

SANTAL



Scheduled Castes & Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute
Bhubaneswar, Odisha
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FOREWORD

Among the Odishan tribes, the Santals are an advanced community. They are mainly found in the districts of Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar and Balasore in the State. Besides, they also inhabit the neighbouring states like Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar and Assam. The word 'Santal' is derived from two words; *santa* meaning calm and peaceful and *ala* meaning man. They speak Santali language which belongs to the Munda group of Austro-Asiatic sub-family of languages. The Santali has its own script called "Ol chiki" invented by Pundit Raghunath Murmu. Now "Santali" is a constitutionally recognized language.

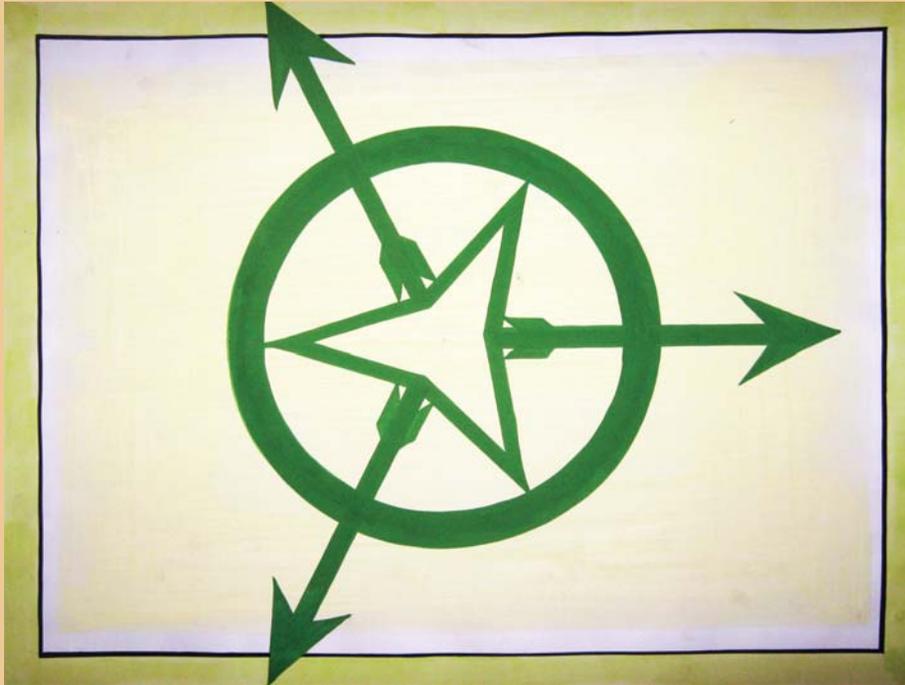
The Santals are well known for their beautiful and attractive housing architecture with very neat and colourfully painted walls, floors and artistically carved doors. Their traditional dress pattern and personal adornment distinguish them from other communities. The primary occupation of the Santals is settled agriculture. Seasonal forest collection is one of the important sources of their subsidiary income.

Like other tribals of Jharkhand region the Santals have the institution of 'sacred grove' located at the village outskirts which they call *jaher era* or *jahera*. Being animists and polytheists, they believe in existence of a number of deities of nature as well as ghosts and spirits whom they worship or try to appease during various ritual and festive occasions. They are mortally afraid of witches and sorcerers.

Dance (*enej*) and music (*sereng*) are integral part of the Santal life. They dance and sing when they are happy as they love it very much and these are always associated with their festivals and rituals which are a community affair. Boys and girls, old and young, irrespective of age and sex, participate in such events.

This photographic documentation of their life style is a part of the series on the tribes of Odisha. Prof. (Dr) A. B. Ota, Director and Ms. K. Patnaik, Senior Laboratory Assistant of SCSTRTI have taken all the pains in preparing this colourful booklet. I hope this work would be of immense help for the tribal lovers, tribal tourists, tribal researchers and general readers.

Shri Sanjeeb Kumar Mishra, IAS
Commissioner-cum-Secretary
ST & SC Development Department
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IDENTITY

The Santals, one of the populous tribal communities of India, are mainly found in the districts of Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar and Balasore in the State of Odisha. Besides, they are also found in the neighbouring states like Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar and Assam.

The word 'Santal' is derived from two words; *santa* meaning calm and peaceful and *ala* meaning man. In the past, the Santals were leading a nomadic life. Gradually they came to settle down in the Chhotanagpur plateau. Towards the end of 18th Century they migrated to the Santal Parganas of Bihar and then they came to Odisha. They speak Santali language which belongs to the Munda group of Austro-Asiatic sub-family of languages. The Santali has its own script called "Ol chiki" invented by Pundit Raghunath Murmu.





