

*Journal of Adivasi and Indigenous Studies (JAIS)*  
(A bi-annual peer-reviewed online journal posted on Academia.edu)  
Vol. XIV, No. 1, February 2024: 6-19  
©2024 JAIS, ISSN (online) 2394-5524

# **Utopian Beginnings, Divine Wrath, and New Beginnings: The Santal Migration Narrative**

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## **Abstract**

Stemming from a shared historical legacy, the Santal, Munda, and Ho tribes of Eastern India offer a rich tapestry of oral traditions. This study delves into the creation stories and migration narratives of the Santals, employing a comparative approach to illuminate their unique cultural identity. By examining the narratives alongside those of their neighboring tribes, the research sheds light on the evolution of Santal social structures, anxieties surrounding social boundaries, and the enduring importance of community. Furthermore, a critical analysis is undertaken, contrasting the Santal deluge narrative with the flood story of the Hebrew Bible. While acknowledging their distinct objectives (Santal narratives focusing on human-nature relationships, Hebrew Bible emphasizing a divinely ordered world), the comparison sheds light on universal themes of humanity's dependence on the natural world and the consequences of disrupting its balance. This multifaceted approach transcends a singular interpretation of Santal traditions. By drawing upon shared motifs and contrasting narratives, the research offers a richer understanding of the Santal worldview, historical development, and the dynamic nature of cultural identity within these interconnected communities. Ultimately, the analysis underscores the significance of better understanding the origin myths and the traditional accounts rather than treating this as purely fictional accounts and thereby preserving these oral traditions for future generations, ensuring their continued contribution to our understanding of Eastern Indian mythology and the rich tapestry of human cultural expression.

## **Introduction**

The Munda speakers, belonging to the Austroasiatic language family, are an indigenous group inhabiting the east and central parts of India. Despite their South Asian location, they exhibit genetic signatures and linguistic traits that trace back to Southeast Asia. This suggests a complex history of migration and interaction between these two regions (Rau and Sidwell, 2019: 35-57). Genetic studies have shed light on the unique admixture pattern of Munda speakers, revealing a sex-specific distribution of Southeast and South Asian ancestry components.

What present genetic studies on the ancestry of the Munda speakers is that they share about three-quarters of their ancestry with Dravidian and Indo-European speakers in India. Interestingly, a genetic component present in Indian populations is missing in the Munda speakers. Additionally, roughly one-quarter of their ancestry is shared with Southeast Asians. In fact, the Mundas are positioned genetically between South Asians and Southeast Asians. Furthermore, between the two sub groups the North Munda and the South Munda: The South Munda tribes displayed a closer genetic relationship to

Southeast Asians, whereas the North Munda tribes leaned towards South Asians. Estimation of the timing of the admixture event has been found to be 3846 years ago for South Mundas and 2867 years ago for North Mundas (Tätte et al. 2019).

In simple terms, genetic studies have given us a picture that the ancestors of the Munda speakers (proto-Munda) arrived India about 4000 years ago. The migration from Southeast Asia to India probably have been in batches. Once the proto-Munda group arrived Indian mainland which was generally a male driven migration the large number of Austro-Asiatic admixed with the local Indian population who were Dravidians and formed the Munda core. Subsequently, the Munda split up into South and North Munda. Although the proto-Munda interbreed with the local Indian population the linguistic trait remained Austroasiatic because of father tongue effect. During the arrival of the Austroasiatic speakers into India, it was the time when we can approximately say that the Indus Valley Civilization was at its last leg or when India was entering the Iron age (Riccio et. al., 2011: 405-435). The use of iron and iron working was prevalent in the Central Ganga Plain and the Eastern Vindhyas from the early second millennium BCE. It could be that the North Munda cluster worked their way up to the Gangetic valley and at some point of time they had built settlement around parts of eastern Vindyan scraplands, the South Bihar plains, which is also the region around the Kaimur Hills. Several places belonging to this part mention places like *Saktesgarh*, *Chitrakut*, *Kalinjar*, *Kherhi*, *Rohtasgarh* in the Santal-Munda-Birhor oral narrative of ancient past (Roy, 1912: 67).

