



## Fertility or Indigeneity?

### Two Versions of the Santal Flower Festival

As local practice, rituals cannot be understood in isolation from their historical context. This article focuses on the flower festival (*baha*) of one of the largest middle Indian tribal societies, the Santal, and explores how national and global influences have come to shape this ritual in the last few decades. Previously only celebrated in the village context, since the 1980s a more elaborate version of the festival has been hosted by local politicians and activists on a regional level. One objective of this article is to compare the village and regional version of the festival and discuss the main themes structuring each of these contexts. As the village flower festival, in its symbols and activities, centers on the relationship between different groups of kin as well as on an exchange between the village and the forest, I suggest that fertility plays a defining role in it. During the large celebrations of regional flower festivals the performance of Santal culture and identity vis-à-vis other communities stands in the forefront, a dynamic in which the idea of indigeneity is highly relevant. Finally, the article addresses the question of cultural change and explores three historical factors contributing to the emergence of regional flower festivals, namely industrialization, the Indian state's politics of minority recognition, and the Jharkhand movement.

KEYWORDS: Santal—Jharkhand—indigeneity—ritual—politics—cultural change

THIS ARTICLE presents an ethnographic exploration of the entanglement of global and national issues with local practice. All three aspects find expression in an annual flower festival celebrated by a tribal society, the Santal, in eastern India. The festival has taken place in villages for as long as people can remember, but in recent years it has taken on a more political shape beyond the village context. My hypothesis is that this change has been brought about by national and global dynamics in which the Santal position themselves. Regarded by the Santal as one of their most important festivals, it is connected with questions of identity and a world view different from other communities living in the area. Today, Santal activists and politicians promote the festival as expressing an inherently “tribal” or “indigenous” lifestyle. At the core of this article lie the commonalities and differences between the Santal village flower festival and its more politicized counterpart on a regional level.

The concept of indigeneity, with its increasingly international character (MERLAN 2009, 303), highlights the ambivalent relationship between globalization and place. While globalization has often been said to pull culture away from place, this is rarely the case in the Santal context. The global indigenous movement seems to thrive on commonalities between indigenous cultures across the world, but the concept of indigeneity also implies a people’s rootedness in a territory (MERLAN 2009, 303).

As this relation with a locality is always culturally constructed, it must take on a different shape in different areas of the world: what it means to “be indigenous” in Jharkhand, India, is located in a specific world view. From the position that rituals offer a window, through which aspects of this world view are rendered visible, this article analyzes the main features of the flower festival as it is celebrated in the sacred groves (*jaher*) of respective villages. For the sake of analysis, this is done in abstract terms, synthesizing the main characteristics of the ritual. By describing this local ritual practice, I also give insight into what it means to be “indigenous” in this particular context. According to my informants, in the last thirty years this village festival has increasingly been performed at the regional level in the area of East Singhbhum. Uniform dances and the presence of local politicians attract much larger crowds than the village flower festival. In this

case a different agenda stands in the forefront, one that is linked to national and global developments.

Scholars working on indigenous issues in Jharkhand have described the assertion of indigenous culture, especially in urban centers such as Ranchi, the union state's capital (SHAH 2010, 115; DAMODARAN 2007, 146). A revised version of the village spring festival, celebrated in slightly different form and under different names among many of Jharkhand's *ādivāsī* communities, has been organized every spring in Ranchi since the 1990s. The festival's name, Sarhul, derives from the Oraon spring festival. The Oraon are a community living, among other regions, in the rural areas around Ranchi. Sarhul has been linked to a politically instigated revival of *ādivāsī* rituals (DAMODARAN 2007, 146). In March 2011 I witnessed how the festival attracted large crowds from all the major *ādivāsī* groups of Jharkhand, who arrived on trucks and buses. Dressed in their communities' festive clothes, they joined large processions accompanied by dancing and drumming along the city's main roads, finally reaching one of the city's sacred groves in the district of Siramtoli. In this context the activists' references to an environmental discourse links the specific national context of *ādivāsīs* in India to a more global arena. This article will complement this contemporary, more urban focus of scholarly writing on *ādivāsī* activism and its influence on rituals with a perspective from a rural area of Jharkhand, based on my fieldwork<sup>1</sup> in the district of East Singhbhum.

Before proceeding to the ethnographic material, the following section provides an outline of the discourses that the Santal as a community have not only been drawn into, but also have strategically engaged with. This section further gives information on the area in which the described festival takes place. A striking aspect of this festival has been its evolvement from a village event to a regional one. In an apt analysis of Santal identity construction, PARKIN (2000, 49) emphasizes the importance of historical factors for an adequate understanding of the constant negotiation and reformulation of Santal identity. The ethnographic material discussed here resonates with and complements Parkin's point, as the regional flower festival has clearly emerged in a specific historical context. Therefore the last part of this article engages with the question of cultural change and lays out the historical circumstances contributing to the emergence of the regional flower festival. Not all sectors of Santal society engage in or even approve of the politics of identity staged in the festival, but nevertheless this revitalization of culture resonates with global developments in the field of indigenous politics (see DE LA CADENA and STARN 2007; VENKATESWAR and HUGHES 2011).

#### CONTENTIOUS TERMS: "TRIBE," "ĀDIVĀSĪ," OR "INDIGENOUS"?

As one of the largest "Scheduled Tribes" (ST) of India, the Santal number about 6.5 million.<sup>2</sup> The terms "tribal," "*ādivāsī*," and "indigenous," mostly used by outsiders to refer to the Santal, each bear their own historical and political trajectory. Because the people organizing the flower festival often evoke these

three terms, especially in its new, regional version, their background is sketched out in the following paragraphs.

Identified by many (DEVALLE 1992, 32; KARLSSON AND SUBBA 2006, 4; SHAH 2010, 13-14) as a colonial construct, “tribes” in India were regarded both by the colonial government and by early anthropologists as communities apart from mainstream society, often living in remote areas of India and subsequently branded as “backward.” In spite of the derogatory connotation the term often carries, it remains widely used in Indian media, academia, and by the people designated as such themselves. As KARLSSON and SUBBA (2006, 4) point out, some groups, especially in the northeast, self-identify as “tribal,” asserting a collective identity different from the Hindu majority population. The widespread use of the term is closely related to administrative practice, due to the fact that “Scheduled Tribes” (ST) are enshrined in the Indian Constitution. As such, members of a ST are entitled to reserved seats in the fields of education, in electoral bodies, and in the government. Especially the young and educated members of Santal society take advantage of these provisions today. In this context, CORBRIDGE (1988; 2000) has pointed to a noteworthy development: based on the idea that tribal society and economy is undifferentiated, the Indian state’s reservation system has actually furthered, albeit not started, economic differences between different parts of these societies. These different classes, especially the Santal middle class to which many activists belong, will emerge in the politicized version of the Santal flower festival as this article proceeds.

