The Santals of Mayurbhanj - A Study on Their Original Homeland

Subash Chandra Karua

There are more than five hundred tribes and sub-tribes in various parts of our country. Out of them the Santals constitute one of the largest proto-Austroloid aboriginal tribes of India. They were inhabiting in Southeastern Chotanagpur plateau. The scenery of the main plateau is very attractive with its undulations detached abrupt hills and forest tracts. Groves of ancient mango trees, many of them are of enormous size. This is a prominent feature of the landscape of Chotanagpur. It is one of the most attractive parts of the Indian peninsula. Santalas have migrated to the western district of West Bengal, Santal pargana of Bihar and northern hilly district of Orissa and tea plantation areas of Assam at different times. Majority of them live in different parts of Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, Jharkhand, Tripura and Chhattisgarh.

Though, their uniqueness of language, traditions and culture drew the attention of number of administrator, anthropologist, ethnologist, social scientist and researcher from India and abroad. Very little work has been done on the Santals of Mayurbhanj except the work of Charulal Mukharjee. An humble attempt is made to study the migration and settlement of the Santals in Mayurbhanj state in a broader historical perspective. They are the most numerous of the tribes of the Austro-Asiatic race to which the Mundas, Hos, Kharrias, Bhumijas and some other tribes belong. L.O. Skreud points out that the name 'Santal' is a corruption of 'Saontar'. It was adopted by the tribe after their sojourn for several generations in Saont region of Midnapur of West Bengal. Before they want to Saont they had been termed 'Kharwar', the root of West Bengal. Before they went to Saont they had been termed 'Kharwar', the root of which 'Khar', is a variant of 'hor' or 'man'-the term used by all the Santals.

Santal, Sonthal, Saontal or Saontar are grouped as tribal Hindus in Mayurbhanj. Out of sixty two tribes of Orissa, forty-five tribes are found in the district of Mayurbhanj. Though the Santals are found in other districts like Keonjhar, Balasore, Sundargarh and Dhenkanal, the district of Mayurbhanj is peopled largely by Santals. Among the people of different races and functional affinities the place of honour, however has been given to the Santalas alone who numerically stand foremost in the population of the state of Orissa. Mayurbhanj is bounded on the north by the district of Singhbhum of Jharkhand and Midnapur district of West Bengal; on the south by the district of Balasore and Keonjhar; on the east by Midnapur and Balasore district; on the West by the district of Keonjhar and Singhbhum. It was the largest and wealthiest of
the feudatory states of Orissa\textsuperscript{17}. The Bhanj rulers are one of the oldest royal families of India and they are the oldest ruling dynasty of Orissa\textsuperscript{18}. Mayurbhanj had the distinction of being administered by a ruling family in unbroken continuity for more than one thousand years from the 9th century AD till it was merged with Orissa on 1st January 1949.\textsuperscript{19}

The Santals called themselves 'bir sindic'\textsuperscript{20} or strong man and 'hor hopon'\textsuperscript{21} or son of the man. E.G. Man points out that the ethnological characteristics of the Santals distinguishes them from all other races in India as nomadic and civilized. The men are of middling stature and they are remarkably well made with dark skins. They have strong limbs, some what thick lips and in many instances their cast of countenance almost approximates to the Negro type. They wear their hair, which is long and coarse, tied in a knot on the top of the head, the ends hanging down from the center\textsuperscript{22}. Regarding their physical feature, R.R. Diwakar states that they are short in stature and they possesses a broad flat nose with sunken nose ridge. They have wavy hairs, some-times curly, though never frizzy. They share these characteristics with other primitive tribes in the same group.\textsuperscript{23} Their dialect belongs to that of the Austro-Asiatic group. G.A. Grierson states that their dialect has been derived from old Kherwali language which had a similarity with other mundari speaking people\textsuperscript{24}.

Santals do not have any written literature, though their traditional legends (binti) are current among them\textsuperscript{25}. Their traditional lore has been handed down orally from generation to generation\textsuperscript{26}.

Pilchu halam and Pilchu budhi are to be the first human couple (Adam and Eve) of the Santal myth\textsuperscript{27} who were born from the egg of Has and Hasin birds. In course of time seven sons and seven daughters were born and as such their family enlarged\textsuperscript{28}. The names of five\textsuperscript{29} sons were Sandhra, Sandhom, Care, Mane and Acredelhu. The names of four\textsuperscript{30} daughters were Chita, Kapu, Hist and Dumnii. The names of the rest children are forgotten\textsuperscript{31}.

