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SANTALS AND *JUNGLE* IN COLONIAL INDIA

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Abstract:- This article discusses how there exist a symbiotic relationship between Santals and forest further how changing access to nature impacted an adivasi people. This paper explores how their access to nature gradually diminished under colonial rule through governmental policies and restriction of the forests to the indigenous population. This paper shows that how *jungle* is integral part of Santal lives and their social, cultural, religious and economic activities revolves in and around the forest only.

Keywords: forest, mahua, hunting, migration, bongas, adivasi, wilderness.

INTRODUCTION:

The Santals, a tribal people, left the *jungle* to settle on the plains at the end of the eighteenth century, but they were allowed to live only between the villages of the majority population and the jungle, and numerous ways of suppression kept them in a marginal social position. The agrarian system at the end of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century put the Santal farmers in a situation where they were easy to exploit economically, and many ended up as debt slaves. This situation provides the background to the Hul, the Santal insurrection of 1855, before the general uprising of 1857. This paper, however, will mainly consider how the administrative structure of Raj tried to change the existing social relation between Santals and jungle.

Under the Mughals, large tracts of jungle inhabited by the tribals extended through the entire Chotanagpur area, including Birbhum and western Burdwan. These jungle Mahals were nominally under Mughal control, but little attempt was made to extract revenues or exert political authority due to their inaccessibility (Poffenberger 1995:337). Chotanagpur was primarily populated by Mundas, Oraons, Hos, Santals, Birhors as well as low caste Hindus. The people of Chotanagpur had seen a steady flow of outsiders even in the pre-Mughal period. But from the Mughal period the indigenous peoples, apart from losing their ancestral lands, gradually became minorities in their own territory (Ghosh 1999:104). The Santals who came to occupy fringe areas were recent settlers in the early nineteenth century. The displacement of the Santals in the early colonial period produced a split in their clan system as they spread out to work on land, and in indigo factories, or build railways from 1850 onwards.

Tribal societies have developed an attachment to the environment which also means that social identities are constructed around images of the landscape. This link between landscape and identity has been noted by scholars (Gold 1999; Vitebsky 1993). Skaria (1999) shows us how, through narratives, the people of the Dangs of south Gujarat imagine their indigeness as rooted in the landscape's wilderness, implying that they see themselves as peripheral people.

From the very ancient days Indian people lived with the forests and their interaction with forests did not do any harm to the environment. It was the colonialist British that for the first time rejected the Asiatic notion of mutual survival of both trees and men and their inter-productive existence. They disturbed this natural equilibrium first by encouraging cultivation through forest clearance for maximization of land revenue and then by introducing organized forestry for commercial timber production, viz., the sal (*shorea robusta*) and deodar (*cedrus deodara*) which were in great demand for making the railway sleepers. The development of railways in eastern India between 1854 and 1910 linked Chotanagpur with other regions and brought commercial economy in the area. Colonial intrusion into the forests of Bengal started officially in 1864 when the first conservator of forests was appointed. The erosion of popular forestry rights in India can be traced to 1865, when a first forest Act was passed, to be followed by the provision of Act VII of 1878. But in 1894, the forest policy issued by the government aimed at defining the rights of the state and local groups in relation to the forest. The British divided forests into five classes: reserved forests, private forests, protected forests, village forests, and wastes. In the last three categories, tribal as well as non-tribal rights continued to be respected. In 1895, the conservator of forests issued licenses to each village headman for hunting,

shooting, fishing or trapping animals in reserved and protected forests of Chotanagpur. The headman was required to himself obey and make the villagers obey the conditions of the license. A system of reward and punishment ensured that the government's orders were carried out. Thus, licenses of the entire village could be withdrawn if any inhabitant contravened any provision of the forest law. The main victims of these new regulations were the tribals of central India, and adivasis had to adjust to new codification of time and space, which curtailed their rights.

The administration aimed at maximizing the commercial value of timber. Straight line planting of foreign species replaced irregular jungles with their symbolic centers, the sal and mahua groves of the Santal myths. The centre thought it necessary both for commercial purpose and for its increasing hold over the subaltern society which would be a very important part of its task of rural penetration and state making. In many cases the people spontaneously protested against denial of their hereditary rights by spoiling forest resources. Soon the exploitation of minor forest products was leased to non-tribal contractors. Hunts were disrupted, deities offended, ancestral places profaned. By virtue of the Land Acquisition Act of 1894, the state could secure for the mining companies an almost limitless access to tribal lands.

