



Chanted Narratives of Indigenous People

Context and Content

This article treats narratives in the text of songs as a cultural script by which indigenous people organize experience and make sense of their lives. The essay is subtitled “context and content” to emphasize a perspective that treats song and music as a way of thinking and mode of being in the world. It explores the context of the Santhal (the largest indigenous community in the Bengal, Jharkhand, and Orissa belt in the Indian subcontinent) narratives by delving into the symbols and cognitive pattern enfolded in them. The concern is also with exploring how contexts constrain narratives in indigenous communities and developing a framework within which the context and content of chanted narratives of the indigenous people may be pursued together meaningfully.

KEYWORDS: agricultural cycle—ethnic identity—indigenous people—
narrative—song

RESEARCHERS have long accepted that the narrative component in dramas, theatre, songs and other forms of expression enshrine the sacred knowledge, wisdom, and beliefs of people and operate within the larger framework of social context (see BAMBERG and MOISSINAC 2003, BRUNER 1990, DONALD 1991, FIVUSH and HADEN 2003, vii–xiv). Narrative discourse, therefore, needs to be treated as part of the cultural system. As DAIUTE and LIGHTFOOT (2004, x–xi) explain,

Narrative discourses are cultural meanings and interpretations that guide perception, thought, interaction and action. Narrative discourse organizes social relations, interpretations of the past, and plans for the future. The way people tell stories influences how they perceive, remember, and prepare for future events. This meaning of discourse applies to all forms of human communication and symbolization—verbal and nonverbal alike.

The challenge before social scientists is to understand how narratives both influence and get influenced as local cultures are re-positioned within the larger and broader concerns of global culture. This essay is subtitled “context and content” in order to depart from an atomistic understanding of chanted narratives and emphasize a perspective that treats the song and music of Santhals¹ as a “cultural script,” referring to the way(s) through which people organize experience and make sense of their lives in the cultural setting. New questions come to the forefront and old ones lose rigor as one moves from an atomistic method of interpretation to a more holistic one. The concern is not with how meters are built up in a rule-governed piece, but rather with the ways in which contexts constrain real text and narratives in the Santhal community. The cultural matrix in which the musical instruments are used in chanting narratives acquire distinctiveness not only by virtue of their physical form or structure but also because of the myths, beliefs and rituals associated with them. This article begins with a broad overview of the Santhal community, which is followed by the cultural concept of sound and a comprehensive account of the wide-ranging life situations, beliefs, and myths associated with it. These provide the context of both making and rendering the chanted narratives. Ten songs that mark the critical events in the lives of Santhals selected from the writings of PRASAD (2001) and MAHAPATRA (1992)² have been analyzed based on the understanding that narratives in songs, dramas, and other

performances in tribal societies present cultural discourse that is intrinsic to mundane activities and social processes. Subsequently, the contexts of the narratives have been explored from an analytical standpoint by delving into the symbols and cognitive patterns enfolded in them. The article concludes with a note on situations of change and transformation in society—which get reflected in the narratives of songs, dramas, and other performances—in order to demonstrate how and to what extent change is interpreted and represented in Santhal society.

Santhal is, by far, one of the major tribes in India in terms of both its numerical preponderance and its assertion of self-identity through the Santhal rebellion.³ Santhals predominantly occupy the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, and West Bengal⁴ in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent. According to a Santhal narrative, in the beginning there were no plants, animals, birds, or human beings. Nothing existed except a vast expanse of water overlying the earth that was occupied by Ṭhākūr jiu.⁵ One day Ṭhākūr jiu created the crab, crocodile, alligator, fish, prawn, earthworm, and other animals that live in water, and two human beings out of mud. Just when he was going to infuse life in them, the *sin sadōm*⁶ trampled on them. Unabated, Ṭhākūr jiu pulled some flesh out of his own chest and made two birds: Hās (the male bird) and Hāsīl (the female bird). He instilled life by breathing on them. The two birds flew away. Since there were no trees, they would alight on Ṭhākūr jiu's hand when they were tired. One day, *sin sadōm* came to drink water and let some froth from his mouth float on the surface. When the birds returned, Ṭhākūr jiu asked them to rest on the froth. The birds floated across the waters on the froth in search of food to sustain themselves.

In order that the birds be able to feed themselves adequately, Ṭhākūr jiu asked the alligator, prawn, fish, and crab to bring the earth from under the water to its surface. After the other animals gave up, the earthworm and tortoise managed to bring the earth out from under the water. Ṭhākūr jiu caused the earth to be narrowed. In this way some portions of it were raised and converted into mountains while others remained level, and on the level ground he caused the cuscus grass to grow. Later, other forms of vegetation appeared. Hās and Hāsīl laid two eggs in the cluster of sirom plants from which the first pair of human beings (a boy and a girl) emerged. The boy was named Pilchu Haṛam and the girl was named Pilchu Buḍhi. They were the founding ancestors of the Santhal tribe. Pilchu Haṛam and Pilchu Buḍhi remained with no clothes and no shame accruing from nakedness till Liṭ⁷ encouraged them to taste rice beer.⁸ The consumption of rice beer inculcated awareness and shame about their nakedness and also sexual desire for each other. Later they begot seven sons and seven daughters who married among themselves and founded seven clans. As time passed, the members of different clans lost respect for each other and fell short of the measure of the good life that Ṭhākūr jiu had laid out for them. Ṭhākūr jiu summoned Pilchu Haṛam and Pilchu Buḍhi to instruct them to hide in a cave while he rained fire, destroying the human population along with all the animals. Only the old couple was saved after seven days of incessant fire-rain. Over a period of time, more children were born to Pilchu Haṛam and Pilchu Buḍhi.