One Madho Singh who finds mention in the Santal-Munda-Birhor oral narrative evicted away these people from Rohtasgarh, Chai-Champa where they had developed a strong foothold (Thakur 2009: 44). Following the exodus the Santals settled in the areas around the *Barakar* and *Damodar* River i.e *Giridih*, *Jamtara*, *Dhanbad*. Further migration along the river *Kangsabati* populated *Purulia*, especially the area around the *Ayodhya* Hill Forest, and *Paschim Medinipur*. Subsequent migration and scattering of *Santal* colonies to the east and south of Subarnarekha River populated the districts of *Saraikella-Kharsawan*, *Purbi Singhbhum* and *Mayurbhanj*. In the early 19th century, the opening up of *Rajmahal* hills for the *Santals* led to a massive migration past the Damodar (Soren 2018: 1-19). The districts of *Birbhum*, *Godda*, *Deoghar*, *Sahibganj*, *Dumka*, and *Pakur* now constitute a big chunk of Santal population in India. Interestingly, the Munda further down South settling in vast numbers in the districts of *Gumia*, *Simdega*, *Sundargarh*, *Paschimi Singhbhum*, *Khunti* and *Ranchi* which accounts for more than 70% of entire Munda population.

Since the Mundas, Santals and the Birhors were in association for a long period of time they share a good portion of common history and then had their own share of separate history. The individual narratives of each of these tribes' origin myth, stories, folklores reflect this shared and individual history.

### **Unveiling the layers of identity: a deep dive into Munda oral traditions**

The genetic tapestry of the Munda people, woven with threads from both Southeast Asia and India, presents a compelling story of migration and intermixing. While these ancestral connections offer a glimpse into their origins, a deeper understanding of the Munda people requires delving into their cultural heritage. Their oral traditions, passed

down through generations, hold the key to unlocking their historical experiences, social structures, and unique worldview. This paper ventures beyond the realm of genetics to explore the rich tapestry of Munda oral traditions, particularly focusing on the Santal narratives. We acknowledge the shared history of the Munda, Santal, and Birhor tribes, recognizing the interconnectedness of their experiences. However, our focus here is on dissecting the intricacies and nuances within the Santal narratives, using them as a lens to understand the broader framework of Munda oral history. This analysis goes beyond simply recounting the stories themselves. We aim to uncover the underlying layers of meaning within these narratives. By examining the use of symbology, potential multiple authorship, and hidden messages, we can glean insights into the social and historical forces that shaped the Santal way of life.

Our investigation will delve into the 'prime movers' behind societal changes and established norms, exploring the motivations behind specific narratives in light of historical events. By dissecting the Santal narratives, we aim to establish a framework for analyzing the oral traditions of other Munda tribes. This comparative approach will allow us to understand the mechanisms by which the Munda people have constructed their collective history, revealing the nuances that differentiate each tribe's experience while acknowledging their shared ancestral roots. Through this multifaceted approach, we aim to bridge the gap between genetic evidence and lived experience. By analyzing the symbolism, authorship, and historical context within Munda oral traditions, we can paint a richer picture of the Munda people's identity.

### **Historical background of the documentation of Santal narrative or origin myth and migration**

One of the first attempts to document the Santal narrative of their story of origin, traditions and institution was made by Rev. Lars Olsen Skefsrud. In 1863, about eight years after the Santal Rebellion a young and enterprising Norwegian missionary Lars Olsen Skrefsrud had come to India to work with the Gossner Mission. Four years later in 1867 he along with his Danish colleague Hans Peter Borresen founded the Ebenezer Mission Station at Benagaria in the erstwhile Santal Pargana. While his association with the Santals, Skrefsrud became immensely interested in the Santali language and traditions. In 1873 he published a Santali grammar and ventured to document the traditions and the institutions of the Santals. For many years he looked in search of someone who had immense knowledge about the traditions and customs of the Santals and finally he found a guru by the name of Kolean. Skrefsrud assisted by a Santal colleague named Jugia became involved in the process of documenting all that Kolean guru had to say about his people. The dictation was completed on 15 February 1871 (Skrefsrud 1942, 187) and subsequently it was published in the form of a book, *Horkoren Mare Hapramko Reak' Katha*, in Santali. Rev. Skrefsrud's successor Rev. Bodding published re-edited version of the book in 1942, *The Tradition and the Institution of the Santals*. The Book comprehensively narrates all the aspects of Santal life, from birth till death. It meticulously tells with detail, the rituals and customs followed in the time of birth, marriage, death and other social obligations. This comprehensive work opens with the Santal story of origin and migration as narrated by Kolean guru. Skrefsrud had clarified that the narratives have been put down, verbatim, without any addition from him (Skrefsrud 1942, 1). A summarised version of the Santal

story of origin and migration as narrated by Kolean guru to Skrefsrud is discussed in the next section.

