

# **A Study on Traditional Knowledge of Santal with special reference to their Health, Disease and Ethno-medicine**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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*Santal is one of the largest agricultural tribes in eastern India. It is found to have retained an enduring tradition of culture and self-image since long in the midst of various external economic, political and cultural interventions in the past. The particular groups of Santal with whom the present discourse is concerned are well exposed, among other things, to the forces of modern health care system. They, however, combine the modern ideas and practices with their traditional ones in their everyday behavior but differ in their orientation to the cosmos of health and life. Health and disease among the Santal are confined not only to the individual and his/her society but also to the natural and the supernatural beings at large. The Santal form a morally bounded world with natural and supernatural beings. Their orientation to the cosmos is essentially participatory.*

*The Santal thus seem to lack a commensurable space for meaningful communication with the modern society that is fragmentary, individualistic and characterized more by a causal orientation to the cosmos.*

*The present paper initiates an ethno scientific discourse on Health, Disease and Medicine among the Santal of my study area.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Modernization may be viewed broadly as an evolutionary transformation of simple and traditional society to a universal pattern of culture. One of the major perspectives of modernization or human development is to improve, among other things, the health condition of traditional/tribal peoples through modern medicine and health care facilities. It has, however, been found that the tribal peoples' own perception of health, disease and medicine as well as the associated socio-cultural norms and practices often stand as crucial

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barriers to the effective implementation of modern health facilities, and subsequently, a doubt is raised in the uniform applicability of the modern medical science uncritically to all traditional societies. Recently, in anthropology and other related disciplines, there has also emerged a concern with the study of the 'specifics' of particular cultures instead of putting them straight into any grand theory of the Western World. The problem that seems to arise from the situation is that there is a practical as well as a theoretical necessity to learn about the indigenous knowledge and culture with reference to health, disease and medicine of the people.

In the present discourse, an attempt has been made to study the ideas and practices of a specific group of the Santal, an agriculturalist tribe in Birbhum district of West Bengal with particular reference to health, disease and medicine. For the purpose I adopted mainly a cognitive approach and collected information on folk taxonomies of health, disease and medicine. An attempt has also been made to understand the meanings of the terms in the context.

Medical Anthropology is a subfield of anthropology that draws upon social, cultural, biological and linguistic aspects of man and tries to understand specifically the factors influencing physical, psychological and social well being of a people in particular and humanity in general. It involves the study of the diseases, the process of their prevention and treatment and medicine in varying socio-cultural contexts of peoples.

Health, disease and medicine though often claimed to be the subject matter of medical science; the history proves that social science in general and anthropology in particular has contributed significantly to them. The work of Bodding(1925), Mahapatra(2003) and Frake(1961) projected a common viewpoint that there exist a strong relationship between health and social situations which led to researchers in understanding social and cultural dimension of illness.

Santal, the studied ethnic group is one of the largest tribes in eastern India mainly concentrated in Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal. According to 1991 census the population of santals in West Bengal is more than three and half a million which is about 9.55% of the total population. Though at present the tribe has been much influenced by the modern society, they still persist many aspects of their traditional customs, norms, beliefs and practices. Traditionally, santal look upon illness normally as a phenomenon arising from an imbalance between the '*Human World*' and the '*Other World*'. The two worlds form a unity into the belief system of the people. The ideas and practices related to health, disease and medicine are closely related to their socioeconomic and religious system and ultimately, their outlook on life. Santal, however, perceive a number of diseases, identify their specific symptoms, have specialist healers and use different kinds of herbal and non-herbal ingredients as well as amulets, spells, divination and exorcism for prevention and cure of diseases. They seem to have an institutional system of identification, nomenclature, cognition and symbols centered round health, disease and medicine.

Although my present study seems to initiate an ethno-scientific discourse on health, disease and medicine, it differs from it in its consideration of the indigenous verbal categories in social action. In my study the primary information relating to the santal notions of health disease and medicine are being gathered from the santal medicine men (*Ojha / Janguru*) and from common people through informal conversations during group or individual interviews, participant as well as non-participant observation etc. I have tried to note the process of classification, study the meanings of the terms in the actual contexts of use, and understand the culturally agreed categories through careful question-and-answer sessions.