They believed that though they were originated at Ahili-pipilior hihili-piili, but they became the settlers at Chai-champa which was regarded as their home land\textsuperscript{32}. They recite the dong song:

\begin{verbatim}
"Hihili pipili reban Janamlen
Khoj Kaman reban khojlen
Harat reban hara lena
Sasangbeda reban Jate lenho"
\end{verbatim}

The Bengali version of the Santali song is described as follows.

\begin{verbatim}
"Hihili pipirite Jonme chhilam
Khoj kamane Khoj parchilo
Harata dese Bansa badrala
Sasang beda dese Jatibhag holo"
\end{verbatim}

A. Campbell narrates:

\begin{verbatim}
"In Hihiri, mother I was born
In pipili, Mother I saw the light
In Haradata, Mother I grew up
In Khoj kaman, Mother I was fought for"
\end{verbatim}

P.O. Bodding narrates:

\begin{verbatim}
"In Hihiripipiri We were born
In Khoj Kaman We were called for
In Harat We grew up
In Sasang beda We became sept."
\end{verbatim}

From Khoj Kaman they went to Chai and then to Champa, where they resided for many years. Their social in division was instituted here\textsuperscript{37}. Regarding the identification of Champa, E.T. Dalton states that he is unable to identify the
Ahiripipiri, but Khairagarh and Chai Champa are in the Hazaribagh or Ramgarh district. L.O. Skrehsud derives the name Hihiri or Ahuri pipiri from the Hir origin, but others identify it with Ahuri pargana in the Hazaribagh. From Ahuri pargana they moved to Khoj Kaman, then to Hara, then to Sasangbeda, then to Jarpi, then to Koida, Chai and finally reached Champa. In Champa, they soujourned for many generations and the present social institution of the tribe was also formed there.

Champa was the capital of Anga (South East Bihar). It was situated at the confluence of the river of the same name and the Ganges. It is stated in the Mahabharata, the Purana and in 'the Hari Vamsa' that the ancient name of Champa was Malini.

"Champasya tu Puri champa
Ya maliny - ab bhavatpura."

A great calamity took place with this race probably due to the invasions of the Muhammadans. Peace and order disappeared and the reign of terror prevailed.

E.T. Dalton has found the existence of an old fort at Chai, the walls of which were of earth and stone. A space of about five acres of land surrounded the fort. It was the abode of the Santal Raja named Jangra. He destroyed him-self and his family members on hearing the approach of a Muhammadan army under Sayid Ibrahim Alli, a general of Muhammad Tughluq. Ibrahim was also known as Malik Baya and died in 1453 A.D.

The existence of the fort is also substantiated by J. Phillips who states that while Santals were dwelling in Chai Champa, they multiplied. Further he states that there were two gates-Ahin gate and Bahin gate of the fort of Chai Champa. The date of the capture of the fort by Ibrahim Alli may be 1340 AD. After the Santals might have migrated to different directions i-groups in search of the site for their settlement.

It appears that the Santals had first begun to settle in the hilly tracts of Damin-I-Koh or Damin estate near Rajmahal hills in the district of Santal pargana in about 1790. The Santals faced a little opposition from the Malers (Paharias) who were the natives of this area. The Santals learnt the art of ‘kurao’ or ‘Jhuming’ cultivation system from the Paharias. So long as there were vast forests and low population this method did not do much harm. But with the shrinking of the forests and rapid growth of the immigrants it caused a lot of harm. Frequent Jhuming of hill sides resulted in destruction of forests and soil erosion. The process of converting the forest and wilderness to cultivable land went on very rapidly. As a result various social evils sprang up rapidly. Like other aboriginals the Santals were toys in the hands of the money lenders and dishonest amalas (subordinate officials). Further under 'kamiauti' system, a man borrowing money had to work for the lender until the debt was rapaid. The position of the Santals became little better than that of slavery in the hands of the unscrupulous money lenders. Many Dikkus (Non-aboriginals) had occupied the hilly tracts cleared by the Santal. Many plots of fertile rice land prepared by the Santals, were occupied by the 'Dikkus' by means of mortgage deeds.