**The *Santal* story of origin and migration as mentioned by Kolean Guru and documented by Skrefsrud**

Towards the rising of the sun (the East) was the birth of man. Initially, there was only water, and under the water, there was earth. Thakur'-Jiu then created various water creatures: the crab, crocodile, alligator, raghob boyal (*Silurus glanis*, freshwater catfish), sole prawn, earthworm, tortoise, and others.

Thakur decided to make humans from earth, forming two figures. However, as he was about to give them souls, the Day-horse descended and trampled them to pieces, leaving Thakur deeply grieved. He then decided to create birds instead, pulling material from his breast to make two Has Hasil birds (swan). They looked beautiful, and after he breathed life into them, they flew upwards but could not find a place to alight except on Thakur's hand.

When the Day-horse returned to drink water, it spilled froth, which formed foam on the water. Thakur instructed the birds to alight on the froth, allowing them to float like a boat. They moved over the sea but found no food, so they implored Thakur for sustenance.

Thakur then called the alligator, asking if he would bring up earth. The alligator tried but failed, as all the earth dissolved. Thakur then summoned the prawn, who also tried and failed. Next, the raghob boyal fish tried, but the earth dissolved, leaving him without scales. The stone-crab also failed in its attempt. Finally, Thakur called the earthworm, who agreed to bring up earth if the tortoise would stand on the water.

The tortoise agreed, and Thakur chained its four legs in the four directions, making it immovably quiet on the water. The earthworm went down to bring up earth, placing its tail on the tortoise's back and eating earth to bring up. The earth was spread out and fixed like a hard film, forming enough for the whole earth.

Thakur harrowed the earth level, creating mountains from the heaped-up soil. He then planted sirom seeds, which grew first, followed by dhubi grass, the karam tree, tope sarjom (*Sal tree*), labar atnak (*Terminalia tomentosa*), ladea matkom (*Bassia latifolia*), and other vegetation, making the earth firm. He put sods in places with water and closed bubbling water with rocks.

The two birds then nested in sirom plants, laying two eggs. The female sat on the eggs, and the male brought food. They hatched two human beings, a boy and a girl. The birds sang a song to Thakur, asking where to place the humans. Thakur gave them cotton, instructing them to press food juices into it for the children to suck. The children grew and began to walk, but the birds were anxious about where to place them.

The birds flew towards the setting sun and discovered Hihiri Pipiri. They informed Thakur, who told them to take the children there. The birds carried the children on their backs and left them in Hihiri Pipiri. The fate of Has Hasil remains unknown as the ancestors did not pass down this knowledge.

The two children, Haram and Ayo (or Pilcu Haram and Pilcu Budhi), grew up eating sumtu bukud grass grain and sama grass ears. They had no clothes and felt no shame, living in peace. One day, Lita, a god, visited them and taught them to brew beer from

roots. The three of them gathered roots, wet rice, pounded it into flour, mixed it with fermenting stuff, and made dough balls. They let the balls ferment and later mixed them with boiled and cooled grain. After five days, they poured water on it, and Lita instructed them to drink after offering some to Marang buru. The couple drank, became drunk, and engaged in amorous behavior.

The next morning, Lita visited again, finding them ashamed and naked. They covered themselves with ficus leaves and later had seven boys and seven girls. The eldest boy was Sandra, followed by Sandhom, Care, Mane, and Acaredelhu. The eldest girl was Chita, followed by Kapu, Hisi, and Dumni, with others unnamed. The boys and girls grew up, often hunting or gathering separately. One day, the young men found the girls playing near a Capakia Fig tree. They joined in dancing, and each young man chose a girl. Pilcu Haram and Pilcu Budhi married them, placing each couple in one of seven rooms. The couples had children, who were divided into septs to prevent sibling marriages: Hasdak, Murmu, Kisku, Hembrom, Marandi, Soren, and Tudu.

Living in Hihiri Pipiri, mankind moved to Khoj Kaman, where they became disrespectful. Thakur, angry, warned them but was ignored. He saved a holy pair by guiding them to a cave in Harata mountain and destroyed the rest with a seven-day fire-rain. The pair emerged from the cave, finding animals, and received clothes from Thakur. They made a home near Harata, had children, and multiplied.

They moved to Sasan Beda, where they became tribes and established five more septs: Baske, Besra, Pauria, Chonre, and the lost Bede. After a long stay, they moved through Jarpi, Sin Duar (where they found a pass after vowing to Maran buru), Baih Duar, Aere, Kaende, and finally the Cae country. Here they greatly multiplied before needing to move again.