The Santhals believe that they are the descendants of Pilchu Haṛam and Pilchu Buḍhi.⁹ The majority of them live in villages that are often located near forests. During the course of the preliminary search for habitation, the people select an area in or close to the forest. Later, the leader of the group, along with three or four other men, inspect the selected area closely, looking for auspicious omens that would ensure the prosperity of the inhabitants.¹⁰ Once the area for establishing the village is finalized, the leader first cuts down a tree as an indication that the place may be cleared for raising houses. At the outskirts of the village is the sacred grove with a cluster of sal trees.¹¹ Another feature of the landscape is the forest with many kinds of trees and animals. Women and girls collect twigs for fuel and leaves for laying out the food. Defined streets mark Santhal villages with mud houses on either side. Streets serve the purpose of connecting houses and providing space for the movement of vehicles (largely bullock carts, bicycles, and occasionally machine-driven motorcycles and auto rickshaws).

A clearly marked space by the side of a street is created for resolving disputes collectively. Santhals usually live in houses that are thatched with straw. The walls are neatly plastered with cow-dung and decorated with paintings of flowers and geometrical designs. Each house consists of a large courtyard where washed clothes are hung to dry, grain is husked, and small tools, baskets, and other articles for daily use are made. The cowshed, pigsty, and hen-roost are located in one corner of the courtyard. The courtyard leads to rooms in which grain is stored, food is cooked, and articles such as clothes and ornaments are kept. The most important part of the house is the *biṭhar*, a compartment that is believed to be the abode of the souls of dead ancestors. The *biṭhar* is passionately guarded from those who do not belong to the family.

A patch of land near the house is used for growing vegetables and fruits that fulfill the needs of the family. Further away from the houses are the uplands in which men toil to cultivate maize and millet. The major crop on which Santhals subsist, however, is rice. The rice fields are located beyond the uplands. Fields often lie fallow between January and March. In April, after rain showers, men plough the fields arduously and women sprinkle the seed in the soil. By July, the seedlings are ready for transplantation. Young girls and women engage themselves in the activity, joyfully singing songs in which they address the seedlings as their own children. Each agricultural event from sowing to harvesting is accompanied with rituals, many of which involve singing and dancing collectively.

INDIGENOUS CONCEPT OF SOUND

The acoustic environment of the Santhals consists of at least three categories of sounds: *sade* (referring to sounds produced by striking different objects), *ra* (comprising sounds of animals), and *arañ* (consisting of human sounds). They read omens from different kinds of sounds produced by an animal or bird on various occasions. This forms the basis of distinguishing auspicious sounds from inauspicious ones. When the golden oriole bird, for example, calls out *pīo pīo*,

Santhals expect that a guest will visit their house. When the same bird cries out *kher kher* they fear news of the death of a relative (PANNKE 2001, PRASAD 2001). Thus the *pīo pīo* sound of the golden oriole is auspicious, while that of *kher kher* is inauspicious.

Other than the nature of sound itself, the place and direction from which it comes as well as the time when it is heard determines its auspiciousness. Nature, place, direction, and time constitute a seemingly complex matrix within which a particular sound is interpreted and identified as auspicious/inauspicious. PRASAD (2001) explains this with the example of the call of the cock. Santhals say that usually the cock crows three times between midnight and sunrise. People say that if it makes an untimely call, for example between dinnertime and midnight they apprehend the entry of evil spirit(s) into the house. In order to ward off the evil spirit and save the family members, the villagers kill the cock and eat it the following morning.

Santhals divide *arāñ* into two sub-categories of *ror* (speech) and *rar* (melody). “‘Speech’ and ‘melody’ are not independent categories, for, in their own words, ‘melody is the prolongation of ordinary speech’” (PRASAD 2001). Melody, distinguishable by a high and low pitch, is an important element of Santhal songs. In fact, it is not so much the rhyme as the melody that determines the structure and length of their songs. Sometimes the melody is repeated twice as a prefix to the main content of the song. The last syllable may even be prolonged and made to end on a relatively higher note. The ascent and descent are, therefore, not essentially linear.