## Study area

The village Mahisdhal is situated under the jurisdiction of Bolpur P.S. of Birbhum district, West Bengal, where I have been carried out my present field study for the last two years. I have already taken preliminary census of 188 household. From my initial study of the household census I have come to know the total population, numerical strength of male and female, the literacy status, occupation, marital status etc of the people of the village. Mahisdhal is a multiethnic village in where Santalas are dominant but there are some other ethnic groups with a very few numbers. The total population of the village is 804 of which 373 are males and 431 are females and the Santal population is 597 (272 male and 325 female)

## Concept of health disease and medicine in modern science

**HEALTH:** “**Health** is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not *merely the absence of disease or infirmity*” (WHO 1948). This definition, which was ratified during the first World Health Assembly, has not been modified since 1948. Therefore Health may be regarded as a balance of physical, mental and social aspects of life in a being. There are three main factors, which determine the health condition of a person such as **genetics, environment and life styles**. Individuals and societies have long considered various definitions of health. In doing so, they usually fell into three areas. The first, the perception of health, is either seen as a subjective or objective phenomenon, and in terms of whether it extends beyond the physical domain. The second includes the means of improving and maintaining health. The third, considers the value and aim of health, how it allows one to function. These three areas are usually considered together in historical and contemporary definitions.

Prior to the Second World War, Sigerist, a well known public health professional, expressed the view that "health is, therefore, not simply the absence of disease; it is something positive, a joyful attitude to life, and a cheerful acceptance of the responsibilities that life puts upon the individual... A healthy individual is a man who is well balanced bodily and mentally and well adjusted to his physical and social environment"

**DISEASE:** According to modern medical science a **disease** is an abnormal condition of an organism that impairs bodily functions. It is also defined as a way of the body harming its self in an abnormal way, associated with specific symptoms and signs.

The mode of being healthy includes, as defined by the World Health Organization, "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO, 1946). When these conditions are not fulfilled, then one can be considered to have an illness or be ill. Medication and the science of pharmacology are used to cure or reduce symptoms of an illness or medical conditions.

In human beings "disease" is often used more broadly to refer to any condition that causes extreme pain, dysfunction, distress, social problems, and / or death to the person afflicted, or similar problems for those in contact with the person. In this broader sense, it sometimes includes injuries, disabilities, disorders, syndromes, infections, isolated symptoms, deviant behaviors, and atypical variations of structure and function, while in other contexts and for other purposes these may be considered distinguishable categories.

**MEDICINE:** The word *medicine* is derived from the Latin *ars medicina*, meaning *the art of healing*. In this sense Medicine is the science and art of healing. It encompasses a variety of health care practices evolved to maintain and restore health by the prevention and treatment of illness. In modern medical science a drug is any chemical substance other than a food or device that affects the function of living things. Drugs can be used to treat illness, or they can be used recreationally to alter behavior and perception. Medications are typically produced by pharmaceutical companies and are often patented. Those that are not patented are called generic drugs. Some physicians can presto over when the homeostasis of a living organism, causing severe illness or death. Essentially it is a type of poisoning. In the context of biology, poisons are substances that can cause illness. Contemporary medicine applies health science, biomedical research, and medical technology to diagnose and treat injury and disease, typically through medication, surgery, or some other form of therapy.

### **Santal notion of health, disease and medicine:**

In every culture there is a repository of values and beliefs built around important life experiences like birth, illness, death, disease etc. Every traditional society has its own method of conceptualization, diagnosis and treatment of disease based on the rational principles and objective factors in a scientific manner within the socio-cultural background of particular rural or tribal communities. Simple, safe, inexpensive, non-toxic and time-tested remedies existed for the alleviation of diseases and disabilities. To obtain the secrets of traditional medicine, every community irrespective of its simplicity and complexity has its own beliefs and practices regarding health and disease. In tribal societies the concept of health, fitness, illness and diseases varies between different tribal groups. In a tribal habitat, a person is usually considered to be afflicted with some diseases if he/she

is incapable of doing the routine work, i.e., incapacitation from work is the universal index of poor health. Thus the concept of ill health becomes a functional one and not clinical.