### **Unveiling the layers: elements of meaning in oral narratives of origin and ancestry**

Before we go into the discussion on the origin myth, we will understand the elements of an oral narrative. Origin myths and ancestral stories, passed down through generations in oral traditions, hold immense cultural significance. These narratives transcend simple storytelling, weaving together history, belief systems, and social structures. To fully appreciate their richness, it's crucial to delve deeper into the key elements that shape them:

**Symbology:** Oral narratives are often rife with symbolic imagery. Animals, objects, and natural phenomena can represent abstract concepts like creation, destruction, or societal roles. Understanding these symbols requires careful analysis of their role within the narrative and their cultural context. Just as the role of tortoise who acts as foundation during the creation of landmass.

**Hidden meanings:** Beyond the surface story, origin myths and ancestral stories may contain hidden messages or veiled references to historical events or social conflicts. Identifying these hidden meanings can provide valuable insights into the concerns and experiences of the community that preserved the narrative. As the handi or rice beer was very wisely introduced to the Santal society as a heavenly item.

**Repetitive formulae:** Repetition plays a crucial role in oral narratives. Recurring phrases, epithets, and narrative structures aid memorization and create a sense of

familiarity for the audience. These formulae also enhance the rhythm and flow of the performance, making the story more engaging. The use of numbers like seven daughters and seven sons, division into twelve septs.

**Performance:** Unlike written narratives, oral traditions are meant to be performed, not just read. The storyteller's vocal inflections, gestures, and interaction with the audience can significantly impact the meaning and emotional weight of the story. Analyzing the performance aspect allows for a more holistic understanding of the narrative's power. Like the traditional account or the origin myth was 'performed' on the occasion of chatiar and death (Skrefsrud 1942: 2).

**Multiple authorship:** Origin myths and ancestral stories are rarely static creations. Over generations, different storytellers may add their own embellishments, modify details, or adapt the narrative to suit the current social context. This 'multiple authorship' contributes to the richness and dynamism of the oral tradition. There are broken ends of the story like there is no finishing to the Plichu Haram and Pilchu Budhi story, in Munda account (Asur kahani) they have quite a role so these broken ends suggest multiple authorship.

**Improvisation over time:** While a core structure might exist, storytellers often improvise details or even inject personal anecdotes within the narrative. This improvisation allows the story to remain relevant and relatable to contemporary audiences.

Understanding these elements allows us to move beyond the literal interpretation of origin myths and ancestral stories. By examining symbolism, hidden messages, performance styles, and the evolution of the narratives, we gain a deeper appreciation for the complex cultural heritage they represent.

### **Discussion on the story of migration**

There are multiple versions of the Santal story of origin and migration; however, the fundamental structure upon which the story is constructed basically is the same. If the narrative is carefully scrutinized, we observe the following:

The narrative opens with a stark image: a world entirely submerged in water, with the promise of earth hidden beneath its surface. This primordial water resonates with creation myths from across the globe. In the Babylonian epic *Enuma Elish*, the world begins with the mixing of sweet and saltwater, symbolizing the raw potential for existence. Similarly, in Egyptian mythology, the primeval god Atum emerges from the watery abyss of Nun, representing the source from which all creation unfolds. For the Santals, this primordial water signifies not just the source of life but also a state of potentiality – a world brimming with possibility before the imposition of order.

The narrative then delves into the act of creation itself. Unlike many myths that depict creation as originating from a central point or an unspecified location, the Santal story emphasizes the east. Land emerges from the water in the direction of the rising sun, imbuing the act of creation with a sense of light, renewal, and new beginnings. This eastward birth of man stands in stark contrast to creation myths found in other cultures. The Abrahamic religions, for instance, describe the separation of waters above and below the firmament, creating dry land at the center. The Santal emphasis on the

east suggests a unique association between humanity's origins and the life-giving power of the rising sun.

### **Unveiling layers of creation: trial and error, and the earthworm's significance**

The Santal creation narrative, beyond the emergence of land from water, delves into a sequence of attempts at creating life and the crucial role of the earthworm. This section offers insights into the Santal perspective on creation, showcasing a process of trial and error quite distinct from the more authoritarian approach seen in Abrahamic religions. Additionally, the tortoise's role as the solid base upon which the landmass was being created presents a potential connection to Hindu symbolism where the same creature (Vishnu in Kurma avatara) formed the suitable foundation upon which mount Mandara rested in the famous episode of Samudra Manthan. Incidentally Mandar hill is discussed in the traditional account of the Mundas (Roy 1912: 65).