The term *arāñ* is also used for sound from musical instruments. The reason for employing the same word in referring to human sound and sound from musical instruments is that they treat the musical instruments as animated and enlivened. One instrument that is believed to be imbued with life is the *banam*. According to a myth,¹² once upon a time seven brothers tasted a few drops of their sister’s blood that trickled from a wound and got mixed with the food she cooked. All the brothers relished the taste of the sister’s blood so much that they decided to kill her in order to eat large amounts of her flesh and blood. Six of them ate up the flesh while the youngest one, who was filled with remorse, buried his share near a pond. In the course of time a tree grew there, and from it emerged a melodious sound that caught the attention of a mendicant. He made a *dhodro banam* from the wood of this tree. The *banam* is regarded as an extension of the human body. It has an identified head, neck, ears, chest, and stomach that are referred to by the same terms used for specific parts in the human body. Since the sister never changed her residence on account of marriage, and since the *banam* remains as her reminder in the minds of people, it is never given away to anyone. A person makes it for his own use.

Santhals believe that spirits in their society have introduced the tradition of dance and making music, especially playing the drums, which they now employ as a part of their invocations and occasional veneration of spirits. While the drums join the human world to the spirit world, the flute joins the human world to the ancestor world. It is said that when Pilchu Budhi died, her sons buried her in the

vicinity of the village. Later a bamboo tree grew there. Out of this tree one of the sons thought of making a musical instrument, the sound from which would resemble a human voice. As soon as he approached the tree with the intent of cutting it for this purpose, he heard a voice asking him to make two kinds of flutes (*tirio*)—one of weal and the other of woe—from the middle portion of the tree. The voice said that the people should play the two flutes on different occasions; this would enable Pilchu Budhi to know the joys and sorrows of the villagers from the kind of flute they chose to play. The instrument is used only after invocation of the following words: “I cut you, dried you and turned you so that even the root of the bamboo tree may hear your sound.”

TYPES OF SONGS

Singing is usually done in mixed groups of men and women. Women sing in a pitch higher than that of men as they repeat a phrase. Not all of them are fully conversant with the songs. The singers maintain their individual identity in terms of rendering; yet there is a distinctive harmony and blending of voices in the song in terms of collective output. Sometimes there are lapses in which those who do not know the text of the song follow those who know it. The last word may become too long and all the members of the group may not end at the same time.

Santhals produce songs for both ritual occasions (such as those punctuating the agricultural cycle and the stages of transition in the human life cycle), and extra-ritual occasions (such as those marking prolonged separation from a loved one and anxiety regarding the well-being of someone). The accurate basis of categorizing Santhal songs is according to the context, as songs are composed for a specific purpose and for a specific occasion. The context and content gain precedence over musical patterns. This is not to undermine the importance of notes and meters but only to emphasize the fact that the main text of the song and the performative context determines its type in people’s minds. There are songs of invocation, of sowing, of weeding and harvesting paddies, of marriage, of death and funerals, and of other rituals as much as those of love, desire and yearning. The content of the songs depends upon the occasion for which they are composed and on which they are sung. In this sense, one could say that the content of a song is determined by its context. Here are at least five broad themes into which Santhal songs may be divided.

(i) *Cosmology*

The myth recounting the origin of the Santhal tribe from Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi is referred to as *binti*. It is recited at the time of marriage by a group of three or four singers. MAHAPATRA (1992) points out that in every village there are professional singers who learn the *binti* song from their seniors. They make improvisations by way of adding to the content or modifying it according to their own understanding. The singers begin the performance by admitting that what they are going to recite is learned from others and not witnessed by them. In a sense they admit the possibility of different versions on the basic themes circulating

in society. *Binti* consists of several repetitions and refrain lines, so a single performance may last for two to three hours.

Recitation of *binti* is common at the time of marriage, which marks the onset of a new phase in the life of a person and an expansion of the family in the village. It seems appropriate to recapitulate the creation myth at this juncture of life, and in doing so place the event of marriage in the wider context of the universe and reiterate the traditions and customs of the community.

(ii) *Agricultural Cycle*

The primary engagement of Santhals is making the most of land and seed. A vast majority of their songs appear to revolve around different agricultural processes. The crop cycle, beginning from the stage of preparing the seed beds and laying the seed in the soil and proceeding through to transplanting the seedlings and harvesting the grain, is interrupted with rituals in which music and song lie at the core. A sample of two songs performed in partial fulfillment of the requirements of rituals interspersed in the crop cycle is presented below. The first is a song of invocation at the time of sowing.

Our obeisance to you, Mother Jaher Era¹³
 On the occasion of Erok¹⁴ festival we offer you
 young fowls, and freshly husked rice
 Accept it in pleasure.

We pray to you
 For every seed let there be twelve
 and let not disease attack them.

If they attack, please subdue them
 Do not allow weeds and grass to grow among our crops
 Bring us the rain-bearing clouds in plenty
 Bring them in time.

Let the earth be green with our crops
 Let there be no hindrance to our movements
 Let there prevail among us the spirit of love and goodwill.

(MAHAPATRA 1992, 175)

The second is a song of invocation to the spirits of the sacred grove at the time of weeding.