Though the tribe Santal bears a huge stock of traditional medicine from the very beginning but they were not so conscious about health and basic hygiene in the modern sense of the terms. The particular group of Santals with whom the present paper is concerned are well exposed, among other things, to the forces of modern health care system. By the influence of modernization they now give much more attention to keep the body fit through sports, dances, archery and other recreational elements. But Santals bother a very little about basic hygienic practices. For examples; their oral health is not so good. Many skin diseases like scabies, mycoses, boils are also seen very often. Most of the people are little conscious of the utility of cleanliness. They are habituated to use the field and the village ponds to finish up the morning duties as well as the same water they use to wash their clothes and utensils, for bathing etc. generally they use ashes from the hearth or the twig of neem (*Azadirachta Indica*), babla (*Acacia Karoo*), varenda, or sonajhuri to brush their teeth. They usually do not use soap to clean their skin. Now-a-days as a reason of availabilities of commercial goods, they are using tooth pest, soap, coconut oil, skin cream, talcum powder etc. But the usage of these commodities is not very common among all the people. Only a few young villagers who work in the urban areas or study in schools are found to use them. I have observed very carefully that most of the people never clean their tongue and they seldom clean their sex organs Santals generally explain that their body (*hormo*) is like a '*kol gari*' (train). As the train moves by the power of engine and stops due to the failure of a machine, in the same way their body is also run by some kind of machinery which is composed of *mayang* (blood), *shir* (vain), *baha* (head) etc. P.O. Bodding shows in this regards that according to these tribal people "*when any part of a machine is out of order, the machinery will not move, but stand still, until it is repaired. In the same way, if any of the sirs of the body gets out of order, we first feel out of sorts, we stretch ourselves and say 'today I feel unwell in my body'*". While working with the Santals I felt that their basic notion of the Body divided into two parts (a) social body, (b) physical body. They consider this physical body as a part of social body. They always treat the physical phenomena in the context of society as a whole. Though they can not conceptualize Health as a biological phenomenon, but they have an idea that '*a man who does not follow the social code of conduct is not considered normal or healthy*'. They think that there is a strong relationship between health and death. Health is a condition of capabilities to do the daily work properly on the other hand Death is situation of incapacitation from work. Disease may cause to lead to death but they never consider death as the end of the life or as the absolute. In the matter of disease Santals conceptualize that disease or illness is a natural phenomena. But there is always a suspicion that the natural cause is not the original one, but that evil influences are at work in the first instance (Bodding '25).

In daily life, santal people interpret illness as a kind of '*hasu*'/ '*rua*'/ '*duk*h', lit. pain / unhappiness / fatal event. Among the santals illness is conceptualized as a disorder which breaks the harmony, that usually exist between the body ('*hormo*') and spirit ('*mon*'). According to santals, a disease free life is possible if there is a congenial relationship between human beings, natural and supernatural beings. Any sinful act or infringements of social customs are believed to be the based for creating illness. In addition to it, the innumerable evil spirit also causes illness. The Bongas and witches cause illness and disharmony. The santal priests (*naeki/paranik*) are then entrusted to look after the propitiation of spirits. Traditional medicine men (*ojha*) are involved in the act of naturalization of the effect of sorcery, evil eye and witchcraft.

In most societies there dose exist a rich body of scientific knowledge based on the demands of the concerned societies. In the past, that knowledge was based on oral and almost always transmitted verbally from one generation to other. Traditional way of treatment is inevitable among the tribal people although modern treatment is applied in different circumstances. Traditional medicine can be stated as the sum total of all knowledge and practices, whether explicable or not used in diagnosis, prevention and elimination of physical, mental or social imbalance. It relies especially on practical experiences and observation handed down from generation to generation, whether verbally or in writing. Such knowledge is in fact still used today in many areas all over the world in the day to day living of many indigenous people.

'Traditional health care system depends both on herbal and the psychosomatic lines of treatment. While plants, flowers, seeds, animals and other naturally available substances formed the major basis of treatment, this practice always had a touch of mysticism, supernatural and magic, often resulting in specific magico-religious rites' (R.S.Balgi, 1997).

.Apart from the professional medical practitioners, every grown up santal know little bit of the application of herbal medicine and he/she first tries to handle the situation by using this knowledge. He/she seeks help of the professionals when he/she fails in his attempts and proceeds step by step from very simple remedies to most complicated practices of divination and witchcraft. The common people however, lack the knowledge about the invocation, incantations spell and magical formula, which are prerogative of the *ojha*.

### **Some diseases and their traditional treatments**

Traditional or indigenous medicines encompass knowledge and practices used for diagnosis prevention and cure. A greater part of indigenous knowledge refers to the properties of natural materials especially medicinal plants, animal parts and minerals. Due to the extensive use of plant materials, traditional medicine is associated with harbalism ( Kibet A.Ng'etich 2005). Here in this chapter I am going to show some diseases that generally occur among the villagers and their home remedies which the people naturally use.