In contrast to the term “tribal,” the Santal I encountered regularly used the term *ādivāsī* to refer to themselves as a group. The term is a political one, coined in the 1930s, in the Chotanagpur region of today’s Jharkhand. It claims the people so designated are the original inhabitants of India (HARDIMAN 1995, 13). While Santal oral tradition, with its narratives of migration, raises doubts about such claims of the Santal as *ādivāsī* being the first inhabitants, the political power the term yields cannot be overlooked: the Jharkhand movement later discussed in this article is a prime example of attracting people under the banner of being *ādivāsī*.

Of increasing importance in rural Jharkhand is the term “indigenous.” It is part of a more global discourse containing the idea of inhabiting a land before it was invaded or colonized by a foreign power and of being culturally distinct from those settlers who today often form the majority (KARLSSON and SUBBA 2006, 6). Greatly fostered by United Nations bodies such as the UN Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (MERLAN 2009, 304), the term remains contested in the Indian context (see BAVISKAR 2006, 35; BÉTEILLE 1998, 190-91; KARLSSON 2006, 52; XAXA 1999). Despite these debates about the suitability of the term in India, the idea of being indigenous is prevalent among activists even in rural areas of Jharkhand. Members of a reformist Santal religious movement (All India Sarna Dhorom) have repeatedly emphasized to me that soon they want to go to Geneva, to connect with other indigenous people, and inform them about the Santal struggle for cultural and religious recognition in India.<sup>3</sup>

While these terms are part of larger discourses, they are also filled with local meaning. The two ritual contexts presented in the following show how in some contexts ideas of what it means to be “indigenous” are more prevalent than in others. Many activists further legitimize their activities by making use of a discourse surrounding these terms.

#### THE ETHNOGRAPHIC SETTING

The material presented in this article is based on fieldwork in the district of East Singhbhum in the southeastern corner of Jharkhand, where people’s livelihood consists mostly of wet-rice cultivation and the use of forest produce such as timber, leaves, and forest fruits. While the majority of the tribal population lives from agriculture, educated Santal tend to work for the Indian railway and in the government sector or in local copper and uranium mines. These jobs are better paid and enable people to expand their ancestral houses in the village as well as to build cement houses in the nearby cities of Ghatsila and Jamshedpur. The wealthier and more educated section of the population especially has been increasingly active in portraying and communicating “Santal culture” to non-Santals, a development I will describe in this article. The beginnings of these divisions of economic wealth and political power within tribal society can be traced back to at least the 1940s (CORBRIDGE 1987, 263).

The Santal constitute the dominant majority of the population in the multi-ethnic area of East Singhbhum. They live in close symbiosis with artisan and other Hindu castes such as blacksmiths, potters, basket makers, and weavers. The latter generally do not own land in the area, but provide the Santal with products for everyday and ritual use. Other ST such as Kharia, Birhor, Ho, and Munda reside in the forested hills bordering the cultivated Santal lands. Only in Ghatsila and Musabani, the nearest towns to my fieldwork villages, does one find other religious communities and higher Hindu castes. I suggest that the presence of these higher castes and the comparatively lower status of the Santal in the towns have led wealthier Santal to build large sacred groves, especially at these cultural crossroads.

#### TWO FLOWER FESTIVALS AND THEIR THEMES

Every year a flower festival called *baha porob* is held around the full moon of the lunar month of *Phagun* (February/March) in sacred groves on the outskirts of each Santal village. The *baha* festival celebrates the blooming of the *sal* (*Shorea robusta*) and *mabhua* (*Madhuca longifolia*) trees and involves the whole village community and invited relatives in worshipping and dancing for three days. In the 1980s people started celebrating *baha* festivals in a more regional context, in larger sacred groves called *disom jahers*. The word *disom* means “land” or “region.” While sacred groves in the villages were established many generations ago, their regional counterparts have only been built recently. Once a year Santal leaders host regional

flower festivals, *disom baha*, in these places. The festivals attract thousands of people who watch Santal dances, listen to speeches, and socialize with other people from all over the area. Thus, the two festivals carry the same name, but to me as an observer and to the participants with whom I spoke, they signify different things.

For an analysis of these two contexts, my question concerns the main theme of each of these festivals. I ask what the village flower festival, in its actions and symbolism, is all about. Different activities stand in the center and shape the meaning of each of these contexts.

In the context of the village flower festival the visits of affinal relatives, those with whom one maintains marriage relations, play a significant role. Further, the symbolism of the festival, such as the flowers that give it its name, the sacrifices to the deities of the grove, and the ritual hunt on the third day of the festival, underline the importance of the forest. In the Santal ritual system in general, the forest and its deities are associated with rain and on the third day of the festival these deities are asked for rain to nourish the rice seedlings soon to be sown. My argument hence is that the village flower festival revolves around the theme of human as well as natural fertility.

Regional sacred groves are recent phenomena, often built by wealthy and politically powerful individuals or groups. They have become a platform where some elements of the village flower festival are elaborated or sometimes changed and essentialized into “Santal culture.” Here, sacrifices to the deities only play a marginal role, no ritual hunt is conducted, and the social context goes beyond the kin networks of the village. The dynamics at play here are related to larger contexts. At the regional flower festival the Santal annually perform selected aspects of their identity, such as the cultural importance of dance and music, as well as the importance of “nature” in their ritual practice. The festival is about a collective Santal identity performed for Santal and non-Santals alike. As I will later explain in more detail, I posit that the main theme of the festival is indigeneity.

In recent years claims to being indigenous have acquired increasing importance. Santal political activism (ORANS 1965; CARRIN 2008; 2012) is one indicator of this development. Politics and religion are often intertwined in many contexts of South Asia (AHMED 2011), and the Santal are no exception. The prevalence of political claims to indigeneity has also come to shape the ritual context in Santal society. The construction of *disom jahers* and the *disom baha* festivals held in them serve as a suitable example. An ethnographic description of both the flower festival in the village and on a regional level is given in the following section.

#### THE *BAHA* FESTIVAL IN THE VILLAGE

The blossoming of the *sal* tree<sup>4</sup> marks the beginning of *baha* festivals in Santal villages, celebrating spring and the arrival of the new year. The central role *sal* and *mahua* flowers play in the festival gives it its name. The festival often takes place on different dates in different villages and thus enables relatives to visit each



FIGURE I. The village priest sacrifices a chicken to the deities of the sacred grove, Janbuni village, Jharkhand. Photo by author, 21 March 2011.

other's festivals, dance, sing, and drink rice beer together. It is a high-spirited time, characterized by joy (*reske*), as many people expressed it.