According to 2001 census, their population in the State is 7,77,204 out of which the male population is 3,93,386 and the female population is 3,83,818 registering the sex ratio is 976 females per 1000 males. Their decadal growth rate during 1999-2001 of 23.41%. Their literacy rate for males and females is 55.86 % and 24.75% respectively.



By their physical features the Santals have long head, brownish body colour and flat nose. They lead a very simple life. Among the Odishan tribes, the Santals are progressive community.



DRESS AND ORNAMENTS

The traditional dress pattern and personal adornment of the Santal distinguish them from the other communities. The male members wear hand loom loin cloth (*kacha*), banion, shirts and napkin (*gamchha*) and women wear green or blue check saree (*jhelah*). But now-a-days they are using the mill made clothes. The Santal women are fond of wearing ornaments like *pankatha* (hairpin), *sikimala* (coin necklace), *baju* (armlet), *sankhachudi* (wristlet), *satul* (bangles), *painri* (anklets). Previously they were using heavy silver ornaments but now



under the impact of modernization the new generation likes to wear plastic, glass and light silver ornaments. Tattooing has become an obsolete past tradition.

SETTLEMENT AND HOUSING

The Santal village is surrounded by agricultural fields, pastures, ponds, graveyard and a common place of worship known as *jaher era* or *jaher* in short. Located at the village outskirts the *jaher* is the sacred grove comprising of *sal* trees within which their deities are believed to be residing. Usually, the Santal villages are large and the number of households vary from fifty to hundred. Their houses enclosed within boundaries are arranged in a linear pattern on both the sides of a wide village street.





Santal houses called *olah* are large, neat and clean as well as attractive with multi-coloured paintings on the outside walls. The bottom of the wall is painted with black soil, the middle portion with white soil and the upper portion with red soil. The houses are multi roomed and thatched with local tiles (*khapar*) or straw (*busub*). The walls are made of wooden planks plastered with cow dung and mud. Each house has a long verandah. Rooms are very spacious. Towards the corner of the main room, there is a sacred place known as *bhitar* where the ancestral spirits are worshipped. The main room is partitioned with a mud wall, which is used for storing grain and other agricultural products and kept on a wooden platform. The kitchen (*dakaolah*) is found at one side of the main room.



The cowshed *pangrigalah* is situated adjacent to the house. The kitchen garden is attached to the house. The houses have rectangular courtyard where the members sit in their leisure time and discuss various matters. The largest house of the village belongs to Manjhi, the secular headman of the village. In front of his house another ritual place called *Manjhi-than* is located. It is the seat of the spirit of founder headman of the village.



HOUSEHOLD ARTICLES:

The household objects like string cots, husking lever (*ukhud*), winnowing fans (*hatah*), gourd ladles, earthen pots (*hulutukuj*), bamboo baskets (*tunki*), paddy containers (*bandi*), broomsticks (*janah*), different types of musical instruments like flute (*tiriau*), horn trumpets (*sakua*), string instruments (*banam*), double membrane drums - *tumdah*, *dhak*, agricultural implements like plough (*nahel*), yoke (*aran*), leveler (*angam*), sickles (*datram*), hunting implements like bow (*aah*) and arrow (*sar*), spear (*barchi*), sacrificial axe (*kapi*), knife (*chaku*), fishing traps like *jhimiri*, *tardang*, *janjih* and dhokra objects are found in a Santal house.



LIVELIHOOD

The primary occupation of the Santal is settled agriculture. Both men and women are engaged in this pursuit. Seasonal forest collection is one of the important sources of subsidiary income. They collect minor forest produce like roots, fruits, tubers, green leaves, yams, honey, *mahua* flowers etc. that sustains them for 3 to 4 months in a year. They also collect fuel wood, medicinal herbs, grass, bamboo and timber from the forest for their day-to-day use like building their houses and making agricultural, hunting and fishing implements, cooking, treatment of diseases etc.