The narrative breaks away from a preordained, single attempt at creation. Thakur, the creator god, initially attempts to fashion humans from earth, only to have them destroyed by the Day-Horse. This failed attempt is followed by the creation of the Has Hasil birds, who struggle to find a place to alight. Thakur then turns to various aquatic creatures – the alligator, prawn, raghob boyal fish, and stone-crab – for assistance in bringing up earth. However, their efforts are in vain, highlighting the challenges in creating a stable foundation for life and thus offering a more natural creation.

This trial-and-error approach stands in stark contrast to creation narratives found in Abrahamic religions. In the Book of Genesis, for instance, God speaks creation into existence with a single command. There is no struggle, no failed attempts – only a divine will that brings forth the world in its entirety. The Santal narrative, on the other hand, portrays creation as a process of experimentation and overcoming obstacles, suggesting a world not simply commanded into existence but gradually brought forth through trial and error.

The eventual success story revolves around the earthworm. Unlike the majestic creatures initially called upon, the earthworm, a humble and seemingly insignificant creature, becomes the key to creating the landmass. This could be interpreted in several ways. It might symbolize the importance of perseverance and humility in achieving success. Even the seemingly powerless can play a vital role in creation.

Furthermore, the tortoise role as the foundation of earth resonates with Hindu symbolism. In Hindu cosmology, the Sesha Naga, a giant serpent, is often depicted coiled beneath the Earth, acting as its foundation. Both the tortoise and the Sesha Naga represent creatures associated with the earth and its creation. This potential connection suggests a possible exchange of ideas or a shared cultural memory between the Santals and neighboring Indo-Aryan cultures.

### **Unveiling the Santal cosmos: shaping the earth and the birth of humanity**

The Santal creation narrative continues to unfold, revealing fascinating details about shaping the Earth and the birth of humanity. This section sheds light on the Santals' understanding of the natural world, their connection to the divine, and the origins of their own existence.

Following the creation of the landmass, the narrative initiates the process of shaping the Earth. Thakur, the creator god, uses a harrow to level the ground, with the excess forming mountains. This act highlights the deliberate shaping of the Earth, suggesting a world not simply created but crafted with purpose. The subsequent mention of various plants sprouting in a specific order – sirom first, followed by –“*dhubi grass (Cynodon dactylon) be sown and come up; after this the karam tree, thereupon the tope sarjom (Shorea robusta) the labar atnak (Terminalia tomentosa), the ladea matkom (Bassia latifolia), and after this all kinds of vegetation.*” (Prasad, 1995: 81) The Santal creation myth not only details the world's formation but also subtly spotlights plants with potential medicinal value, the story introduces several trees:

**Sal Tree (*Shorea robusta*):** This majestic tree's bark and leaves have traditionally been used to treat diarrhea, dysentery, and skin ailments.

**Arjun Tree (*Terminalia tomentosa*):** The bark, leaves, and flowers of this tree boast various applications, with the bark decoction used for treating digestive issues and the leaves used for wound healing and pain relief.

**Mahua Tree (*Madhuca longifolia*):** Various parts of the Mahua tree hold medicinal value. The flowers are used for coughs and colds, the bark for diarrhea and dysentery, and the seed oil for skin conditions.

**Karam Tree (*Terminalia arjuna*):** This tree's bark is particularly valued in Ayurvedic medicine for treating heart conditions due to its cardio-protective properties. A decoction of the bark might also be used for treating diarrhea and skin ulcers.

The narrative then shifts to the creation of the first humans. The Has Hisil birds lay eggs that hatch into a boy and a girl. Interestingly, the birds seem unsure where to place these humans, singing a song that expresses their concern and seeking guidance from Thakur. This portrays the birds as nurturing figures, responsible for the well-being of the first humans. Thakur's solution involves cotton and food juices, suggesting a period of initial dependence and care for the newly born. Also suggesting that though this is an origin myth the basic elements of life love and affection are all there it increases its connection with the audience.

The section concludes with the birds transporting the children to Hihiri Pipiri, a land of abundance where they live on wild grains and remain unclothed without shame. This land of Hihiri Pipiri might represent a utopian state, a paradise untouched by societal norms and the need for material possessions. Here, the Santals might be reflecting on their ideal state of being, one grounded in harmony with nature and free from societal constraints.