The following description is a synthesis of *baha* festivals I witnessed in 2011 and 2012 in five different villages, for which I use the ethnographic present. As a synthesis it glosses over the minor differences appearing in these villages. My description focuses particularly on the actors involved, the ritual actions such as the sacrifices in the sacred grove, and the symbols used.

The day prior to the festival's main day is dedicated to the preparation and decoration of the *jaher* and the village. In the *jaher* young men thatch the roof of the main shrine and form straw figures. One is in the shape of a peacock and another figure consists of a straw male puppet with pronounced genitals, joined together with a female in sexual intercourse. Later, both figures hang from a rope at the entrance to the *jaher*.

In the evening of this first day, men and women assemble in the courtyard of the village priest's house, where they are served rice beer. With songs, the assembled villagers call on the gods, and up to five people fall into a trance, possessed by the gods Marang Buru, Jaher Ayo, Moreko Turuiko, and Manjhi Haram. As these are the gods residing in the sacred grove, the number of gods taking possession of the mediums is prescribed and should be at least four. The name of the god, Moreko Turuiko, literally means "Five Six," and often this god possesses several mediums. In the courtyard the village elders then present the gods with their attributes, such as a bow and arrow for Moreko Turuiko and a broom and basket for Jaher Ayo, the

mother of the sacred grove. Then the possessed mediums make their way to the sacred grove to see if it has been prepared well for the activities of the next day.

On the main day of the *baha* festival relatives arrive from other villages, such as the mother's brother or father's sister, who have brought their respective partners and children along. They belong to the category of affinal relatives, those with whom one's group has intermarried. However, only the men belonging to the descent groups of the village attend the ritual act of sacrificing to the *jaher* deities in the morning. The sacrifice takes place at the foot of *sal* trees within the grove, and a chicken of prescribed color is dedicated to each god of the grove.

Marang Buru, the male deity of the grove, further receives *sal* flowers, while Jaher Ayo, the mother of the grove, is offered *mahua* blossoms. The bodies of the sacrificed chickens and goats are later jointly eaten by the agnates, and the head meat is reserved for the priest and his assistant. Although the women are excluded from the ritual sacrifices in the shrine, their participation is essential. Without their singing and dancing, the gods do not arrive and the ritual cannot proceed. The women's songs call the gods and five people become possessed by the gods of the sacred grove, who each take on the individual god's specific attributes and dance. In some villages the possessed then leave the grove and collect *sal* and *mahua* flowers from the forest.

In the evening, after resting during the heat of the afternoon, villagers, their affinal relatives, and people from neighboring villages move in large crowds toward the *jaher*. The women stand in lines in front of the shrine. Here the village priest hands each one a *sal* flower, which they put in their hair. The men, who also receive these flowers a little later, put them behind their ears. People take great care of these given flowers and later hang them above a door of their house as a sign of auspiciousness (*sagun*). While the groups of men and women dance to the rhythm of the drums, the gods return again, an occurrence that manifests in the screaming and wild dancing of the mediums.

With the onset of darkness, people return to their houses, where they eat, drink rice beer, sing, and socialize. Later, during the night, all generations, and especially the young, start dancing at the village dance ground (*akbra*). Moving to the sounds of drums until the next morning, the dancing joins men and women from inside and outside the village in long lines and offers a chance for flirtation.

The morning of the third day is characterized by two main activities: observing the auspicious clay pitcher (*sagun supari*), and a co-temporal water fight and hunt. At the village priest's house the women of the village each squat in front of a clay pitcher in order to inspect its water level. The pitcher had been filled the previous evening, and is said to predict the rainfall for the coming agricultural season.

Women and men later sing songs in the courtyard of the priest's house. The songs comment on the different ritual steps taken that morning and on hunting activities, which will take place shortly after. One last time two people become possessed by Moreko Turuiko, who is associated with hunting, and the mediums tell the priest in veiled language (*bhet kattha*)<sup>5</sup> where prey can be found for the ensuing hunt. Then men and boys of the village embark on the first hunt of the



year armed with bows, arrows, axes, and spears, accompanied by their hunting dogs. They later return to the village led by a group of drummers, singing songs (called *singrai seren*) mixed with whistles and shouts. In the village the priest's wife receives them by washing and oiling their feet.

Meanwhile, water fights take place in the village. This time of year is the Hindu festival of color, Holi. The Santal maintain that they play Holi with water, or more specifically *baha dak'* (flower water), which is sprinkled or poured only on affinal relatives.

To summarize, the *baha* festival in villages celebrates the onset of spring marked by the blooming of *sal* and *mahua* trees in the forest. The idea of fertility, symbolized in the joining of male and female, such as the *sal* and *mahua* flowers or the straw puppets, seems to frame the elements and actions of the ritual. It is the only occasion of the year when women are allowed to enter the sacred grove, and a time when humans and the gods of the sacred grove interact in sacrifice and dancing. The prominent use of fertility symbols, such as the straw puppets in a sexual position, rice beer,<sup>6</sup> and the important position of flowers, which in songs often stand for women, underlines this thesis. Thus, in its relation to procreation, the symbolism of the festival evokes the idea that at its center stands the reproduction of human fertility.

It is important to note that society and its environment are not separated in the Santal ritual system. The exchange between the "inside" and the "outside," the domains of the forest and the village, is instead articulated as essential: affinal relatives come from their villages into the host village, flowers of the *sal* and *mahua* tree are brought from the forest into the sacred grove, and hunted game is brought into the village. The ritual importance of the water-filled clay pitcher predicting rainfall and the almost simultaneous ritual hunt evokes another important aspect of the forest in the Santal world view: agriculture is not possible without the forest. Other annual rituals, such as the sacrifices for the mountain deities (*buru bongga*) or the annual hunt (*sendra bongga*) articulate that it is the deities of the forest who provide the rain necessary for an abundant harvest. Hence, DAMODARAN'S assertion that "Chotanagpuris tended to experience the forest and the village as ontologically part of each other, one being the life force for the other's continuing existence" (2002, 90) holds true for Santal society in particular, as my analysis of the different ritual activities and the symbolism of the village flower festival shows.

However, only some of the features of the village flower festival, such as sacrificing, *sal* and *mahua* flowers, and dancing appear in the regional version of the festival. This shows that the performance of tradition is a selective process and that emphasis is placed on different aspects of the festival at the regional level.

#### REGIONAL *BAHA* FESTIVALS (*DISOM BAHA*)

Regional *baha* festivals take place in *disom jahers*, which are much larger in size than the groves in villages. During my fieldwork I saw four *disom jahers* and heard about several others in Jamshedpur and Kolkata. They are a new phenomenon, built and run by "service-holders," Santal men who work in



FIGURE 2. Dancing in the regional sacred grove at Surda crossing, Jharkhand. Photograph by author, 18 March 2011.

the railway, government, or mining sectors and have gained influence due to their wealth and education. However, some Santal see *disom jahers* critically as “political worshipping places.” In their eyes the gods prefer sacred groves, built by the original founders of villages. The following section will clarify who has established these *disom jahers*; it further describes the common features of the *disom baha* festivals I attended.