1. **Gitil Jam** (Mycoses)- It is skin disease caused by water, mud, sand etc. It is generally found among the young santal men and women who work in the agricultural field or any where else with sand, water or mud for long time. Person who does not wash off the dirt for long time may also affected by this disease. There will be the gangrene (*bill*) and red marks between two fingers (*katup*) both in hands and legs. There may or not be any irritation.

**Treatments:** Two different methods are very popular among the people. After washing the effected areas -

- a) They apply the pest (*richkidei*) of *loukisori* (small medicated bush) leaves (*sakham*) on the affected area for 3 to 4 hours.
- b) They also apply the pest of boiled *gabladhari* (acacia) leaves mixed with a pinch of salt.

2. **Uju** (Boil)- It is an inflamed pus-filled (*bill*) swelling under the skin. It is mostly found on the legs, under arms, back and buttock of the grown up children some times among the adults also. Santals do not know the actual cause of boil. There must be horrible pain on boil and surrounding areas.

**Treatments:** A pest (*richkidei*) of *Jakhashakham* (leaves and twigs of a kind of small medicated plants) mixed with salt (*bulung*) in appropriate proportion are applied around the boil. After three four days all the rotten pus and blood will come out from the boil and it will recover.

3. **Ghao** (Scabies)- It is a contagious skin disease. Santals believe that if any part of the body become wounded or if there is a cut and it faces all the dirt and oils, it will become rottened and scabiesed.

**Treatments:** In this case people generally apply calcium carbonate and turmeric on the effected area.

4. **Baha hasu** (Headache)- Continuous pains occur in any part of the head. According to the villagers many kind of Headache can be seen.

- a) Hemicranias / Megrim (*Misa chendi hasu*) - violent headache affecting one side of the forehead may be on the left side or on the right.
- b) Pain on the forehead (*Chendi*) - chronic pain on the frontal bone.
- c) Pain on the bregma (*Tala baha*) - chronic pain on the top of the head.
- d) Occiput (*Totka*) pain - Back head pain.

**Treatments:** The villagers use two types of methods to reduce the headache –

- a) They apply wet clothes (socked in cold water) on the forehead or affected area.

- b) Roots of *baja* (a root looks like ginger) mixed with coconut oil can be applied on forehead or on the affected area.
5. **Diarrhoea**- It is a condition of excessively frequent and loose bowel movements. It causes loose stool (some times with blood), chronic stomachaches weakness, aversion of foods etc. According to the santal villagers this type of loose motion may be of two types such as –
- a. **Tandi teida** (Ameobiasis)
- b. Mayangi Tandi teida (Dysentery )

### Treatments

- a) Water, salt and sugar, mix these three together properly and take continuously in a hour gap.
- b) Tender leave of guava (*sappare sakham*) can be chew and take the juice.
- c) Pest of green leave of thankuni (*guddulutu arha*) can be take with rice.
6. **Ambul** (Acidity)- Young ladies who work out side of the house for long time mostly faced this problem. As they cannot maintain the time to take food and work for long in the sun, in the rain may owing to indigestion. In the cases of aged persons it occurs due to the lack of digestive power. The villagers now used to take the medicine prescribed by the allopathic doctors or from the medicine shop but there is a homely remedy to reduce acidity.

**Treatments:** 7 or 8 leaves of thankuni (*Guddulutu arha*), pinch of salt (bulung) and 3 or 4 black paper. These three can be grind together and should take in empty stomach (<ekenlary).

7. **Chalsa** (Cataract)- It is a condition of eyes in which the lenses becomes progressively opaque. In this case the inner portions of the eye both the white area (*Jurul*) and eye ball (met epil) become discolored or become gray. The tribal people do not know the exact cause of cataract but they do think that it occurs because of ageing. They also think that there is a connection between the nails (*rama*) and the eyes (*meth*). If the nails are unclean it may be the cause of monocoluous (*kanrha*).

**Treatments:** According to the santal people there is no treatment of cataract but it may prevent. If someone can make a habit of applying mustered oil after cleaning the nails (*rama*) (both in hands and legs) every day before go to bed at night, it will be a prevention from occurring cataract.

8. **Meth hakani** (Ophthalmia)- It is a condition of inflammation of the conjunctiva. The tribal people do not know the exact cause of this disease but sometimes consider as the effect of catch cold (*manda*). They also think that if some one makes continuous eye contact with the diseased person, it may contagiously effects.