### **The Santal balancing act: divine intoxication, human error, and social solutions**

The Santal creation narrative's portrayal of rice beer, intoxication, and the potential for incest offers a unique perspective on human failings and societal solutions. Unlike many myths that depict such situations with punishment or tragic consequences, the Santal story takes a more nuanced and ultimately humane approach. The narrative introduces rice beer as a gift from Lita, a god. This divine origin imbues the drink with a certain allure and positions intoxication as a novel human experience. The beauty of this experience is hinted at – the potential for pleasure and altered states of

consciousness. This resonates with the idea of forbidden fruit, where the act of consumption itself holds a certain irresistible charm. However, the narrative doesn't shy away from depicting the potential dangers of intoxication. Under the influence of rice beer, Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi lose their inhibitions and teeter on the edge of an incestuous relationship. This human vulnerability is acknowledged, showcasing the potential for even the first humans to make mistakes, especially when presented with a new and intoxicating experience. The most striking aspect of the narrative lies in its aftermath. There's no divine punishment or tragic consequence for the potential transgression. Instead, Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi demonstrate remarkable foresight in recognizing the need for social order to prevent similar situations in the future (Hansdak 2017: Ch. 7).

Their solution – the creation of septs – establishes a foundational social structure that effectively prohibits marriage within families. This proactive approach highlights the Santal belief in human agency and the ability to learn from mistakes. Rather than resorting to punishment or succumbing to despair, they take concrete steps to ensure the well-being of future generations. By focusing on establishing social norms rather than punishment, the Santal narrative offers a more humane approach to a sensitive topic. It acknowledges the possibility of human error, especially when faced with the allure of the unknown. However, it emphasizes the capacity for self-correction and the importance of building a social structure that promotes harmony and prevents future transgressions.

This approach stands in contrast to many creation myths where incestuous relationships lead to devastating consequences. The story of Oedipus in Greek mythology or the Egyptian myth of Osiris and Isis exemplify this tragic outcome. The Santal narrative, however, offers a glimmer of hope, suggesting that even in the face of human failings, proactive solutions and social structures can prevent future tragedies.

### **Nature's wrath and the human cost**

The Santal deluge narrative in their creation story serves as a cautionary tale, functioning differently from the widely known account of Noah's Ark. Here's how it sheds light on the Santal relationship with nature: The deluge serves as a stark reminder of humanity's vulnerability to the forces of nature. Thakur's anger unleashes a destructive fire-rain, highlighting the potential consequences of human actions. This resonates with the Santal respect for nature's power. Unlike some myths where humans are granted dominion over nature, the Santal story emphasizes a more balanced relationship.

Unlike Noah's Ark, a divinely constructed vessel, the Santals find shelter in a natural cave on Mount Harata. In Ho narrative the humans find shelter in a crab hole which is an example of personal improvisation in the story. This choice emphasizes the protective power of natural elements themselves. Caves, often associated with the womb of the Earth, symbolize a safe haven provided by nature. This highlights the Santal reverence for the natural world, seeing it as a source of both destruction and protection.

The irony lies in humanity's need for a natural cave to escape the very nature they disrespected. This underscores the potential consequences of a broken relationship with

nature speaking in Biblical terms this would be the –‘broken covenant’. The story serves as a warning to maintain harmony with the natural world, acknowledging its power and respecting its potential for both destruction and refuge.

The narrative reveals a more intricate relationship between the Santals and nature. It's not just about fearing its power but also recognizing its potential for both destruction and protection. The cave becomes a symbol of this complex relationship, offering shelter while reminding humanity of the consequences of disrespecting the natural order. This episode reinforces the Santal reverence for natural elements like caves and hills. These elements are not simply passive backdrops but active participants in human existence, offering both challenges and safe havens. The story encourages a more balanced and respectful relationship with nature, acknowledging its power and appreciating its potential for both destruction and renewal.

### **Shared narratives, shifting boundaries and social norms**

The Santal migration narrative, recounted across Santal, Birhor, and Munda communities, offers a fascinating glimpse into the historical construction of social norms. More than a simple account of movement, the story reveals anxieties surrounding social boundaries and their potential influence on cultural practices.

The narrative establishes a concept of social purity, evident in the separation from the Birhors due to their diet and the social distancing from the Mundas who married outside the group. The Birhors' consumption of monkey meat, considered taboo by the Santals, highlights the importance of dietary restrictions in defining social identity (Nadal 2014: 263-278). Similarly, the social distancing from the Mundas who intermarried suggests a disapproval of practices that blur the lines between communities. These actions showcase a preference for maintaining social distinction within a broader tribal grouping. This sets the stage for the emergence of Mando Sin, a figure of mixed heritage who embodies the potential dangers of breaching social boundaries.

