

Research paper

Santali Literature: A Historical Analysis from 1885 - 1960

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ABSTRACT

The Santals are one of the most prominent tribal groups in India, ranking as the third-largest tribal community after the Bhil and Gond tribes. They are distributed across a vast region, primarily in the states of West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Assam. During British colonial rule, the Santals were largely excluded from mainstream socio-political developments. Christian missionaries were active in certain areas, converting some Santals to Christianity. Following the Santal rebellion of 1855 and increased awareness of their social life, British authorities gained a greater understanding of the Santali language, folk literature, and cultural practices. A significant milestone for the Santali language occurred in December 2013, when the University Grants Commission (UGC) included Santali in the National Eligibility Test (NET) for recruiting faculty in Santali language and literature at colleges and universities. Currently, numerous universities and colleges across India offer Santali literature as a distinct academic subject. Contemporary written Santali literature, which echoes the traditional sentiments of its folk origins, is being produced and disseminated through various magazines published by educated members of the Santal community. Against this backdrop, the present study examines the development of Santal literature in its various forms from 1885 to 1960. Today, Santali literature encompasses far more than collections of folk stories or songs; it has become a rich literary tradition that attracts global scholarly attention. The unique qualities of Santali literature, characterized by its moral depth and literary merit, are highly valued by both literary enthusiasts and the Santal community.

Keywords: santali literature, development of santali literature, historical analysis, 1885-1960

The Santal community is among the most prominent tribal groups in India, ranking as the third largest after the Bhil and Gond tribes. The Santals are distributed across a wide geographic area, primarily in the states of West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Assam. Additionally, some members of the community have migrated to neighboring countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal (Ahmed, 2025, p. 19). The Santals are often characterized as highly integrated and notably resilient within eastern India.

Like any other social group, the Santals have their own language. They speak Santali, which is an independent language itself. Santali belongs to the Munda group of languages (Ahmed, 2021, p. 105). Again, while citing from Schmidt's (1906) *Die Mon Khmer Volker, ein Bindeglied Zwischen Volkern Zentralasiens und Austronesiens*, Troisi (1979) said that Schmidt classified this Munda group of languages as the Austro-Asiatic language group. Among the Austro-Asiatic languages, Santali is spoken by a large number of populations. While concentrating on the development scale of the language, it is certain that Santali ranges among the best-documented tribal languages of India (Lotz, 2004). They not only speak their own language but also have been able to keep their language identity amidst Aryanised and other tribal communities in India. Currently, the Indian Constitution recognizes 22

scheduled languages, including Santali, which was added to Schedule 8 through the 92nd Constitutional Amendment Act of 2003. During British colonial rule, the Santals were largely excluded from mainstream socio-political developments. Christian missionaries actively sought to convert local populations, including the Santals, to Christianity. Following the Santal rebellion of 1855 and increased awareness of Santal society, British authorities gained insight into their language, folk literature, and cultural practices (Baskey, 1987). Grierson conducted a comprehensive study of the Santali language in his work 'Linguistic Survey of India,' which provides a reliable bibliography on the subject. Despite possessing a distinct and independent language, the Santals lacked a written script for communication. Until the nineteenth century, Santali was primarily an oral language, with traditional knowledge, history, stories, and songs transmitted orally across generations (Datta Majumder, 1956). Prior to Indian independence, Christian missionaries were among the first outsiders to engage extensively with the Santals. Their primary objective was to promote Christianity among indigenous communities (Culshaw, 1949). However, linguistic barriers posed significant challenges to their efforts. To overcome these obstacles, missionaries immersed themselves in Santal culture, language, and customs by living alongside them in forested regions. After acquiring proficiency in the language, missionaries and European scholars such as Philips, Campbell, Skrefsrud, and Bodding produced numerous works on the Santals, utilizing Bengali and Roman scripts before the 1860s. These efforts led to the creation of Santali dictionaries, documentation and translation of folk tales, and studies on the morphology, syntax, and phonetic structure of the language (Hembram, 2010).

Gradually, Devnagari and Oriya were introduced to promote Santali. As Roman, Bengali, Devnagari, and Oriya were being used extensively for writing Santali, some felt the need for a new script which might embody themselves independently, not by using foreign or some dominant language scripts but the script of their own for which they would be proud of. There was a huge gap between dreams dreamt and the reality. But a man from Rairangpur, Mayurbhanj District of the Indian state of Odisha, Pandit Raghunath Murmu made the dream come true. Pandit Raghunath Murmu's utmost endeavour for the better manifestation of his mother tongue and his zest for excellence paved the way for the evolution of Santal peoples' own script for their language which was named "Ol Chiki" in 1925 (Ahmed, 2021, pp. 106–107 & Dalton, 1872).