The headman of a Santal village had to beg a permission from the landlord to convert a patch of forest land to a patch of cultivable land. The headman had to pay a sum fixed by the landlord for the said purpose. Though initially the fixed sum was paid, later the landlord began to demand much higher sum as a rent and harassed the villagers. So the Santals were compelled to leave such areas in search of tracts of virgin jungle, where the same process was repeated. Yet they were
subject to torture and humiliation of the 'Dikkus'. Their smouldering discontentment on the agrarian issue exploded during the 19th century in the districts inhabited by the aboriginals. It was pointed out by Edward Gate in 1901 that the Santal migrated mostly to the areas rich in laterite soil. They not only migrated to Santal Pargana and many parts of Chotanagpur, but also to the laterite tracts of Malda, Dinapur, Rajasahi and Bogra.

The Santals might have learnt the immense utility of Sal tree (shorea robusta) and Mohua tree (Madhuca latifolia) and Karam tree (Adina cerdifolia) from their ancestors. For their sustenance these trees were quite significant from two angles socio-religious and economic. They used to collect various kinds of roots, leaves, flowers, fruits, stems, and resin from the forest, which were consumed by them either as food or as medicine in their day-to-day life. They also sold these forest products in the market.

Mayurbhanj state extended over an area of 4243 square miles and presented varieties of soil and sights. It had a rich valley. The Meghasani hills or 'the seats of clouds' rose to the height of 3824 ft. in the Southern part of the State. Different qualities of laterite soil was found throughout the district. Moreover, the Similipal forest of Mayurbhanj district comprising a single compact block represented a virgin and semi-evergreen forest with flora and fauna. The central core of the forest covered the ridges and ranges of hills and mountains and was undisturbed by any type of polluting factor. The forest growth was thick and impenetrable presenting massive growth of varieties of trees, the chief among them being the Sal trees.

The areas of Bamanghati and Nayabasan consisted of hills, dense jungle and valleys. These forests are quite significant and inaccessible to trade and commerce, were mostly inhabited by the rudest jungle tribes. The soil of northern Bamanghati was very fertile and fit for extensive cultivation. Red and yellow ochre were usually used by the Santals for painting their houses. The Yellowish limestone was also available in the bed of Burabalanga river at Mahulia of Baripada. The clay available on the laterite bed of Baripada was well suited for pottery.

They were in search of such areas where the above mentioned amenities were available. So the dense forest tract of Similipal and laterite bed of Mayurbhanj might have attracted these people for their settlement. Out of their several groups some might have settlement. Out of their several groups some might have settled in the hilly tracts of Similipal mountains after the fall of Champa in about 1340 AD.

The history of Mayurbhanj reveals that the Santal were living in this land much before 1340 AD.

The Bamanghati copper plate inscription of 924 AD issued by Ranabhanja state that he granted four villages in favour of a son of Mahasamanta Mandi located in Uttarakhanda which comprised the vishayas of Karandiya and Devakunda, which are identified with modern Karanja and Devakunda respectively.

Another copper plate of Rajabhanja (Son of Ranabhanja) records the grant of Brahmanvasti in the name to Subraman, the son of Samanta Mandi who may be identified with Mahasamanta Mandi of the Bamanghati plate of Ranabhanja. Brahmanvasti may be identified with modern Brahmanvasa, six miles away from Rairangpur of Mayurbhanj.

From the above copper plate inscriptions it may be assumed that Subraman Mandi was the son of Mahasamanta Mandi or Samanta Mandi.
who belonged to the Santal tribe. Because Mandi or Marndi is a title, which is used by only Santal community. Moreover out of their twelve sects Mandi or Marandi\(^3\) is the fifth clan or sect of the Santal community. When they were originated in Champa they were wealthy class and they had a fort at Badoligarh\(^3\).

If Ranabhanja the Bhanja king of Mayurbhanj was ruling during 924 A.D, and if the date of copper plate inscriptions are true, the Santals of Mayurbhanj might have settled in Mayurbhanj by 924 A.D.

In view of the facts stated above the opinion of Charulal Mukherjee regarding the migration of the Santals to the district of Mayurbhanj towards the close of the 18th century\(^6\) may not be applicable. The two copper plates mentioned above clearly prove that the settlement of the Santals in Mayurbhanj at an earlier date.

**References:**

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42. Ibid.
43. E.T. Dalton, op.cit; p.450.
44. H.H. Risely, op.cit; p.226.
45. J. Houlton, op.cit; p.74.
46. Ibid; p.75.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid; p.76.
49. Ibid; p.78.
50. Ibid; p.79.
51. Ibid.
52. N.M. Senapati, N.K. Sahu, opcit; p.46.
53. Ibid; p. 45.
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57. Ibid; p.19.
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Subash Chandra Karua is a Lecturer in History, M.P.C. (Auto) College, Baripada.