The largest and best known *disom jaher* in the region is the “Surda Crossing *jaher*” located at a road intersection connecting Musabani and Ghatsila, just outside of Surda village. It is surrounded by a concrete wall and its gate is decorated with signs reading “Disom Jaher Garh” and “Puja Place” in Roman, Hindi, and Ol Chiki, the latter being a Santal script invented by Rangunath Murmu in the 1940s. To the right of the gate a board gives information about the different worship places within the *jaher*. The board further specifies the *jaher*’s construction date in 1989. To the left of the main gate, a wall states “Disom jaher garh, Bahabonga 2011 honorable donors list” commemorating the names of about 120 individuals together with the amount of money they donated for the annual *disom baha* festival. A local politician, Ghatsila’s Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) Ramdas Soren, representing the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), donated the largest sum of 25,001 INR. Other donations range from 24,900 INR to the lowest sum of 500 INR. In front of the *disom jaher* there is a small temple-like building, sheltering a bronze statue of Baba Tilka Manjhi, the first Santal freedom fighter who took up

arms against the British in 1784 (MUNDA 2004, 185). He is shown decorated with a flower chain and armed with bow and arrow.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the actual ritual worship in the *jaher's* shrine, dancing is an essential part of the festival. For many hours the dance ground is transformed into a cloud of dust, vibrating with the steps of hundreds of female and male dancers dressed in identical clothes. The women wear checkered sarees. This clothing style has come to be called "Santal saree," but according to older villagers the style originates from Orissa. They further assert that it was only recently that the style became popular in their area. Some women even balance water-filled vases on their heads while dancing. The men dance in separate lines, dressed in identical dhotis with peacock feathers tied to their turbans. In front of each line of dancers a group of men beat typical Santal drums called *tamak'* and *tumda*.

Many young men watching the dance performances film the dance groups with their mobile phones; some results can be found on the online video platform YouTube. As opposed to the dancing during the village flower festival, the dancing at the *disom jahers* is not inclusive, but instead an organized performance. The day following the *disom baba* festival, all major regional newspapers feature pictures of these dances but often provide very little background information about the festival otherwise.

In the midst of all this activity local politicians are seated on a stage and give speeches through microphones. In 2012, Ghatsila's Member of Legislative Assembly, Ramdas Soren, attended the celebration accompanied by several armed bodyguards. Next to him sat the *desh pargana* of Ghatsila. He is a local official traditionally presiding over all the village headmen (*manjhi*). These headmen consult him when grave breaches of custom occur in their villages. Members of the board of the *disom jaher*, many of whom work in a nearby copper mine, further occupied the stage.

While many families and groups come to watch the dances, others embark on a trail leading from one shrine of the *jaher* to another. A maze of sacred sites is portrayed outside on the wall of the *jaher*. Each of these places features clay statues, measuring about one meter in size.<sup>8</sup> The statues teach about Santal tradition, such as the main gods of the sacred grove and the activities of the ancestors. The seven sons and seven daughters of the ancestral Santal couple Pilcu Haram and Pilcu Budhi are depicted hunting and gathering, dancing, drumming, and worshipping the gods.

Another *disom jaher* in the area is located on a hill in the town of Ghatsila and was built during 1985–1986 by the aforementioned *desh pargana* of Ghatsila. A wall also surrounds this *jaher* and a printed banner marks its entrance alongside the state highway, announcing the annual *disom baba* festival. An additional *disom jaher* can be found in the industrial part of Chakulia, a town located about 30 kilometers southeast of Ghatsila. Its board members are actively involved in the All India Santal Writers Association. Even further away from the area's towns and main roads, a Santal priest (*naeke*) built a *disom jaher* on the outskirts of a small village in the forest in 2007. He emphasized that at his *disom jaher* even women are allowed to eat the sacrificial food, which is not the case in the village *jahers*. The

crowd attending the *naeke's disom baha* festival consists mainly of his wife's students from the nearby public school. All of these men or groups of men emphasize in English that they built the respective *disom jahers* "against deforestation." The fact that for some of these groves, the most characterizing feature is their encompassing concrete wall with only two or three trees found on the inside, seems irrelevant to those making these statements. They also repeatedly tell arriving Hindu journalists and me, the anthropologist, "that we Santals worship nature, and have sacred groves and no buildings such as churches or temples."

These statements show that the activists position themselves in much larger discourses, such as environmentalism, to represent their society to the outside. But also toward the members of their own community these festivals reaffirm a pride in being Santal, especially among the youth, who form the largest crowds at these events. What characterizes these rituals is the creative potential they bear for a negotiation, contestation, and performance of tradition. Having sketched out the details of the village *baha* festival as well as the different shape the *disom baha* festival takes, the next section aims to identify the themes of these two ritual contexts.

THE ARTICULATION OF FERTILITY AND INDIGENEITY:  
VILLAGE *BAHA* FESTIVALS AND THE THEME OF FERTILITY

The Santal village flower festival celebrates the beginning of the new year. It brings together villagers and their affinal relatives in a celebration of nature's renewal, symbolized by the blooming of *sal* and *mahua* trees. The ritual actions and symbolism of the festival suggest that the theme of fertility stands at its center. This does not mean that fertility is necessarily an indigenous concept, but rather that it emerges as a result of my analysis. Different concrete notions of the abstract concept of fertility find expression throughout the festival. Fertility is to be understood here, making use of BLOCH and PARRY'S formulation (1982), as fecundity in the sense of fruitfulness and productiveness. One finds the idea of new growth, in its relation to the natural environment, throughout the festival: the first *sal* and *mahua* flowers of the season are offered to deities, and humans and gods are requested to provide rain to flood the fields and nourish the soon-to-be-sown rice seeds. But this fecundity also refers symbolically to the social domain, in the sense of human fertility: the straw figure of a human couple in sexual intercourse hung in the sacred grove, the visits of affinal relatives, the prominence of rice beer as a symbol of human reproduction, and the central role of dancing suggest that the fertility celebrated in the festival also includes the idea of human reproduction. While BLOCH and PARRY (1982, 18) write that some rituals might articulate either an idea of "human fertility" or of "natural fertility," I argue that both of these types play a role in the Santal village flower festival. While human fertility is underlined by the interaction between agnatic and affinal relatives, natural fertility results out of the interdependence of forests and cultivated fields.