Mando Sin's narrative serves as a powerful cautionary tale. His mixed heritage, portrayed as the child of a *deko* (outsider) and a Santal woman in some versions, or the offspring of a Birhor and a Santal in others, underscores the anxieties surrounding social purity. Regardless of the exact lineage, Mando Sin's "unacceptable" background makes him an undesirable marriage prospect. His desire for a Santal bride and the king's threat of violence highlights the anxieties surrounding inter-tribal marriage. This could have influenced the development of endogamy (marriage within the tribe) as a social norm, aiming to preserve social order and prevent future conflicts. The narrative emphasizes the importance of the Santal community. The collective flight in response to Mando Sin's threat underscores the threat to their social fabric and cultural identity. The story suggests that a strong sense of community was necessary to resist external pressures and maintain their way of life. This focus on collective identity might have contributed to a sense of shared purpose and solidarity within the Santal tribe.

### **The Santals at the crossroads: adaptation and identity at the three trees**

The passage describing the Santals' conference at the three trees offers a glimpse into a fascinating moment of cultural adaptation and transformation. The reasons behind the changes in customs and norms likely stemmed from a complex interplay of

factors. The Santals, having been repeatedly displaced, might have needed to adapt their practices to survive in new environments. This could have included practical adjustments, such as modifying burial rituals because there was not be any permanent homeland from thereon. Because of continuous displacement there was no sense in making permanent structure because any other day it might belong to the more powerful aggressor. So, it was far more practical to cremate them like the dekos and this could be seen as some sort of appeasement as well.

The specific trees chosen for the conference – the Sal, Asan, and Mahua – likely held deep cultural significance for the Santals. These trees might appear in creation myths or represent important values. For instance, the Sal tree is associated with strength and stability, while the Asan tree symbolizes resilience. The Mahua tree, with its flowers used as food and leaves used in rituals, could represent sustenance and community. Holding the conference under these trees could signify the Santals' desire to:

**Reclaim their cultural essence:** By surrounding themselves with symbolic elements, they might have sought to reaffirm their identity despite the changes they were considering.

**Seek guidance and strength:** The trees could have been seen as sources of wisdom and resilience needed to rebuild their community after displacement.

**Establish a new connection to the land:** Choosing a specific location with these trees might have been a way of claiming a new space as their own and establishing roots.

The adoption of deko practices doesn't necessarily signify a weakening of Santal identity because by that point of time dekos were ubiquitous and not something that could be lived without. In that context it could be seen as a strategic move (strategic integration). Facing new realities, the Santals might have recognized the value of certain deko customs, like applying vermilion or sindur as a mark of married woman. Now since they would be living with deko neighbours who are more populous it was necessary to adopt their customs so as to warn the neighbours that this was a married woman through their customs (Bodding 2013: 13). This doesn't imply complete assimilation; rather, it suggests a willingness to adapt while retaining core cultural elements.

### **The genesis of division: examining tribal narratives of separation**

Understanding the historical separation of tribal groups often involves delving into the rich tapestry of their oral traditions. This is particularly evident when examining the Ho, Santal, and Birhor tribes, who each possess unique narratives explaining their divergence from a common ancestry. These narratives not only shed light on historical events but also reveal the core values and social structures that each tribe holds dear.

### **A feast for destiny: the Ho creation myth**

The Ho people tell a story steeped in symbolism and hierarchy. It unfolds with a grand feast orchestrated by the benevolent deity Sing Bonga. Having witnessed the first humans learn the ways of procreation and flourish into a thriving family of twelve sons

and twelve daughters, Sing Bonga presents them with a challenge – how to maintain harmony within this large group (Tickell 1840: 797) His solution takes the form of a magnificent banquet. A diverse spread of food is laid out – rice, buffalo and bullock meat, goats, sheep, pigs, poultry, vegetables, and more. Each pair in the family is then presented with a unique choice: to select a food item that resonates most deeply with them. This seemingly simple act holds immense significance, for it will determine their future and social standing.

Drawn to the symbolism of strength, the first two pairs select buffalo and bullock meat. They become the ancestors of the Ho and Bhoonij Mootkan tribes. Others, drawn to the nourishment of rice and vegetables, are destined to become the Brahmins, Rajputs, and other Hindu castes. The remaining pairs make their selections, each choice shaping their future occupations and social positions, until all the food is gone. The final two pairs face a meager offering – only pig flesh remains. These become the ancestors of the Santals and the Kurmis. Finally, the pair left entirely empty-handed receives a share from the Koles, becoming the Ghasi.