Salutation to you, Mother Jaher Era
 On the occasion of the Asadia¹⁵ festival we offer to you
 young fowls and freshly husked rice
 Kindly accept them.

We pray to you
 Bring us rain-bearing clouds
 and make our fields fit for cultivation.

With rain-waters wash away
 the insects and germs that cause disease
 Let not snakes and scorpions harm us
 as we work in the fields weeding out grass.
 When our cattle and goats
 and sheep sometimes eat up the crop by mistake
 Be kind to us and make them grow again
 Be kind to us that we may live in peace and happiness
 and that our desires and expectations are fulfilled.

(MAHAPATRA 1992, 177)

These songs express the mundane concerns of the people such as infestation of the crop, lack of rain, and ill health of the cultivators and their families. The spirit of the sacred grove is addressed as “mother”—one who provides and sustains life in many ways. The major anxiety of the people relates to the survival of seeds in the soil. They also remain anxious about the well-being of all the villagers. A case of sickness, disease or death slows down the work of all the people because the village acts as a corporate body. An incidence of death in one family, for example, pollutes¹⁶ all the people in the village. During the period of pollution, no festivals, weddings or sacrifices to spirits are performed. Those who observe avoidance as a consequence of pollution incurred from death in the village refrain from going to the fields to work or engaging in any other productive work. All the men participate in the last rites of a person. They resume work only after the purificatory ritual is performed on the fifth day. It is, therefore, a matter of general interest that people remain safeguarded from ill health.

Songs that mark a stage in the agricultural cycle recount the major activities, as in the following one, which is chanted after the harvest.

I reaped and gathered the crop
 I gathered the crop—a bagful of crop
 I brought the crop carrying on my head
 I put the crop on the daubed ground
 I shall offer you that crop
 O wealth-fetching bullock
 I shall also give it to the milch[y] cow.

(PRASAD 2001, 12)

The above is a descriptive account of people’s engagement with reaping, gathering and storing the grain and an expression of their gratitude to the bullocks for helping them in ploughing the fields.¹⁷

(iii) *Forest Songs*

The forest¹⁸ is an important part of people’s lives. As mentioned earlier, women and girls collect twigs for fuel and leaves for laying out the food. They also pick roots, berries and plants for food. Men joyfully chase animals. The call of animals,

the swaying of trees, and the smell of flowers all inspire creativity in the people. Innumerable songs are sung here for a loved one in gay abandon amidst trees, birds and animals, all of which provide acoustic input. There is reference to flowers, birds, water sources, buffaloes, flutes, and all that the people physically deal with in their daily lives.

Forest songs (*bir seren*) are invitations for proximity and intimacy, as in the following example.

Oriole, at the spring and tank
You see me and you hide
If once I catch you, oriole
I shall carry you away and away.

By the bushes with white flowers
you are grazing buffaloes, my love
Pick me a white flower
Picking, I will pick it
I will put it in your hair
Then what will you give me?

(ARCHER 1974, 106)

Songs focusing on requests for sexual favors, praising the qualities of the beloved, and yearning for the loved one are common in the lives of young boys and girls, who engage in love relationships without much restriction before marriage. Several of them remain nostalgic about their previous relationships even after their marriage to one with whom they were not in love earlier. As sentiments of boys and girls flower with the sal tree and mature over a period of time, they enter into marriage and establish a family. Marriage does not, however, sever the attachments of a girl with her family and friends. A large number of songs refer to her yearning for the loved friend and to a sense of loss accruing from an unprecedented ending of romance.

(iv) *Rites of Passage*

Occasions for invoking and appeasing spirits are afforded in phases of transition from one stage in the life cycle to another with distinct rites and rituals. There are invocation songs to mark rituals accompanying birth, marriage, and death. The village headman (*jog m njhi*) decides the date and time for performance of each ritual. The text of the songs consists of making requests to the spirits for granting conditions of health and welfare for the people. The following is a song rendered at the time of naming an infant, which constitutes a part of the birth ritual.

Salutation to you Maran Buru¹⁹
On the occasion of the naming of this new-born baby
We offer you *handia* and neem water.
Kindly accept it with pleasure.
We pray: let this child be healthy and strong.

Let him grow well and live long.
 Let him also be blessed with true knowledge and wisdom.

(MAHAPATRA 1992, 184)

Marriage rituals are performed in the bride's house, after which she goes to stay with her husband for the rest of her life. The marriage songs largely describe the (1) physical and emotional condition of the bride (anticipated longing for parents and friends after marriage), (2) roles and responsibilities of the bride after marriage, bride's previous attachments and love affairs with boys before her marriage), (3) betrothal and the wedding ceremony, and (4) hospitality extended to the bridegroom's relatives and friends as they advance to the bride's house to bring her with them after the marriage rituals are completed.