If rice fields are vital to the village, another portion of the landscape is even dearer to the Santal heart. This is the forest- in southern villages a tiny patch, but in the north a vast expanse of trees surging to the lonely hills. These supply the villagers with twigs and branches for fuel, timber for rafters and tools, and leaves for plates and cups. During the hot weather the girls and women lay in the year's fuel, going to the forest in little chatting bands and returning with the long poles wagging on their heads. If the year is bad, the forest is scoured for roots, leaves and berries and certain plants are cooked for curry. These plants are an insurance against famine as well as a mainstay of the kitchen. But above all, the forest is a place of secret recreation. In it the men can discuss their tribal ways in privacy, they can talk sex away from women, and they can hunt. Santal men relish nothing more than a hunt in the forest. Finally, the forest is a trysting place for lovers, a setting in which boys and girls can meet in private, sing love songs, form attachments and prosecute their affairs (Archer 1974:24).

Forest are an integral part of the livelihood of the Santals and serves as a nucleus around which the economy and culture of the community revolves. The commonly found tree species in the Santal *jungle* are *sal*, *mahua behra*, *harra*. The forests serve as an important source of fuel wood and virtually all the domestic fuel wood requirement in the household is met through the forest. At the time of food scarcity in the Santal household, tubers growing wildly in the forests are dug from underneath the ground to serve as food. Forest product mainly *mahua*, *behra* and *aamla* fetch good price in the local market. The collection of *mahua* is important economic activity among the Santal womens and *mahua* has religious and cultural importance in Santals society.

The symbolism of the forest has been central to most events and processes by which tribal solidarities were affirmed. Thus the charismatic leaders of the Santal rebellion (*hul*) as well as the Birsa movement of 1895 emphasized the importance and meaning of the forest and ancestral places. The forest became an apt smile for survival: this is generally true in India where forests are associated with religious values and are 'the local landscapes of Indian magical realism' (Corbridge 1991). In Santal poetry the degradation of the forest symbolizes loss of memory and more specifically the decline of kinship ties. The importance of the forest is also reflected in the calandar: the New Year begins with the flowering of the *sal* tree. In traditional songs, wealth is associated with sal. The Santal use sal leaves to make leaf cups and plates which they sell in the market, and which are essential for offering rice-beer and ritual food to ancestors and deities. Whenever Santals migrated in search of new lands, the chief brandished a sal branch: lifting the branch conveyed the orders of the chief. The connotations of the *sal* branch are numerous: it may indicate a fixed appointment, the number of leaves showing the days outstanding before an event. Branches of other trees such as *karam* (*Adina cordifolia*) evoke fictive kinship which implies economic and ritual solidarity. Trees are associated with Santal deities, especially in the sacred grove, where the villagers propitiate the bongas who look after the crops. Felling a tree is often seen as a transgression since trees are the abodes of the deities. The Santals use a great variety of trees: *sal* as well as other trees no less valuable for their timber.

The symbolic meaning of the forest is still present in stories about hunting. The Santal strictly celebrate mainly six different hunting festivals like: Pur hunting, Jarpa hunting, Bithi hunting, Baha hunting, Gira hunting and Disua hunting on different occasions throughout the year, these are associated with nature, forest including their traditional socio-religious beliefs. The *disua sendra* is one of the most important and biggest public hunting among the Santals. Totemic names as well as sub-clan (*khunt*) stories emphasize the relationship between men and wild animals (Carrin-Bouez 1991). The forest was where one learnt discipline, obeying the orders of the Dihuri baba (hunt priest), organizing the hunters and preventing them from fighting each other. The forest is a place of enchantment, where people make love illicitly--- often evoked as 'resting under *mahua* trees'. It is where men or women encounter bongas who seduce them. The supernatural dimension of the forest is clear from the story of a woman who delivers her baby in the forest. As her mates leave her alone, she meets a bonga who aids in the delivery. When she returns to the village in the morning, carrying her son in her arms, the villagers see a bright halo radiating from her body. To give birth in the forest links the landscape to the human body. The forest is where young men learn about taboos, pleasure and social justice, but also where they may provoke the forest deities by transgressing their rules. Thus a man who picks up certain fallen branches under a tree where bongas live is defying the deities. The emphasis on the forest has allowed the Santals (as well as other adivasi of the region) to express social cohesion in ecological terms and to think of deforestation as a cultural loss.

All through the nineteenth century the local communities of Chotanagpur and Santal Pargana had sought to protest against growing cultural and physical incursions into their lives. Beginning with the unrest in Tamar in 1816, Munda rebellion in 1832 and the Santal rebellion in 1855, disaffection continued through the mutiny of 1857. W.J.Allen, who made an extensive

tour of Singhbhum in 1861 noted 'that the love of freedom was the general characteristic of the wild and hilly country of the savage Kols and Santals (Pursottam 1991:87). The restriction of access to forests and fresh-water fisheries resulted in a wave of protest among the Oraons, Mundas and Santals. When they lost their lands and forest to *dikus* (outsiders), the local community refused to recognize the loss as legitimate. The link between *adivasi* and *jungle* was one that had been established in the nineteenth century through the many tribal rebellions over the land of Chotanagpur and Santal Pargana. This claim to territory was reformulated in the period after the second world war once the discourse of indigenous rights began to be politically articulated by raising the issue of separate state.

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