This narrative emphasizes the preordained nature of social order in Ho society. The feast acts as a pivotal moment, establishing social stratification at the very dawn of humanity. The choice of food becomes a symbolic representation of one's destined path, reinforcing the importance of tradition and established hierarchy within the Ho culture. It's interesting to note that a similar story exists in the Santal narrative, with a key difference – the Santals themselves choose the ox meat, which symbolizes strength while the dekos select the remaining options. This variation highlights the complexities of oral traditions and the importance of considering different perspectives when understanding tribal identities.

### **The curious case of twelve: a recurring motif in tribal narratives of eastern India**

The narratives of the Santal, Munda, and Ho tribes, inhabiting regions of eastern India, share a peculiar fascination with the number twelve. This seemingly arbitrary number appears repeatedly in their creation stories and social structures, prompting curiosity about its cultural significance. The number is found as division into septs such as 12 septs of the Santals, and then dividing 12 septs into 12 sub-septs, marking a historical event deliberation went on for twelve days or twelve years, using in rituals as 12 seers of rice, or as 12 days of fasting after the Karam festival in the Birhor custom during the *Jitia* festival. This is reminiscent of the same symbology as 12 years of exile in Ramayana. Here, we delve into the potential reasons why twelve holds such importance for these tribes.

**The Santal septs:** Their narrative mentions twelve distinct septs, potentially representing a complete picture of their social organization. Each sept might have its own customs, roles, or even origin stories that contribute to the overall identity of the Santal tribe.

**The Munda Asur story:** This narrative feature twelve Asur boys who challenge a single boy in a game. The number twelve here could symbolize the completeness of the Asur group or the totality of their challenge.

**The Ho creation myth:** It describes the first humans having twelve sons and twelve daughters. This usage of twelve might represent the completeness of the first family or the foundation for all future generations of the Ho tribe.

**Divisibility and order:** Twelve is a highly divisible number (1, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 12), making it practical for establishing subgroups or categories. This divisibility might be particularly useful for the tribes in organizing and remembering their complex social structures.

**Mythological resonance:** The number twelve holds significance in many mythologies and religious traditions. For example, the twelve Olympians embody the major Greek deities, while the twelve disciples surround Jesus Christ in Christianity. By incorporating twelve into their creation stories, these tribes might be imbuing their narratives with a sense of grandeur and connecting them to wider mythological themes, potentially lending legitimacy to their origins and social structures.

**Cognitive ease:** Cognitive science suggests that humans have a natural preference for small numbers, with twelve falling within the range we can easily grasp and remember. This inherent cognitive bias could explain why twelve is a commonly used number in storytelling and cultural systems across the globe. By using a number within this range, these narratives might be ensuring their effective transmission through generations.

### **Conclusion: a tapestry woven from myth and identity**

This exploration of Santal oral traditions, particularly the creation story and migration narrative, has unveiled a multifaceted cultural tapestry. The intricate symbolism within these narratives illuminates the Santal relationship with nature, their social structures, and the historical events that shaped their identity. The comparison with neighboring Munda and Ho creation stories has proven particularly insightful. The narratives, while sharing themes of origin and social order, reveal distinct anxieties surrounding social boundaries and cultural practices. At their community level each tribe displays their sense of superiority and racial purity. This comparative approach highlights the dynamic nature of cultural identity and social norms within these interconnected tribal communities. Comparing the Santal narrative with the story of Noah's ark revealed some interesting differences in terms of general tone, objective, message where it was seen that the Santals found shelter in the natural cave protecting themselves natural calamity. So, it displays the remarkable dependence of this tribal community with nature and its surroundings, the hills, the caves and the springs. Also, the treatment of sensitive social aspects like incestuous relation is dealt with openly in the Santal narrative, giving it a much softer tone and accepting it. The events in the narrative are not always punishment every time there is a scope of improvement which makes the guilt of transgression much lower.

In conclusion, this paper has provided a deeper multifaceted understanding of their worldview, cultural identity, and historical development. By delving into the symbolism and comparing narratives, the analysis not only celebrates the richness of Santal mythology but also underscores the importance of preserving these traditions for future generations. These oral traditions serve as a bridge to the past, offering invaluable insights into the cultural tapestry of eastern India.

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