Equally rich in meaning are the songs of death through which the people express sorrow and pray for the peace and salvation of the soul of the dead person. A mother laments the loss of her child by repeatedly referring to him/her as the little parrot that has flown away; a daughter laments the death of her mother through songs in which the mother is referred to as the milk-tree that has fallen down. Since milk is known to provide nourishment, it is common to address one's mother as the milk-tree, perhaps as an acknowledgement of her nurturance. In the same vein, a woman's sorrow on the death of her husband is expressed in songs in which his role of protecting the wife is emphasized. Most of the songs abound in deep philosophy based on the core purpose of life, inevitability of death, and ephemeral nature of joy and happiness.

(v) *Protest and Dissent*

Songs of protest and dissent generally characterize the *bithala*²⁰ ritual that is performed as a sanction against kin incest, clan incest, and misbehavior with outsiders.²¹ The content of the songs tends to represent the deeply felt sentiments of the community. The songs are outpourings among groups of village men (some of whom are nude jesters) carrying sticks, drums, flutes and buffalo horns. The crowd drums, dances, and sings lewd songs as it approaches the house of the offender. In repeating and representing the sexual act in a gross and apparently crude and obscure manner, the elements of intimacy and fondness are removed. The sense of shame and guilt becomes so overwhelming that an individual would not dare to repeat the act in his/her lifetime.

POETIC IMAGES AND MULTIVOCAL MEANINGS

Santhals tend to conceptualize their self identity as part of the natural environment, comprising the plants, trees, animals, and material objects on the one hand and kin relations on the other. This is greatly reflected in their vocabulary, which consists of common words, for instance, for barren human beings, barren animals, and barren trees; fat human bodies, fat animal bodies, and fat or thick tree trunks. The vision of harmony between nature and Santhal culture is rooted

in the understanding that the people derive their design of life from the processes and phenomena of nature itself (MATHUR 2001). Lifestyle and worldview mark the cultural identity of the people. Their creativity, sensitivity, and cultural expressions treat all life forms as sacred and respect them for what they are. Not only forms of life but even inanimate objects and the phenomena of nature are sacralized. The sacredness is affirmed in metaphors, rituals, songs, dances, and everyday practices. People spend their lives optimizing cordiality and togetherness between human beings, nature, and spirits.

People's worldview and understanding of the world are derived from a sense of fullness in which there is an implicit acceptance of the fact that human existence is an integral part of a design of life that includes the various elements of nature and celebrates its rhythm. The vision of harmony between nature and culture in particular is grounded in the understanding that configurations in lifestyle are derived from the processes and phenomena of nature itself.

CARRIN (2003) explains that the expression *bid dare* meaning "to lift a branch" alludes to the gesture used by chiefs to bring their companions together in the course of migrations and that in the present day too, a branch is planted at crossroads to convey the message of a meeting to the villagers. The number of leaves on the branch mark the days before the meeting. A branch planted in a way that leaves are turned downwards informs that the meeting would sanction the transgression of the norm of endogamy.

One might argue that Santhal poetry and music have been inspired from social situations and intense personalized experiences. Several of them, however, derive from people's fancies and expectations, as well as the demands of society. It is important to note that most of the songs consist of accounts of events, situations, and day-to-day concerns—in other words all that the people see and experience in the course of their lives. The imagination remains at a fairly descriptive level rather than reveling in absolute abstraction. Often, Santhal songs are not composed for yielding sheer aesthetic delight or aural pleasure. The narrative component in many songs may appear overly simplistic and bereft of profundity. Consider the following narratives (cited from PRASAD 2001):

Let us go O children
to catch fish
There is no fish in the pond
We only dabbled the mud. (27)

Shoot at the bird Dehu
following it cautiously
and jump over it cautiously. (39)

Where is the rope for tying the calf
The calf is sucking milk. (53)

Those who do not belong to the community may treat these narratives as inconsequential. They may, at best, qualify as simple, mundane messages set to

rhythm and music. What is important to understand is that these songs reflect everyday life situations and form a significant part of the cultural treasury. The twin purposes they seem to serve are those of developing an interest in and inculcating awareness, particularly among children, and training them to perform regular, mundane activities.

What is remarkable about the songs is that intense passion is expressed through simple thoughts without complexity of abstraction. The language is, of course, metaphorical. The flowering of sal trees in the forests is an occasion of excitement and jubilation. The sal is a referent of a girl. A sal tree in full bloom is likened to a girl with beauty and elegance. Not surprisingly, then, the flowering of the sal tree coincides with the celebration of the Baha²² festival in which flowers are thrown into the aprons of women and girls. Girls put the flowers presented to them in their hair or behind their ears, dance around the sacred grove, and later splash water at each other.

Baha songs bring out the aspirations and express the emotion of love surging in the hearts of boys and girls. The poetry of these songs is inspired by the sky, mountains, trees, and flowers. These become the motifs of love and endearment in Santhal society. A sal tree, the gushing water of rivers, and chirping of birds all kindle fond emotions and a desire for togetherness and intimacy. Festivals such as the Baha provide opportunities for communicating these sentiments without many restraints. In fact, the Baha festival brings together loved ones separated from each other by virtue of marriage outside the boundaries of the village in which their affections developed. A married woman may return to her natal village and sing with her former lover—something that would not be tolerated on any other occasion.