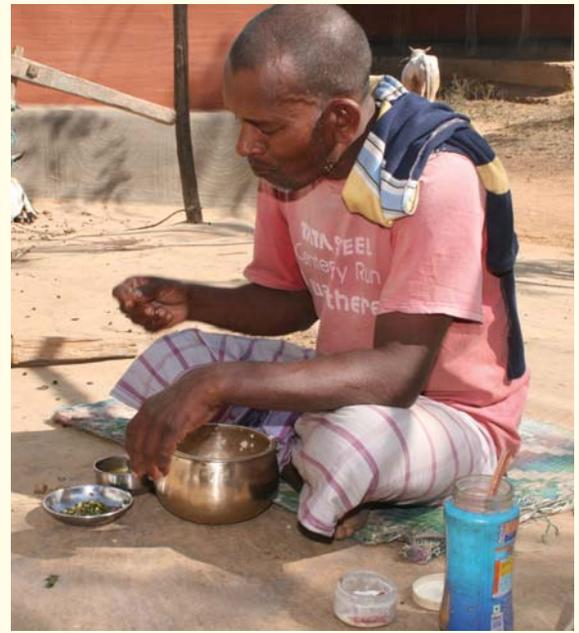
The women prepare leaf plates (*patrakhali*) and cups (*phuluhdana*) out of *sal* leaves and make brooms out of the grass and sell them in the local market to supplement their income. The Santals occasionally hunt wild animals for flesh. During the lean or post-harvesting season, they go to the neighbouring industrial, mining and urban areas for wage earning. They are expert in carpentry works and this skill also helps them to supplement their livelihood.



FOOD & DRINKS

Rice is their staple food. Usually they take watered rice (*baskemandidaka*) with boiled green leaves (*alahkorha*) and vegetable curry. They consume vegetables like brinjal (*bengal*), pumpkin (*kahanda*), papaya (*jada*), ladies finger (*bhundi*), tomato (*bilati*), sweet potato (*sankarkenda*), etc. and the non-veg foods like fish (*haku*), meat (*zil*), crab (*katkom*) and dry fish (*rahalhaku*). During rituals and festivals they prepare and take rice cake and mutton or chicken curry. They are very fond of eating fish.

Rice beer (*handia*) is a very popular drink among the Santals. The women usually prepare *handia* out of fermented rice. During festivals and rituals both male and females love to take *handia*. As a matter of





tradition they entertain their guest or relatives with this drink. Besides, they also drink *mahua* liquor and date-palm juice. The Santal males like to chew tobacco and are fond of smoking by rolling the tobacco inside a *sal* leaf locally called *pungi*. Now-a-days, the young Santals like to smoke *beedies* or cigarettes available in the market.

HAAT (WEEKLY MARKET):

The local weekly market or *haat* occupies an important place in the socio-economic life of the Santal. This is the place where they purchase their necessities by bartering or selling their surplus agricultural and forest products. It is also the meeting place where the people, friends and relatives of different villages meet, exchange their feelings and socialize with each other.



SOCIAL LIFE

FAMILY:

Among the Santals, family is the smallest social unit. It is patrilineal, patrilocal and patriarchal in nature. Father is the head of the family and he manages all the family affairs. After marriage, the son is separated from his father and he establishes a new house. After marriage the daughter goes to her husband's house. Though invariably the family structure is nuclear sometimes, extended families consisting of parents and their married sons and grand children are found. Kinship relationships are classified into two groups, viz. *bandhupela*, i.e., the affinal



kins related by marriage and *kutumpela* i.e., the consanguineal kins related by blood. Both the kin groups participate in all socio-religious functions of the family.



The tribe is divided into a number of exogamous clans, called *paris*. Each clan is divided into sub-clans (*khut*). Marriage between sub-clans is strictly prohibited. Violation of the rule is punishable by way of social ex-communication called as *bitlaha*. Totemic worship is also found. Sexual relationship between the clan members is tabooed.



PREGNANCY AND CHILD BIRTH:

A Santal couple always welcomes the birth of a child. There are certain taboos and prohibitions which a Santal woman observes during her pregnancy. The husband of a pregnant woman never kills any animal nor participates in any funeral ceremony. He is also prohibited to touch a dead body. The pregnant woman is not allowed to go to the forest alone and to weep on the death of her relative. Except some hard works, a pregnant woman does all types of simple and easy works. These restrictions are imposed only to protect the baby from the evil spirits. The traditional midwife called '*mukhi*' is called for delivering the child. After the child birth, she cuts the umbilical cord and puts the placenta in a pit at the right corner of the door in the same room.