## Treatments

- a) The fluid of a snail (*guguli*) can be squeezed out with two fingers and dropped on to the effected eye.
  - b) Juice of *kukuruchuti* leaves can be applied on to the eye.
  - c) Pure honey can also dropped on to the effected eyes.
9. **Jaundice rua kenay** (Jaundice) – It is a condition of excess amount of billirubin pigment in blood causing yellow eye, skin and urine. It is mainly occurred due to liver disease, bile disorder, etc.

## Treatments

There is no home remedy to recover from jaundice. In this case villagers used to seek protection from *ojha* who gives them a herbal garland (*jaundice mala*) sanctified with some mantras. The *ojha* collects the secret plant and cut the twigs into small pieces. After that day at the very first morning he makes the garland for the patients before all his morning duties. Then he ties the garland around the patient's neck tightly sanctified with some mantras. If the person has the disease surely the *jaundice mala* becomes longer as time passes. After wearing the rosary the patient has to maintain at least three days rituals strictly. During this period the patient can not take bath or use soap or oil. He/ she must take the boiled foods and boiled water. The patient will be forbidden strictly to go through the cohabitation with their mates during this time. After three days the patient gets down to a pond or river and put off the rosary from the lower part of the body and immerse the thing into the water. They have a strong belief that all the germs will flow with the *jaundice mala* into the water. But now-a- days the patients can also take the medicine from the allopathic doctors with the kind permission of the *ojha* in this period.

10. **Manda** (Cold and Cough)- It occurs due to the unseasonal rain, continuous change of water etc. if suddenly take chilled water after moving in the sun it may occur.

## Treatments

- a) Curry or fry of *sajina* (*munga arha*) can take with rice.
  - b) Mustered oil (*iti sunum*) is a great medicine in this case. Black leguminous seeds (*shut karai*) and garlic (*rusun*) will fry in mustered oil. When the colour of the oil will change, this hot oil can be applied on the palm (*ti talka*) and feet *Qatar jangha*) before going bed at night.
  - c) Mustered oil can also put in the nostrils (*muvgue*) also in cold & cugh.
11. **Uup-nur** (Hair-fall)- Santals do not consider this problem as a disease. It is a very natural phenomena occurs due to ageing, avoiding hair oil for ling, tied up of wet hair, carelessness, dandruff, lice etc. This incident mostly happens with the young women and pregnant women. But they do not know why it occurs in pregnancy.

They also do not know why an aged man face this problem more than an aged women.

### Treatments

So many local methods are there to reduce hair fall. Two of them are most popular in my studied village.

- a) Pest of *loukishori* leaves can be applied on the root of the hair.
- b) They make a pest of the tiny leaves ucaliptus and onion. Then it will be mixed with coconut oil and this pest can be applied on all over the hair.

**12. Pinias (Dandruff)**- Flakes of dead skin in the hair are called as dandruff. It occurs as a reason of avoiding hair oil, unclean hair etc.

### Treatments

Santals believe that if someone can use the black soil (*nakrha asha*) of river bed as a substitute of shampoo to wash of the hair, dandruff can be reduced.

**13. Si (Lice)**- It is a parasitic insect that can spread by the close contact of head from a effected person. Santals do not consider it as a disease.

**Treatments:**A very simple but effected method is very much popular among the santal girls, which a pest of custard apple leaves (*sitafall/ madargam*) can be applied on all over the hair, give up for one hour and wash off.

**14. Ekshire (Hydrocele)**- It is a condition of dropsy of the scrotum. Both or one of the scrotums become bigger and fluid will be enraptured. The cause of occurrence of Hydrocele is not known to the general villagers. *Ojha*, the traditional medicine men admitted that he knows the reason but he did not disclose it to me.

### Treatments

In this case the *ojha* provides them a secret medicine (*run*) that is sanctified by some *Mantras*. The head of a turtle (*kachim*) will be dried up in the sun. Then this dried head will be roasted. The ash of the head will be mixed with some secret roots (*rehet*) and will be provided as the medicine of hydrocele.

### Conclusion

In the present discourse an attempt has been made to broadly describe some of the ideas and practices of the Santals in a village of Birbhum in the contexts. It is observed the people have indigenious views of health, disease, and medicine that can be hardly disassociated from their concept of life and death. They conceive life as omnipresent and death is just a transitory phase in the circuit of life. All material, non- material objects,

events, temperaments and dispositions, health, medicine etc are presided over by some supernatural entities. They all together form a complex of culture. Their general division of their world into noapuri (this world) and hanapuri (celestial world) are closely connected by life (jiu) and form a morally bounded world.

They are aware of the modern health care system only partly and use it along with their traditional health care world of socio-cultural communication.

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