In general, the importance of songs in the lives of Santhals may be appreciated in light of the fact that people frequently draw correspondence between the plant world and their own. Marriage songs, for example, refer to the brides as trees and flowers, sometimes even birds, as illustrated in two of them:

In our courtyard
is a sweet tamarind tree
Its branches are large
Its flowers are white and red
Its fruits hang in clusters.

Below our field
are many coloured flowers
Come to our village, boy
and choose what flower you will.
(ARCHER 1974, 186)

Plants are bestowed with human attributes, as is evident from the two transplantation songs cited below:

The paddy is weeping
The paddy is asking

when will be my wedding
 When the water of the skies
 drenches the earth
 then will be your wedding.

Wealth, wealth
 O mother wealth
 Where was your birth
 I was born in a splash of rain.

(ARCHER 1974, 22)

According to Santhals, the paddy plants are anxious about their marriage, much like young boys and girls. The song has another layer of deeper meaning at the metaphorical level. Clearly, the sky is regarded as the male principle and the earth the female principle. Water (in the form of rain) is the fertilizing fluid. The wedding, which is invariably associated with a change of residence, in this context refers to transplantation and implies a change of soil and location for the seedlings. Here seedlings are referred to as wealth because they bring prosperity and happiness to the farmer.²³

More specifically, Santhal songs of invocation are replete with layers of meanings, and often link up different orders of reality, different patterns of social experience and value judgments. Another significant feature of invocation songs is the polarization of meaning, as in the following:

Salutation to you, mother Jaher Era
 On the occasion of the Mahmane festival²⁴ we offer you
 young fowls and freshly husked rice
 Be pleased to accept them
 Do not allow disease and pestilence to enter the village
 Put to flight our enemies before they enter our village
 With cool rainwater put out the fires
 and soften inclement weather
 In disease and sickness, when we take medicine
 let it cure and heal
 Grant us your mercy and help us recover.

(MAHAPATRA 1992, 176)

This is a song invoking the spirit of the sacred grove when new seedlings appear. The dichotomy of social and physiological concerns and of aggression and peace are immanent. These polarities are joined with each other along a continuum. The referents of, for instance, aggression in this song are “disease and pestilence” and “enemies,” while those of peace are “recovery” and “mercy.” These are connected through intermittent referents as “cool rainwater,” “put(ing) out fires,” “soften(ed) inclement weather,” “medicine,” and “cure(ing) and heal(ing).” The

transition from one end of the continuum to the other through these referents is gradual and transformative rather than sudden and mutative.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

In the wake of acculturation and modernization, Santhal culture, much like that of other communities, is given to change. Conjoined with change, however, are the attempts of people to uphold their ethnic identity. It is argued that people have been able to safeguard their social and moral order even as they avail the benefits accruing from acculturation. The assertion of ethnic identity is facilitated through Olchiki—the Santhal script created in 1925 by Raghunath Murmu. Since then, Santhals have actively engaged themselves in the publication of journals and books in their own script. Apart from articles, stories and dramas, several publications carry poems. In earlier times, after a song was composed and rendered publicly it came to belong to the community at large; the composers no longer treated these songs as part of their personal repertoire. The identity of an individual as a composer or author was laid to rest as the song became part of the collective identity of the people as a corporate body to whom the song belonged. The absence of a designated artist and stylization derived from rigid aesthetic canons imbues in folk arts the potential for renewing and rejuvenating themselves, yet maintains continuity with antiquity and tradition. Unlike the earlier situation, however, in which individual composers remained anonymous as the community adopted a composition as its own creation, in the present day, poems are published under the authorship of individual poets. The community members are able to identify composers who, by virtue of the fact that they publish their work in journals and books, are treated as elite members of society. One of the well-known poets, Sadhu Ram Chand Murmu, has authored several plays, essays and poems that are centered on themes of social reforms. Other better-known Santhal poets are Sarda Prasad Kisku, Rabilal Majhi, Babulal Murmu Adibasi, Bhagan Murmu, Shyam Sunder Hembrom, and Gomasta Prasad Soren.²⁵ The compositions of many of these poets are set to music and presented as songs in local gatherings. Of particular importance are those that deal with exploitation and social reforms in so far as they generate awareness among the people.

New movements, ideas, and concerns are absorbed and assimilated imperceptibly and indiscernibly. These are sustained, carried forward and even embellished by succeeding generations. What is interesting to note is the fact that even as narratives serve as an expressive genre that frames tradition, people's lives, and expectations, they are themselves governed by the processes of assimilation, acculturation, and transformation, ushering in social change. The following song is a case in point:

From the upland
Two canals flow
The field is over-flooded

Let us work hard and sow the seeds
 That will bring us money
 And we will purchase new sarees.

(PRASAD 2001, 20)

This seems to be a new composition revolving around, say, monetization of the economy and the desire to visit the marketplace in the adjoining city as well as the concern with flooded fields and crop failure.