JANAM CHHATIAR

The mother is considered ritually unclean and remains secluded in the lying-in room till *the* Janam Chhatiari or the purificatory rites are performed. During this period she is not allowed to enter in to the kitchen or to touch anybody. The ceremony takes place on the seventh or ninth day of childbirth. On this day, the midwife bathes the new born baby and the mother. All the family members take a purificatory bath, clean clothes and houses, and throw away used earthenware pots. The rite is completed after cleaning their

head with soil collected from the crop field. On the same day, name-giving ceremony (*nyutum*) is performed. On this occasion, the midwife takes the child and with the consent of all the members of the family a name of the dead ancestors is selected either from paternal or maternal side for the new born baby. All the elders present there to bless the child. They are entertained with festive meals and drink.

CHACHO CHHATJAR

Chacho Chhatjar is one of the most important ceremonies of the Santals which initiates a person into adulthood and the membership of the society. It enables the individual to take his place in Santal society and participate in its rites and ceremonies. Without this no Santal can be married or cremated.

PUBERTY RITES

In case of a girl child, when she attains puberty, she is not allowed to enter into the cowshed and the *bhitari*, the sacred place of the house. Pollution is observed for a period of 7-9 days. After completion of the period, each room is smeared with cow dung for purification of the house and the girl cleans her clothes and takes a purificatory bath to come out of pollution.

MARRIAGE (*bapla*)

Marriage (*bapla*) is one of the most significant events in Santal society. It makes an individual a full-fledged member of the community. From the economic point of view a man obtains a life partner who can help him in all economic pursuits. For marriage, some customary rules and regulations are followed. Marriage within the same clan and cross-cousin marriage are prohibited. In Santal marriage, there is no restriction of age. The bride may be younger, older or of equal age of the bridegroom.





Different types of marriages, such as marriage by negotiation (*sangebariyat*), marriage by mutual consent, marriage by capture (*ipitut bapla*), marriage by elopement (*gurdaonapam*), widow re-marriage (*sanga bapla*), son-in-law in house (*ghar-de-jamai*), Hindu type of marriage (*diku bapla*) are prevalent in the Santal society. Marriage by negotiation (*sangebariyat*) is the common practice in the Santal community. Levirate and sororate types of marriages are also permitted in their society.

Marriage negotiations are first initiated by the boy's side. The elders of both the parties exchange several visits to fix the customary bride price. The bride price is paid by the boy's side in both cash and kind, consisting of few rupees, cow/ bullock, three saris - one for the bride's mother, one for her paternal grandmother, and the third one for her father's sister. A day is fixed for the marriage. On the wedding day

the bride with a party arrives at the boy's place where marriage ceremony is held. The expenses of the wedding depend largely upon the form of marriage. Marriage is a communal affair and members of both the villages and also neighbouring villages participate in it. The parents of the boy and the girl and the village officials play very important roles in this affair.

Divorce

Divorce is a common sequel to Santal marriage. It is granted at the wish of either husband or wife. The husband can demand the divorce if his wife is proved to be a witch, or doesn't obey him or always goes to her father's house. The wife can claim divorce, if her husband cannot provide her adequate food, clothing etc. If the woman divorces her husband to remarry another man of her choice, then the new husband has to return the bride price and other expenses to her former husband and if the husband divorces his wife, then he must pay the woman the compensation fixed by the village council.

Death Rites

In the Santal society after the death of a person, the kin members are invited and they bury the corpse. After returning from the burial ground they take a smoke bath burning the straw at the entrance of the village. The bereaved family members of the deceased do not take any non-veg items during the period of death pollution. The purificatory death ritual is performed within 2/3 days because, the Santals believe that the spirit



of the dead remains in the house and may cause harm to family members and villagers until the death rituals are performed. Therefore they hasten to perform the obsequies as early as possible.

Both burial and cremation are in vogue in their society. The bone of the deceased is collected and kept inside an earthen pot and left in the hole of a tree. Before the Makar festival they immerse the bone in the 'Gaya River' which is called Damodar Jatra. Now-a-days, they immerse the bone of the deceased in the Ghats of nearby river of their own locality.



RELIGIOUS BELIEFS & PRACTICES

Religion (*dharma*) is considered to be a part and parcel of Santal life. Though basically they are animists, because of their cultural revivalism in the recent times, they have named their religion after the popular name of their village ‘sacred grove’ as *sarna*.

Like other tribals, the Santals are polytheists. They believe in the existence of a number of deities, ghosts and spirits residing in the hills, forests and streams and their ancestral spirits guiding every aspect of their life. Their benevolent Supreme deity is Dharam or Thakur or Sing Bonga who is identified with the sun and is worshipped with great reverence as the creator of the universe. Though no specific ritual or festival is observed for him, he is remembered and worshipped in every important festival.



