunj chalah ayo Paranik orah,
Paranik orah ayo kadako chumaira.”

English Translation:

Mother make me ready. I will go to the houses of Majhi baba and Paranik baba to greet their cattle. This song reflects the social custom of greeting cattle at the houses of Village heads.

7.3 Sardi Maha / Khuntao Maha:

This day is dedicated to cattle and includes the ritual of Khuntao, where animals display their strength.

A song sung for cattle:

“Ahire...

Enech mese eya raengeyae,

Khelond do udug me.

Tehenj do sari saharay khuntao,

Numin din em tangi led,

Numin din em dheyan led,

Ona din do tehenj seter en.

Derenj te rog me raengeyae,

Pun janga te enech me,

Don ate khel udug me,

Digir digir dhuri otang me.”

English Translation:

O cattle, this is your day of joy

Dance, play, and celebrate. The day has come for which you were looking for so long. Blow the wind and dust in the air with your dance.

This song expresses joy and encourages cattle to participate in the celebration .

Another song describing the Saharay ritual .

Santali Song:

“Majhi ko chhatka re gey ko tolekan,

Paranik chhatkare kada ko tole kan;

Gey ko tole kan do tore sutem te,

Kada ko tole kan do jaeri baber te.

Gey ko enej ekan tumdah tamak te,

Kada ko enej ekan baj bajna te.

Gey ko enej ekan do dhuri doy otang ed,

Kada ko enej ekan do hasa doy kholao ed.”

English Translation:

Cattle are tied in the front yard of the village heads(Majhi and Parantik) and made to dance to the sound of traditional instruments. The song reflects the age old Santali tradition of the playful of the cattle during the Saharay.

It describes preparation and performance of Khuntao ritual.

There is another song which reflects the youthfulness of the youths in the Santali village:

“Majhi koyag chhatka re,
Jora kushbi baha akan do,
Janum teko ramfa akad,
Charech teko bata akad,
Jora kushbi chikenj tiyuga.”

English Translation:

A pair of marigold flowers bloom in the courtyard of the village head. The flowers are fenced with thorns. How can I pluck them.

This song is symbolizing youth and festivity. The Santali youths who desire to gift flowers to their beloved, can't pluck the flowers.

7.4 Jajle Maha or Jale Maha: The fourth day emphasises social interaction where people visit each other's homes. A representative song :

“Hola dona daey na gey kada ko matao len,
Tehenj dona daey na kora kuri ko matao akan;
Gapa do na daey da Haram budhi ko matao aa.”

English Translation:

Yesterday was for cattle,
Today is for youth,
Tomorrow is for the elders.

This song explains the sequence of celebration across different groups – cattle, youth and elders.

7.5 Gadai Maha/ Jom mid Maha (Day of Farewel)

The final day marks emotional departure.

A farewell song :

“Daey na daey na marang daey,
Daey na daey na tala daey,
Hati lekan Saharay daey na odog chalah kan.
Den daey na jari jote,
Den daey na sili sutem,
Hati lekan Saharay daey na lang tol dohoya.”

English Translation:

Oh elder sister,Saharay, as big as an elephant, is leaving—
Let us tie it so it does not go away.

This song expresses sorrow and compares Saharay to something grand like an elephant symbolising it's importance.

8. Discussion:

The songs reveal:

- Ecological awareness (respect for cattle)
- Agrarian identity
- Mythological continuity
- Social bonding and emotional expression

They function as oral archives preserving Santali heritage.

9. Conclusion:

Saharay Parab is the most significant festival of the Santals and Saharay serenj forms its cultural core. These songs are not merely artistic expressions but serve as living records of Santali history, mythology and world view. They reflect ecological ethics, agrarian life and social values, emphasizing harmony between humans, animals, and nature. As oral traditions, they provide valuable insights for scholar of Folklore, literature and anthropology. As the greatest festival of the Santals, Saharay tradition and the Saharay Serenj represents its cultural essence. These songs are invaluable sources for understanding Santali tradition, religion, and world view.

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