The idea of human fertility emerges from several aspects of the flower festival as mentioned: it is articulated in the joining of relatives, the prominence of rice beer,

and the straw puppets hung in the sacred grove. In a similar vein the nightly dancing in the village dance ground during the *baha* festival offers opportunities for new affinal connections to be made. That marriages result out of first encounters during these nightlong dances is no exception.

But who exactly are these two categories of relatives, which constitute society in Santal cultural logic? Agnates, “the people of a house” (*orak’ hor*) as the Santal literally call them, and affines (*pera*—the word is used as a synonym for guests) are those with whom one’s agnatic group can potentially marry. Since clan exogamy is the rule, affines are potentially all clans other than one’s own. A more specific category of affines are those with whom marital relations already exist, such as the house one’s daughter has married into or the mother’s brother’s house. The agnates are the people of the village, many of them descendants of the village founders, who first established the sacred grove. In that sense the sacred grove represents their rootedness in the land where their village is situated. They sacrifice to the gods of the grove and offer rice beer to their ancestors in the ancestral shrine of their houses during the festival. On the occasion of *baha* they invite and host their in-laws. Both of these social categories together form the foundation of Santal and other Middle Indian societies.<sup>9</sup> The social pattern structuring these societies is not the remembrance of the ancestral line but rather the opposition and complementarity of affinal and agnatic categories (BERGER 2010; GREGORY 2009; HARDENBERG 2005; PFEFFER 1982; 1997).

My argument concerning human fertility here is that on the one hand the flower festival ensures the fertility of the whole village. The sacred grove itself is a reminder of the foundation of the village, as it is the patch of forest left over when the ancestors cleared the forest in order to till the land and establish a village. The deities of the sacred grove function as benevolent deities for the village as a whole, including many latecomers who do not belong to the agnatic groups of the original founders. For the sacrifices to the deities of the grove each village household contributes a chicken. In sum, the festival articulates more specifically the fertility of the village, with its generally agnatic connotation.

On the other hand, the flower festival also expresses the complementarity of affines and agnates. It states that the joining of these two categories is essential for the continued existence of the agnates. This is most vividly expressed in the important role married women play during the festival. They are the ones who have come into the agnatic group as in-laws. Once a year, on the occasion of the flower festival, they are permitted to enter the sacred grove. Their contribution to the ritual activities is essential. Through their singing and dancing they call the deities, whose participation makes the festival an especially auspicious and happy event. The reference to women as flowers in several contexts shows that human fertility and natural fertility are closely connected in the Santal world view. In *baha* festival songs, a tree heavy with flowers refers to young women who have matured, ready to be “plucked” by suitable men. During one of the first ritual encounters in the context of marriage arrangements, the groom’s party in veiled language (*bhet kattha*) states: “We have come to chose a flower,” referring to a potential bride.

The idea that natural fertility equally plays an important role in the flower festival is expressed in several ritual actions of the festival: the general role of wild *sal* and *mahua* flowers, the hunt, and the observing of the auspicious clay pitcher, predicting the annual rainfall. In all these actions, movements between the spheres of forest and village are crucial. Wild flowers are brought into the sacred grove, offered to the village deities, handed to the villagers, and later placed in the houses. Prey from the forest is brought into the village. And on the same day a clay pitcher filled with water predicts the coming rainfall for the agricultural year. Several other annual Santal rituals articulate the idea that the deities of forests and mountains are those responsible for rain: during the annual hunt (*sendra bongga*) and the annual ritual for the mountain gods (*buru bongga*), these deities are asked for rain through the collective sacrifices carried out by several villages at the beginning of the rainy season. The fertility of the fields in most villages of East Singhbhum is solely dependent on the monsoon and is hence, in the Santal world view, closely related to the domain of the forest. The flower festival therefore articulates that the forest plays an important role in the continued existence of the village and its inhabitants. Because a sufficient rice harvest, supplemented by forest produce (for example dried *mahua* flowers), is the most important food source for the Santal in this area, this natural fertility is the precondition for human growth and reproduction. The fact that Santal metaphors often draw analogies between the natural and the human domain—women are described as flowers, life stages are expressed in terms of trees, so in ritual practice a child or groom and bride can be married to a tree—underlines that the human and natural domains are not regarded as ontologically different. Rather, one is expressed in terms of the other. In a similar manner, the village flower festival, with its emphasis on fertility, celebrates the complementarity of human and natural fertility.

#### DISOM BAHBA FESTIVALS AND THE THEME OF INDIGENEITY

When comparing the two versions of the flower festival, the defining features of the *disom baha* festivals lie in their larger scale and uniformity. Chartered buses bring people to this event. Politicians are seated on a stage and give speeches. Everyone can watch the performances of dance groups dressed in identical sarees and dhotis. Some of the elements of the village *baha* festival can still be found here, such as the sacrifices to the deities of the sacred grove and the distribution of *sal* flowers to the participants. But the structure of agnates and affines is absent. Here, instead of the descent group, rooted in the land, a politically motivated activism takes center stage. This context to some degree is open to the negotiation of village practices, thereby leaving room for the influence of individuals who want to challenge some of these practices.

Because of their scale and location in cities or nearby roads, the *disom baha* festivals attract the attention of the local media and the Hindu population. Event organizers present journalists with the picture they want to paint of Santal society. Much more than the participants in the village flower festival, the people involved

in organizing the regional festival communicate certain aspects of a Santal identity to the outside. This identity often revolves around the importance of dancing in a uniform, elaborate, “clean” way, without the drunkenness that is often part of the event in the village context. In the case of the *disom baha* festival at Surda crossing, another remarkable portrayal of Santal culture exists in the clay statues showing different cornerstones of Santal mythology. Another feature local organizers of these events like to emphasize are the deep relations Santal society has with nature, exemplified in the existence of sacred groves. The last claim is often made especially by people who are fully aware that it sets the Santal apart from other religions. Many of the politically active Santal I met emphasized that other indigenous peoples, for example Native Americans, maintain similar relations with nature.

Paying attention to the protagonists of the organization of *disom baha* festivals in this area, one notices that several of them are involved in other Santal political and cultural organizations. In fact, the above-mentioned unifying cultural tendencies<sup>10</sup> are not only present in the case of the regional flower festival, but also reappear in these other organizations and their activities. They are condensed in the activities of groups such as the All India Sarna Dhorom, which has been attempting to reform Santal religion since the 1950s. ORANS (1965, 105–37) already mentions political movements that promote a return to the sacred grove and the promotion of *sarna* as the religion of the Mundari-speaking *ādivāsīs* who resided in the Jamshedpur area.<sup>11</sup> He further relates this assertion of religious identity to developments within the Jharkhand movement, which I will comment on later in this article. In the area of Chakulia town I further encountered active members of The All India Santal Writers Association, founded in 1988, functioning as a platform to promote and develop Santali literature. Members from both these organizations are actively involved in the boards of *disom jahers*, also beyond the region. Through their political activism they demand governmental recognition of Santal social and cultural rights. These people partly live in villages and attempt to promote more unified cultural practices there as well, such as the wearing of the previously-mentioned checkered sarees in village festivals.