Their village deities are Marang Buru, Moneko-Turiko and Gosane Era, who reside in the village sacred grove - *jahera*, at the village outskirts. These deities play a vital role in the day-to-day life of the Santal. Another important village deity is the Manjhi Haram Bonga- the spirit of the founder headman of the village, who resides inside the village in the *manjhi than* in front of the house of the village headman - Manjhi. The village headman worships the deity in every morning.

At the family level, they worship their family deity and ancestral spirits called Hapram Bonga and Abge Bonga seated in the sacred place named *bhitar* in every house. Besides, they worship deities of nature namely, Buru Bonga (hill deities), Rango Bonga (forest deities) and Basumata or mother earth. Now-a-days, they have started worshipping some local Hindu gods and goddesses.

Like other tribal communities, the Santals also very strongly believe in witchcraft and black magic. They



believe that the witches or *diens* who have become so by learning the *Dien Vidya* (the technique of witchcraft) have the evil powers to cause harm to others and bring natural calamities. The Santals are mortally afraid of the witches.



Naike is the religious headman and the priest of the village who is assisted by Kudam Naike. Ojha, the shaman is the traditional magico-religious healer. He has the power to converse with the spirits through trance.



FAIRS AND FESTIVALS:

To propitiate their Gods and Goddesses, the Santals observe a number of festivals round the year. As the Santals are agriculturists, their festivals are mainly connected with various agricultural activities and a few are connected with the hunting and collection of forest produce.

Their most important festivals are Erok-sim, Harihar-sim, Iri-Guldi-sim, Janthar, Saharai, Magha-sim and Baha, which are associated with agricultural operations. Erok-sim marks the beginning of sowing the seeds in the fields. Harihar-sim is observed at the time of the sprouting of seedlings. Iri-Guldi-sim is observed for the offering of the first millet crop to the deities. Jantal observed during the month of September is a celebration of the first fruit eating of the winter rice crops to appease the hill God. Saharai, the cattle festival observed in the month of November, is one of the main festivals of the Santals. They worship cattle for increase of cattle wealth. Magh-sim observed in the month of Magha (January-February) marks the end of the year. During Baha festival the Santal offer the first fruit of *mahua*, wild flowers and fruits to the *jaher* deities. Besides these, festivals like Karama and Makar Sankranti are also celebrated with pomp and ceremony for the prosperity and happiness of their community.



AESTHETIC LIFE

ART AND CRAFTS:

The Santals have inherent talents in art and crafts which is reflected in their beautiful wall paintings, housing architecture and wood works. Their doors are decorated with colourful drawings. Inside walls are also decorated with beautiful drawings by the Santal women. They keep their houses neat, clean and decorative to appease the Gods and Goddesses and get their blessings.



MUSIC AND DANCE:

Like other tribes Dance (*enej*) and music (*sereng*) are integral part of the Santal life. They dance and sing when they are in happy mood as they love it very much and these are always associated with their festivals and rituals which are always a community affair. Boys and girls, old and young, irrespective of age and sex, participate in such events. Dancing visits are exchanged between different villages. There is no hard and fast rule regarding the time and place for dancing. But they generally dance at night. The dancers do not wear any special



costume. Various dances such as Kalasi dance, Danta dance, Rinja dance, Baha dance, Jachur dance, etc. are during different festive occasions. The Santal have different types of songs for different occasions. Devotional songs are sung during religious ceremonies.

Traditionally, the Santal dance is performed with the tune of beating of drums and blowing of the flutes. The musical instruments such as *tamak*, *dhol*, *bhuang*, *tumdah*, *tiriau banam* (one stringed fiddle), *ghanta* (iron bell), and *singa* (horn trumpet), *sarangi* are used during dance.



SOCIAL CONTROL

The Santals have a well established political organization. It functions at the village, inter-village (*pirh* or *pargana*) and regional (*disam*) levels. The village is considered as the smallest and most important unit at the ground level. There is a traditional village council (*atu mone hor*) constituted of functionaries like Manjhi (secular village headman), Jog Manjhi (deputy village headman), Parmanik, (assistant to village headman), *Gadet* (secretary to village headman & messenger), Jog Parmanik (Deputy Parmanik), Naike (village head priest) and Kudam Naike (assistant to village priest). All the household heads are the members of the village council. Manjhi presides over the village council meetings and settles all the disputes relating to theft, conflict, divorce, partition of property, adoption of children, quarrels over land, violation of social customs, tradition, etc. at the village level. The meeting of the council generally takes place at the *manjhi than*.