Several new compositions reflect the influence of other cultures and technologies. Modern influences on Santhal songs are clear in their portrayals of and reaction to the introduction of new technology in agricultural operations, means of transport, processes of urbanization and emerging power structures, and the market economy. Musicologists and sound recording specialists both in India and abroad have come together to document and profitably market tribal music through the electronic medium,²⁶ both for its archival and market value. The technologizing of the spoken word has many implications. In a more general sense, “Over the centuries, the shift from orality through writing and print to electronic processing of the word has profoundly affected, and, indeed, basically determined the evolution of verbal art genres, and of course simultaneously the successive modes of characterization and of the plot” (ONG 1982, 155). Santhals and other tribals, who are often awed by and sometimes fearful of the recordings, treat them as permanent records of their songs. Many of them in the course of participation in the tribal festivals have given up singing and playing the music as part of their everyday lives. They now play the audiotapes instead. Some of the younger ones who are literate have written down the notations and texts of songs in diaries from which they chant them routinely and dispassionately. Writing down the notations helps them in reciting the songs flawlessly at tribal fairs, festivals, and cultural programs in which they perform regularly for money. The elderly people do not approve of the practice of singing out of context in contrived or simulated situations, while the younger ones seem to avail the opportunities of “popular,” “progressive,” and “modern” media communication.

There is also the possibility that young boys and girls (particularly those who leave their villages to stay in metropolitan cities, often for the sake of acquiring Western education²⁷) seek to fuse traditional songs and music with modern jazz and Western classical music as they assimilate other cultures. There is no denying that in the present era—characterized by mergers and amalgamations not only in businesses but also in indigenous cultures that were long, albeit erroneously, thought to be relatively self-contained and isolated—music is emerging as a largely contested domain in which elements of continuity and change are negotiated. Now, cultural funding is an important component in the promotional endeavors of both local and national government bodies that seek to exhibit indigenous cultures and lifestyles at cultural festivals. The tribal festivals are less concerned with nurturing the cultural lives of the people and more focused on satisfying the demands of the market. The traditional wisdom that remains associated with

the art forms erodes in the absence of a supportive environment. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that in the wake of modernization, globalization, and increasing tourism, the younger generations are not involved in village life to the same extent as their fathers and forefathers. There are only limited opportunities to affirm faith in the viability of traditional art forms.

While the new forces of artistic production and reproduction hold out the prospect of widespread participation and appreciation, they tend to ignore the context in which works of art, more specifically songs, are deeply enmeshed. This may be understood in light of the fact that tribal songs are usually not performative constructs but are produced to initiate or complement a ritual, and recollect and express intensely felt emotions. Bereft of the context in which the meaning and relevance of songs lie, they emerge as bits and pieces of melodious fabrication with no vitality and life force. There is a possibility that Santhal music could well be played at cocktail parties as is any other form of music. The crucial point is that, without the performative context, it loses its distinctiveness.

CONCLUSION

A Santhal song is not a mere expression of mundane concerns and apprehensions. It is also a part of the mental space in which people's thoughts and ideas are located. It is the intrinsic creativity of the people that transforms these cognitions into the aesthetic patterns that appear before us as myths, songs, and dances. Their potential and genius is enmeshed in a socio-cultural context. To appreciate the fullness of indigenous music and song, it is important to understand the social, cultural, and vocational situation of the community. Some Santhal songs, as well as those of most other indigenous cultures, make reference to the other world. They affirm the link with beings of the cosmological world even more when the songs are accompanied with rituals. Communication with the powerful and all pervasive spirits is established through the combination of sounds produced from musical instruments (most of which are believed to be imbued with life), songs, and rituals. The benevolence of spirits is invoked, their anger is placated, and favors are asked of them. Apart from communication with the spirits, the songs serve as a means of expressing intense emotions (as in the course of the baha festival), reinstating the social order (as through the ritual of *bithala*), reviving the myth of origin (through the recitation of the *binti*), and accepting change in society (by composing new songs that not only make reference to the elements of change but also legitimate them as they become part of the collective memory).

Entering Santhal thought through analysis of the content and context of the songs is a means of deciphering their ideational constructs. It is apparent that Santhals treat human beings as one of the many forms of life that are dependent on each other. The cosmological myth enshrined in the *binti* states that human beings originated from the eggs of birds. Other songs, particularly the forest songs and those that accompany rituals punctuating the agricultural cycle, affirm the correspondence between trees, animals and human beings. It is common to

hear a loved one referred to as the oriole bird, one's mother as the milk tree, and one's children as seedlings.²⁸ Interestingly, a pregnant woman is spoken of as one who has collected a bundle of seeds. Likewise, a bed of seedlings, one's place of birth, and place of first settlement are all referred to by the same term *phor g di*. The vocabulary is replete with words that demonstrate the overlap of seemingly different categories. The semblance between processes of nature and articulations developed in the culture finds expression in both the vocabulary and the songs. This makes for rituals and songs at the manifest level, and for the mindset of the people at the abstract level, that are shared, preserved, and conserved by the people as part of their cultural identity.