With regard to my initial question as to what differentiates the two versions of Santal flower festivals, I argue that the idea of indigeneity lies at the heart of the regional version. With reference to Berger’s (this volume, 19–37) three notions of indigeneity, I argue that the Santal flower festival, along with other Santal political activism, presents a case of “claimed indigeneity.” In the case of the regional flower festival, the involved Santal actors reduce the complex meaning of the village flower festival to certain eye-catching aspects, and annually communicate this version of their cultural identity to a larger local audience. Two facets of this identity, namely the cultural importance of dancing and the idea of worshipping nature, are outlined in the following.

In some of its aspects this claimed indigeneity is performed in a local context, but many of the quoted statements also show that global aspects of “being indigenous” are evoked. Hence, the Santal material shows that indigeneity can be claimed on different political levels. The importance of Santal dance as one aspect of this

claimed indigeneity is mostly relevant in the region and in India, where it serves to prove that the Santal differ from other communities in the area. One needs to be familiar with different cultural practices in India in order to understand their emphasis on dancing during the regional flower festival as a claim to indigeneity. However, the claim to being “close to nature,” for which the festival in the sacred grove is given as an indicator, and a third aspect of the flower festival, the practice of claiming a certain rootedness in a place, can be seen as related to more global political claims of being like other indigenous peoples outside of India. I describe these three features of the festival in the following.

One aspect of their culture, which the Santal often see as differentiating them from Hindu society, is their way of dancing. “We are a mixed society,” one of my first Santal friends emphasized, referring to the relatively free gender mixing during Santal dances. As I encountered it, dancing in the village dance ground (*akbra*) is a crucial feature of any village festival, uniting young and old, men and women, visitors and villagers in rhythmic steps throughout the night. People told me repeatedly that the greatest fun a person can have happens during dancing. They were convinced that “the way white people dance, not in lines but alone, cannot be fun at all.” Although the dances performed at the *disom baba* festival lacked this participatory inclusiveness, the organizers of the festival clearly chose them to form the core of the festival.

Despite the fact that this stereotype of the “dancing tribal” has existed since colonial times, no doubt replicated by newspaper images with little accompanying information even today, I never encountered any criticism of this image among my Santal contacts. Many famous activists of the Jharkhand movement, such as Ram Dayal Munda (BABIRACKI 2000/2001) and Mukund Nayak, used the participatory types of *ādivāsī* dance to unite people for the movement. They portrayed dancing as an essential component of *ādivāsī* culture. The Santal community of the area rejuvenates this image of dancing as a part of *ādivāsī* identity each year anew. Insiders and outsiders alike thus cultivate the image of dancing natives. It is maintained by the Santal themselves through their regional flower festival, but also by the Indian government; the first thing catching the eye upon arriving at Kolkata and Ranchi airports respectively are large boards portraying lines of *ādivāsī* dancers and drummers. Dancing as part of the regional flower festival could then, in Berger’s sense, be regarded as both claimed and ascribed indigeneity.

The second aspect of the regional flower festivals is their relevance for claiming place. As claims to indigeneity often include the idea of a rootedness in a specific place, the Santal regional flower festival fits well into this context. The literal meaning of the regional flower festivals already points to a relevant spatial aspect. *Disom*, referring to the “country” or “region,” linguistically labels these practices as different from their village counterparts. *Disom* refers to a spatial concept broader than the village and includes the people inhabiting this area. It is not a bounded spatial concept, for no one could name its boundaries, but rather stands for an idea of a large area from which people arrive to attend the festival. Their sheer numbers make the festival an occasion for claiming the area as belonging to the Santal.



Besides the people and the festival as a cultural performance in itself, the site in which the celebration takes place stands as a constant marker of a Santal presence in the area. Located in many cases at visible places—at road intersections, in cities—these recognizable sacred groves stand as a telling counterpart to the rather inconspicuous village groves. They are “*pūjā* places,” as the gate to the entrance of Surda *disom jaher* claims, marking a Santal presence in the region. Whereas in the past only small stones at the foot of trees were the place for Santal religious activity, today their sacred sites are much more visible to outsiders.

The third relevant aspect of the regional flower festival is how its organizers describe it as a symbol of their close relationship to nature. Hindu journalists from Ghatsila present for festivals and I, the anthropologist, were repeatedly presented with the image of the Santal as nature worshippers. Among the reasons for establishing regional sacred groves, I often encountered people explaining that they were built to save the forest, “against deforestation.” The context of these statements appeared to be much more relevant than their actual truth, for many of these groves contain very few trees. The newly built, regional sacred grove outside of a small village in fact was even surrounded by thick forest and caught the eye mostly because of its concrete shrine and stones representing the deities embedded in cement platforms. I see these statements made during the festival as influenced by the political claims of organizations such as Sarna Dhorom. In a memorandum, submitted to the president of India through the Collector of Mayurbhanj in January 2012, this organization lists the environmental benefits of sacred groves (such as “no scarcity of water” and “pure air”) and demands its protection, preservation, and maintenance by the government. As pointed out by BAVISKAR (1995, 239), indigenous people are often environmentalists “by default,” due to their small population size and dependence on their environment; however, describing them as inherent protectors of nature is a misrepresentation. The protection of trees in Santal sacred groves similarly cannot be attributed to a veneration of “nature,” but is due to the respect for its deities. Nevertheless, political claims to ethnic distinctiveness are increasingly made in environmental terms in India (see, for example, ARORA 2006; BURMAN 2013; DAMODARAN 2012), as well as in other countries such as Mexico (PARAJULI 1998) or Indonesia (LI 2000). These claims are often made by outsiders on behalf of indigenous people, or by a local elite. In the case of Jharkhand, for example, SHAH (2010) illustrates the differences between activists claiming to represent *ādivāsī* villagers and actual village practice. BAVISKAR (1995; 1997) presents similar dynamics in the case of the movement against the Narmada dam in western India. The Santal regional flower festival serves as an indicator that the Santal, too, employ this strategy, couching identity politics in terms of an environmentalist discourse.

So far this article has analyzed the differences between the annual village flower festival and its regional counterpart, which has appeared on the scene only in recent decades. This new ritual, making use of many features of an older village tradition, is especially striking in that it represents a cultural performance, which annually underlines Santal claims to indigeneity on a national and global scale.