The inter-village council known as the *pirh* or *pargana* constituted of fifty to sixty villages, deals with matters which cannot be settled at the village level. It is constituted by the representatives of several villages under the *pirh* or *pargana*. Pir Pargana is the secular head of the *pir*, nominated by all the Manjhis of the component villages once in every five years. Along with Pir Pargana, Pir Dihiri and Pir Godet are also two important functionaries at *pir* level administration. Major offences like incest, adultery and inter-village disputes are discussed and decided at this level. When somebody is dissatisfied with the decision of the village council, he may appeal to the *pirh* or *pargana* council. It also functions as the hunt council. The annual hunt is organized by a large number of Santals from different villages beyond the *pirh* or *pargana*, which gives them a chance to meet and discuss complicated disputes. Hunting expeditions may continue for three or four days. Spending the whole day in the chase, the hunting party takes a rest at one place overnight where they discuss different problems. Any case previously referred to the village or *pargana* council may be placed before the hunt council for a fresh trial. Excommunication from the community or *bitlaha* for grave offences can be awarded by the hunt council. Guilty persons are fined by the council and the fine is spent on feasting.

Five to ten Pirs together constitute a Disham, whose secular head is Desh Pargana. He is elected by the Pir Parganas once in every five years. He settles disputes on the cases which are not decided at the Pir level with the consultation of Pir Parganas and Manjhis. In case of serious social offence (*bitlaha*), Desh Pargana is vested with powers to impose both physical and financial punishment to the guilty person considering the severity of the offence. Sometimes, the culprit is excommunicated from the society. Disam Dihiri and Disham Godet also help Desh Pargana in this work for smooth administration at Disham level. But now with the introduction of the 3 -tiers Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs), the traditional political system is losing its importance.



CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT

The Santals are considered as one of the most progressive tribes of Odisha. Urbanization, Industrialization and frequent interactions with the Hindu castes have changed their life style to a great extent. Now-a –days, many of the Santal youths are moving towards town and urban areas for education and in search of jobs. Occupational mobility has also brought a drastic change in their living pattern.

There has been a continuous effort since independence by the government to raise their socio-economic standards. For their social and economic upliftment, Government has launched a number of development programmes which have brought a drastic change in their way of life by improving their status of education, economy, communication, health and sanitation etc.





Emphasis has been laid on their educational development. As a progressive tribal community, the Santal avail themselves of the maximum facilities provided to them. The opening of residential schools and hostels, and the provision of scholarships, have provided ample opportunity for the Santal to educate their children. Being educated, many Santal persons have now occupied high positions / posts in the Indian and Odisha Civil Services and other Government and Non- Government Sectors.

At present their village is electrified with 'Rajiv Gandhi Vidyut Yojana' and 'Biju Grama Jyoti Yojana'. There is also a lot of change in their leadership pattern. Traditional political leaders are replaced by elected people's representatives. Use of modern medicines, mill made clothes; cosmetics etc. are now a fashion among the Santal youths.



Their material culture has changed considerably. Their household articles no longer constitute their indigenous materials, which they make themselves or collect from the forest. Now, many well-to-do families have radio, cycle, television, mobile phone and wooden furniture. The young men wear pants, shirts and banyan instead of their traditional coarse cloths. The women wear mill-made saris, blouses, petticoats, and glass or plastic ornaments imitating local caste women. The habit of taking tea, smoking *bidis* and cigarettes has been acquired by Santal living in towns and urban centers.

The ST and SC Development Department, Government of Odisha under the aegis of Ministry of Tribal Affairs has established a Tribal Museum in the premises of SC and ST Research and Training Institute (SCSTRTI), Bhubaneswar for preservation of material culture of Odishan tribes including that of the Santal. Artefacts like dress and ornaments, combs, agricultural, hunting and fishing implements, household objects, musical instruments and *dhokra* objects of the



Santal tribe as well as a replica of Santal hut have also been displayed in this exclusive museum. Besides, the Santals artists are regularly performing their dances in the Annual Adivasi Mela at the exhibition ground held from 26th January to 9th February and in the National Tribal Dance Festival held during December every year and many such district and state level events exhibiting their talents.



Besides, SCSTRTI, Bhubaneswar is organizing the Live Demonstration Programmes on Tribal Arts and Crafts in which Santal artists are participating. Now, some talented Santal artists have got national award for their fine Arts and Crafts.

The Santal is one among the few tribes which has its own script *Ol chiki*. Their Santali language has been scheduled in the Indian constitution.





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