NOTES

* The author is grateful to Professor Peter Knecht for his insightful comments on an earlier draft of the article.

1. In this article the spelling used is "Santhal." The spelling "Santal" that appears in other literature represents the anglicized version of "Santhal."

2. Onkar Prasad and Sitakant Mahapatra are anthropologists. Onkar Prasad specializes in ethnomusicology and he teaches in the Palli Charcha Kendra (the Center for Social Studies and Rural Development Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan in West Bengal). Sitakant Mahapatra is a retired senior bureaucrat who composes poetry. Both learned the Santhali language and have translated several Santhal songs into English with acclaimed precision. The songs analyzed here serve as a representative sample of a large number of songs that mark different occasions.

3. Several thousand Santhals revolted against the exploitative practices of British colonialists and the landowners who readily executed their commands under the leadership of Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu in 1855.

4. They are also present, though in lesser numbers, in the states of Assam and Tripura.

5. *Ṭhākūr jiu* is believed to be the guardian spirit of Santhals.

6. *Siñ sadōm* is literally translated as the "day horse," which is a referent for the sun. Interestingly, the term *sadōm* is used independently to mean a horse.

7. *Liṭ* is believed to be the spirit of the mountains. *Liṭ* is also referred to as *Maran Buru*, which means "the mountain."

8. Rice beer, referred to as *handia* by Santhals, is made by fermenting boiled rice. The usual practice is to soak boiled rice in water for about ten hours.

9. A detailed version of the creation myth of the Santhals may be found in BODDING 1942, 3–22.

10. Details of omens and rituals performed at the time of establishing the village may be found at <http://www.aiswacs.org/Santal/creatconc.htm> (accessed 22 February 2007).

11. A sacred grove is a cluster of trees that are worshipped by believers on different occasions. The sacred grove of Santhals consists of a cluster of sal trees. It is referred to as *jaher*. The wood of the sal tree is used for making rafters and for fuel. The leaves are used as plates to serve food. Apart from its utility, the sal is used as a referent for a young girl. The symbolic significance of the sal is presented under the section "Poetic images and multivocal meanings" later in this essay.

12. The myths associated with the *banam* and *tirio* presented here have been drawn from SATTAR (1975) and PRASAD (2001).

13. *Jaher era* is the spirit that resides in the sacred grove.
14. *Erok* is the Santhal word for sowing the seeds.
15. Asadia is derived from the month of Ashad in the Hindu calendar that roughly corresponds to July. This is the period when farmers remove the weeds from the fields.
16. Evidently, what constitutes pollution varies from one culture to another. In India, the term “pollution” broadly refers to the impurity acquired as a consequence of participating in “unclean” events (for example, birth, death), occupations (for example, scavenging, tanning), and contact with bodily emissions (for example, menstrual blood, excreta) as well as with those who have acquired impurity.
17. Traditionally, that is, before tractors were introduced in the villages, Santhals ploughed the land by draught power, particularly by using a pair of bullocks for turning over the soil into ridges and furrows.
18. The Santhal term for forest is *bir*.
19. Maran Buru is referred to in note 7.
20. Bithala is the punishment for committing incest in which the offender is severely shamed and ridiculed in public.
21. Santhals refer to outsiders, that is, those who do not belong to their community, as *diku* and treat them with suspicion.
22. *Baha* is the Santhal word for flower. The Baha Festival (celebrated sometime in February–March) is one in which rituals for enhancing the fertility of women are performed. The throwing of flowers into the aprons of women perhaps simulates the act of receiving children as gifts by women. It also expresses their joy.
23. This interpretation was presented to representatives of the Santhals in a seminar on Santhal Worldview organized by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi in September 1997.
24. The Mahmane Festival marks the sprouting of seeds. This is the occasion for invoking the spirits.
25. For profiles of Santhal poets and writers see the portal for Santhal books and magazines at <http://wesanthals.tripod.com/id 39.htm> (accessed 22 February 2007).
26. Apart from other initiatives, Peter Pannke—a German composer and musicologist—along with a team of sound recording specialists and anthropologists, has documented Santhal music (PANNKE 1997).
27. The term “Western education” in India is used to refer to the act or process of imparting or acquiring knowledge that is based outside the subcontinent, or more specifically, that is not indigenous to India. This perception has roots in people’s perception of the “West.” In common parlance, all that is not Indian is said to be “Western.” Thus, Western clothes, Western food, and Western education simply mean “non-Indian.”
28. BODDING (1942, 23–28) records a myth according to which Santhals kept *iri* (barnyard grass) and *erba* (Foxtail millet) seeds in gourd shells. They were surprised to see that when the seeds were laid in the soil later, *iri* seeds yielded *erba* plants and *erba* seeds yielded *iri* plants. Even today, one Santhal asks another how many *iri* and *erba* seeds have shot into ears to find out how many daughters and sons respectively he/she has.

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