When comparing the Santal to the Gadaba, for whom Berger (this volume, 19–37) writes that they exhibit this “claimed indigeneity” only in a nascent stage, the Santal have been presenting this type of indigeneity already in a very elaborate form for several decades. What factors can be detected in recent Santal or regional history that might have led to this political activism? The remainder of this article discusses the historical and regional context, which I see as contributing to such a development.

#### RITUAL PRACTICE, HISTORICAL CONTEXT, AND CULTURAL CHANGE

The regional Santal flower festival presents a relevant case for the exploration of Santal political activism and the increasing importance of the concept of indigeneity in this context. Previously the blooming of *sal* and *mahua* trees was only celebrated in the kin-oriented village context; today the regional version of this festival attracts people from all over the region and serves as an occasion to portray some selectively chosen aspects of Santal culture. One aspect deserving attention is the peculiarly simultaneous emergence of the different *disom jahers* in the area of East Singhbhum, Jharkhand, around the 1980s. What happened around this time?

The emergence of *disom jahers* in East Singhbhum can be contextualized in a chain of historical events in which the Santal actively engaged. As an answer to the question regarding what has led to the increase in Santal cultural politics, I suggest that there are at least three historical factors which fostered this development. This is where global and national dynamics enter the picture, namely industrialization, national political recognition of minority groups, and the Jharkhand movement, a political movement that led to the formation of the new union state of Jharkhand in 2000.

#### INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT IN CHOTANAGPUR

CORBRIDGE (1987, 252) delineates the industrial development of Chotanagpur from the opening of the first coalfield in 1894 and the ensuing competition for mineral resources between Indian and European capitalists. Contradicting the idea that industrialization in this region only led to exploitation and “internal colonialism,” CORBRIDGE (1987, 255 and 263) concludes that some tribal mine workers were able to accumulate wealth from their work in the mines. This led to economic and political divisions within tribal societies of the region. As I observed, even in villages of East Singhbhum, work in the mines enabled some families to buy land from other tribal families, build large houses, send their children to private English medium schools, and acquire consumer goods. It is important to note that this type of industrialization did not happen in all Santal areas. Many parts of the Santal Parganas, in the north east of Jharkhand, for example, are considerably poorer than the rather industrialized area of East Singhbhum.

In accordance with SAHLINS’s (1999, x) argument concerning the “indigenization of modernity,” a considerable part of the money earned in the copper, coal,

and uranium mines of the area is spent on large cultural performances: people afford elaborate weddings, naming ceremonies, and funerals or donate money for cultural events such as local *disom baba* festivals. Therefore, the relative wealth, which industrialization has brought to a small portion of Santal society, has partly led to a kind of “culturalism” (SAHLINS 1999, x). *Disom baba* festivals are a prime example of this culturalism. This section of Santal society, which has profited from the industrialization in the area, has been actively involved in Santal cultural organizations. These organizations have in some cases been rather successful in bringing their political demands to the attention of the state. A fruitful ground for these demands has been provided by the classification of the Santal as a Scheduled Tribe in Jharkhand.

#### THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION

Another historical event contributing to the rise of the importance of indigeneity and its elaboration in ritual contexts can be located in the Indian state’s politics of minority recognition (KAPILA 2008; RYCROFT AND DASGUPTA 2011, 137). The Indian Constitution of 1950 guarantees with Article 15 equality for all citizens: caste and communalism are to be abandoned and untouchability forbidden by law. At the same time it takes a protective stand toward those who might still suffer from exploitation and discrimination, qualifying these groups for active state support (CORBRIDGE 2000, 67). In Article 46 it specifies these groups as Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST), entitled to “reserved jobs in central and state governments, as well as reserved seats in Parliament and provincial Legislative Assemblies” (KAPILA 2008, 121). However, the Indian Constitution preserved a difference between these two groups. The SCs are regarded as discriminated against in the ritual domain, due to their impure status in the eyes of higher Hindu castes, and at the same time economically deprived. The STs lower socioeconomic development is attributed to their “distinctive and primitive way of life, their remote location and their ‘general backwardness in all respects’” (KAPILA 2008, 121). Their “problem,” therefore, lies in their culture. As the Indian government regularly adds communities to the schedules of its constitution, several communities have striven to prove their tribal cultural identity, regardless of how vaguely defined this identity may be in the constitution. CORBRIDGE (2000, 73) outlines how in Jharkhand many ST men from the tribal elite have been able to obtain reserved positions. In his words, they have learned to “colonize the state” (CORBRIDGE 2000, 82). A similar attitude is sketched out by KAPILA (2008, 128), where she describes the relationship between the Gaddi—a Himalayan pastoral community—and the state as “extractive.” The Gaddi know “what can and should be derived from the state as an entitlement” (KAPILA 2008, 128). Among the Santal such strategies can be detected as well: in particular, members of Sarna Dhorom are involved in such efforts, demanding from the state, among other things, the maintenance and protection of sacred groves. But even outside of these organizations, people are aware of the benefits provided for them by the government. For many young men and women in the village, obtaining a job in the public sector is the high-

est goal. Jobs in the private market are generally less desired. As one father of two children in a village told me: “I am sending my children to a school with an English instead of a Hindi curriculum, so that they can get a job in the public sector. We as ST are lucky, the government provides good jobs for us.” As the case of the regional flower festival shows, not only educational choices, but also ritual contexts are being influenced by the politics of recognition in India. Through organizing and performing large regional festivals, the Santal of this region continually prove the point of being a distinct cultural group within India, worthy of the provisions the government reserved for them.

#### THE JHARKHAND MOVEMENT

As a third historical factor, the Jharkhand movement’s influence on the cultural claims brought forth by Santal activists cannot be overlooked. The Jharkhand movement, with its increasingly urban political pressure groups, can be placed in a long tradition of *ādivāsī* protest in Chotanagpur. Here the Santal Rebellion of 1855 figures prominently among other tribal uprisings in the long process of demanding an autonomous state (DEVALLE 1992, 109–50). The movement’s political strategy has oscillated between an emphasis on *ādivāsī* cultural distinctiveness and a more inclusive approach, drawing other, non *ādivāsī*, inhabitants of the area into its fold.

A decline in the political success of the Jharkhand movement led to a revival period at the end of the 1970s when the Jharkhand movement renounced its previously ethnic character in order to cover a broader social basis (SHAH 2010, 20). During this period two militant parties, the Birsa Sewa Dal, active in Ranchi and Jamshedpur, and the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) under the leadership of Binod Bihari Mahato, A. K. Roy, and Shibu Soren, were founded. MUNDA (2004, 187) recognizes the movement’s strength in bringing together mining and agricultural laborers and the incorporation of a sizeable non-tribal population. After an expansion, characterized by all national political parties active in this region forming Jharkhand cells, and the rise of the JMM as the main opposition party in Bihar legislature in 1985, a time of self-examination set in.