Significant recognition of the Santali language was achieved in December 2013 when the University Grants Commission (UGC) introduced Santali in the National Eligibility Test (NET) for recruiting future faculty in Santali language and literature at colleges and universities. Currently, numerous universities and colleges across India offer Santali literature as a distinct subject. The government of West Bengal has also implemented various initiatives to promote the Santali language and literature, including the establishment of Santali-medium primary schools, the publication of textbooks in Santali from primary to higher secondary levels, the recruitment of Santali language teachers, and the creation of Santali departments in several colleges and universities (Murmu, 2014). As a result of these extensive efforts, a large proportion of the Santal population now has access to universal education, and a significant number of educated Santals are employed in both government and private sectors. Written literature reflecting the traditional sentiments of folk literature is being produced and is featured in several magazines published by educated members of the Santal community. Against this backdrop, the present paper examines Santal literature and its development in various forms.

Objectives

This article is an attempt to present and highlight along with the historical analysis based on the following objectives:

1. To know the history of the development of Santali literature since its beginning.
2. To find out the names of contributors and their contributions to Santali literature since its beginning.
3. To know the historical development of different forms of Santali literature since their starting period.

METHODOLOGY

Over several years, I had the privilege of closely associating with the Santals, during which I gradually learned their language and explored their diverse literary forms with the assistance of Santali friends and students. I systematically collect data on various genres, including folk stories, myths, historical accounts, novels, short stories, drama, journals, and magazines. Initially, my understanding of Santali literature was limited, but as my research progressed, I became deeply engaged and sought to investigate the historical development of Santali literature from its origins. I visited Santali departments at multiple colleges and universities in West Bengal, consulted departmental libraries, and engaged with faculty members to gain further insights. Secondary data for this study were obtained from various sources, including books, journals, research articles, and websites. The scope of this research is limited

to the period from 1885 to 1960. Data collected from these sources regarding the development of Santali literature over the past 75 years have been analysed historically and are presented in the following section.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The detailed findings, along with the discussion of this study, are described in the following subsections:

Folk stories

Several books on Santali folktales have been published since 1908. There was a collection of Santali folktales in the Santali language by using Roman script and a translated version in English in three volumes, collected and edited by P.O. Bodding and published from Norway. Bompas brought out a collection of Santali folktales in 1908, while in 1924 was published '*Hor Kabniko*'— a small-volume book of Santali folktales, the text being borrowed from P.O. Bodding's bigger volumes. In 1948 another collection of Santali folktales came out which was named '*Gom Kabni*'. All these books in the Santali language laid the base of Santali prose.

Myths

One of the classics of the language is *Horkoren Mare Hapramko Reak Katha*. Rev. Skrefsrud of the Northern Churches Missionaries of Benagaria (near Dumka district in erstwhile Bihar, presently in Jharkhand) took down what one Kolean, the preceptor told in 1887 about Santal myths and legends, Santali life, manners and customs. All this has been assembled in the book, which was written in the Santali language using the Roman script. It was translated by P.O. Bodding in 1942 and was entitled 'Traditions and Institutions of the Santals'. It was further translated into English in the 'Census Handbook 1951: Bankura', which was translated by B. Hansda and edited by A. Mitra. Another similar type of book on the life and manners of the Santals named *Kherwal Bamsa Dharam Puthi* was written by Ramdas Manjhi in the Santali language by using Bengali script in 1902. This book depicted the life of the Santals who resided in the erstwhile Midnapore district, while the book by Kolean pictured the life of the Santals who resided in the Birbhum district of erstwhile Bengal.

History

Santals are very proud of their national heroes and leaders, Sido and Kanhu, who led them and rouse voices against the British rulers during the Santal Uprising in 1855. The Santal rebellion as described by Chotra Desmanji is mentioned in the book entitled '*Chotra Desmanjhireak Katha*' published by the Missionaries of Benagaria. C.H. Coomar wrote a book entitled '*Santal Pargana, Santal ar Paharikoak Itihas*' in the Santali language using Roman script in 1930 (Risley, 1998).

Novels and short stories

In 1946, R. Carteryars published his novel named '*Harmawak Ato*' (The Village of Harma) using the Roman script, which is the first novel in Santali literature. Later On, it was translated into English by R.K. Rapaz. *Harma* is the leading character of the story which centres on the Santal insurgence. In 1952, Nunku Soren published his novel entitled '*Muhila Cecet Dai*' (The Lady Professor). This is the second novel of Santali literature. The main theme of this novel is a love affair of a lady Professor, named *Muhila*. A collection of six Juvenile stories named '*Kukmu*' (Dream) was published by Balkishore Basuki in 1952. Doman Sahu published a collection of short stories entitled '*Bul Munta*' (The Drunk) in 1954.