In 1981 the Department for Tribal and Regional Languages was established at Ranchi University, enabling research on the languages and literature of the Jharkhand region. It came to form an important intellectual anchor for the Jharkhand movement and created space for meetings and conferences (MUNDA 2004, 188). The All Jharkhand Students Union and the Jharkhand Coordination Committee were formed in 1986 and 1987 to coordinate political and cultural activities. Thus, the end of the 1980s saw a reappraisal of the distinct cultural identity of Jharkhand through conferences and rallies. It seems no coincidence that this “culturalist turn” (BABIRACKI 2000/2001, 38) of the Jharkhand movement and the building of *disom jahers* fall into the same time period. On 15 November 2000, the day commemorating the death of the first pan-tribal rebellion leader Birsa Munda, the demand for an autonomous state of Jharkhand was fulfilled (MUNDA 2004,

215). After thirteen years of independence many of the social and political inequalities still remain (SHAH 2010), which can be observed among the Santal, one of the state's most dominant *ādivāsī* communities. The state's independence has, however, created a ground on which Jharkhandi cultural politics further thrive.

#### CONCLUSION: THE ONGOING PROCESS OF SANTALIZATION

In this article I have introduced the two cases of *bahn* festivals and laid out that the village flower festival revolves around the theme of fertility, both in the sense of human reproduction and natural growth. In the last decades, indigeneity, and all the claims related to it, has gained increasing importance in some contexts, one being the regional flower festival. This rise in the importance of indigeneity can be explained by taking the historical events of industrialization, the national politics of minority recognition, and the cultural turn of the Jharkhand movement into account. While fertility continues to play an important role in the village flower festival, the case of the regional flower festival illustrates that claims to indigeneity shape Santal cultural practices in the contemporary context.

Already several decades ago, ethnographic literature on the Santal dealt with questions of cultural change (DATTA-MAJUMDER 1956), and since then has continually touched upon the topic of Santal identity within the modern Indian nation-state (CARRIN 2012; GAUTAM 1977; ORANS 1965). Hindu influence surely plays a role in many of the cultural changes among some sections of Santal society, such as refraining from beef consumption practiced by members of Sarna Dhorom, the adaptation of the custom of cremation, and the use of vermilion at marriages. Nevertheless several authors (CARRIN-BOUEZ 1986; GAUTAM 1977; PARKIN 2000) have deemed it inadequate to speak of Sanskritization (SRINIVAS 1952, 30) in this context. Instead of sanskritizing, that is, aiming for a higher position in the caste hierarchy, the Santal I encountered during my fieldwork differentiated themselves consciously from higher-caste Hindus. This tendency to underline their cultural uniqueness vis-à-vis other communities also emerges in ritual claims to indigeneity, developed in this article. While this dynamic can already be identified earlier in history, such as the Santal rebellion of 1855, the modern national and global influences elaborated above have further supported some sections of Santal society in formulating this separate identity. Describing the Santal revival of their customs through modern means, GAUTAM (1977, 373) has called this development “Santalization.” This article has shown that such processes of Santalization continue to take place today, molding new elements, such as party politics, the media, and environmental discourses, into a more elaborate yet modified version of village flower festivals.

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#### NOTES

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1. The fieldwork consisted of fourteen months in two different Santal villages in the vicinity of the towns of Musabani and Ghatsila between 2011 and 2013. The fieldwork was supported by the University of Groningen.

2. According to the Census of India 2001 there are 6,469,600 Santali speakers in India. Census data on Santali speakers are the only numbers available to me on the Santal population, although I am aware that not only Santal speak Santali in certain areas. These census data should be understood as an estimate, as it is difficult to count populations spread over a territory often difficult to access. Source: [http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Census\\_Data\\_2001/Census\\_Data\\_Online/Language/parta.htm](http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/Census_Data_Online/Language/parta.htm) (accessed 13 March 2013).

3. These activists, for example, demand financial support from the government to further expand the teaching of the institutionally recognized Santal script Ol Chiki in schools and ask that the Santal village headmen receive financial remuneration.

4. In this text I use the Hindi terms *sal* and *mahua*, for they are commonly employed in the academic literature on the Santal (ARCHER 2007, 237; CARRIN-BOUEZ 1986, 104; TROISI 2000, 134). All other italicized words in this text are Santali.

5. Instead of naming something directly, this type of language uses a different word to refer to it. The medium, for example, speaks of “sheep” when referring to a bear, or uses “old broom” when referring to a porcupine. This language is usually used during possession, especially when the possessing deity belongs to the dangerous category of forest deities. Marriage negotiations between potential affines represent one more occasion for the use of *bhet kattha*.

6. Rice beer plays an important role in the origin of Santal society. Only after the god Marang Buru had taught the ancestral couple to brew rice beer did they commit incest and give birth to seven sons and seven daughters. For an article on the association of rice beer with fertility see CARRIN-BOUEZ (1987).

7. Statues of Santal cultural heroes, like Sidho and Kanho Murmu, the brothers who led the Santal rebellion in 1855, or Ragunath Murmu, can be found all over East Singhbhum. They are often located in market places, in the cities of Musabani and Chakulia for example, but many statues also stand besides rural roads or in the center of villages. In many places annual celebrations are held to commemorate these heroes.

8. Similar-looking clay statues seem to be used in other *ādivāsī* festivals in central India as can be seen on a picture of the 2009 *ādivāsī* exhibition in Bhubaneswar, taken by Markus Schleiter (DE MAAKER AND SCHLEITER 2010).

9. The term “Middle India” is mostly used by PFEFFER (1982; 1997; 2002; 2004) and other scholars (BERGER 2007; HARDENBERG 2005; SKODA 2005; OTTEN 2006) working in cooperation with him. According to PFEFFER (2002, 211) “Perhaps some 100 million—or more—of people belong to the tribal world of Middle India situated in the vast territory between the Ganges in the north and the Godavari in the south, the deserts of Rajasthan in the west and the Bay of Bengal in the east.” In many cases, these societies inhabit the difficult-to-access plateau or hill regions, speak distinct languages (Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian) from the plains people, and exhibit a particular kinship pattern different from the North Indian and Dravidian one (PARKIN 1992; PFEFFER 2004). Defining which communities belong to tribal Middle India enters into the above-mentioned debate on the terms “indigenous,” *ādivāsī*, and “tribal.”

10. Ritual practice often differs from one village to another—that is, in some villages the *baha* festival takes place on days around the full moon, in others on the new moon. Politicians and activists attempt to smooth over these differences and aim to unify these cultural practices.

11. See CARRIN 2008 and 2012 for further mention of the foundation and goals of the Sarna Dhorom movement.

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