Drama

The most acclaimed drama in Santali literature written by Pandit Raghunath Murmu was '*Bidu Chandan*' in 1942 through the Oriya script and later in 1947 through the Bengali script. It depicts the traditional social life of the Santals. In 1952 he published another drama named '*Kherwar Bir*' by using the Bengali script. It depicts the life of *Kherwar*, the traditional Santal ancestor. Kaliram Soren wrote a drama named '*Sido-Kanhu*'. The central theme of this drama is the role of Sido and Kanhu against the British rulers during the Santal Rebellion in 1855. In 1953, Rupnarayan Syam published his drama named '*Ale Ato*'

(Our Village). It is basically a social drama. Balkishore Basuki wrote a drama on the evils of drunkenness named '*Akil Arsi*' (The Mirror of Knowledge) in 1959 (Mukherjee, 1962).

Poem

Archer is the most famous in the field of the collection of Santali poems. He collected Santali lyrics for a long period and then, in 1942 he published two volumes on Santali poems viz. '*Hor Sereen*' and '*Don Sereen*' in Santali language by using Roman script. Paul Soren published his collection of Santali poems volume named '*Onrobe Baba Dalbac*' (A Sheaf of Flowers) in 1935 (Bodding, 2007). In 1945, a collection of Santali poems named '*Seren Ita*' (The Seed of Songs) was published by Panchanan Mandi in Bengali script. Thakur Prasad Murmu published his collection of Santali poems in his book entitled '*Ebben Aran*' (Songs of Awakening) by using Bengali script in 1951. Sarada Prasad Kisku, a noted Santali poet of Purulia district of West Bengal, published his collection of Santali poems in his book entitled '*Bhurka Ipi*' (The Morning Star) through the Devanagari script in 1952 (Mahapatra, 1986). Other noted Santali poets are Kaliram Soren, Raghunath Murmu, Stephen Murmu, Durgacharan Hembrom, Bhagbat Murmu, Narayan Soren, etc. At present, the Santali poets are publishing their poems in journals, magazines, and also separately in book forms.

Journals and magazines

Santali literature uncovers the best disclosure in the slim journals and magazines published by different groups from time to time. The first Santali journal named '*Pera Hor*' (The Guest) was edited by P.O. Bodding and published by the Benagoria Mission in the Roman script in 1890 (O'Malley, 1910). It was a fortnightly journal. In 1891 the journal was renamed '*Hor Hoponren Pera*' (The Friend of the Santals). A monthly Santali magazine named '*Marsaltabon*' (Our Light) was published by the Catholic Missionaries of Dudhani using Roman script in 1946. In Independent India, the Government of Bihar is the first State Government who take the initiative to publish a magazine in Santali. In 1947, the Government of Bihar had been publishing the weekly magazine named '*Hor-Sambad*' (The Santal News) in the Devanagari script. During the 1950s, the Government of West Bengal published a Santali fortnightly named '*Galmara*' (Table Talks) in Bengali script. Adivasi Mahasabha published a Santali fortnightly magazine named '*Sagun Sakam*' (The New Leaf) in both the Devanagari and Bengali scripts at the same time (Mahapatra, 2001 & Mukherjee, 1982). All these journals and magazines print essays, stories, poems etc. which were a big documentation of Santali literature.

CONCLUSION

Santali literature no longer means collections of folk stories or folk songs, rather than presently Santali literature is a rich literary reservoir which globally seeks immense attention to the literature-lover. The distinctive Santali literature with its high moral order and literary contents is proudly cherished by the literature-lover and the Santal people. The aims and aspirations of the people now unearth phrases through the literature produced by the Santal writer, litterateur, play-writer, and poet. Traces of the fast-diminishing rural face of parts of eastern India are still to be found in the emerging Santali literature. This literature is still idyllic, and it should be helped in its growth amidst the meaningless heterogeneous urban backdrop.

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Ethical statement

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines for social science research involving human participants, particularly those from indigenous and vulnerable groups. Informed verbal consent was obtained from all participants after clearly explaining the research objectives, methodology, and potential outcomes. Participation was voluntary, and respondents retained the right to withdraw at any stage without repercussion. Privacy and confidentiality were

strictly maintained, with all personal identifiers removed from datasets. Data were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes.

Competing interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Author contributions

As a single-author study, the author was responsible for all aspects of the research and manuscript preparation.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request. Due to confidentiality and ethical considerations, some data may be restricted.

AI disclosure

No AI-assisted tools were used for this study. All substantive research contents represent the original work of the author. The author assumes complete responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and final content of this manuscript.

Biographical sketch

Dr. Nizamuddin Ahmed, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Education in the West Bengal Education Service (WBES), currently posted at Haldia Government College, Purba Medinipur, West Bengal, India. Dr. Ahmed has published forty-five research papers in reputable international journals and contributed several chapters to edited books. He has also edited three books. Dr. Ahmed has written a textbook for undergraduate and postgraduate students in his subject. In addition, Dr. Ahmed has presented research papers at numerous international and national seminars and conferences.

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