

## **Hunting Tradition in a Changing Scenario among the Santals of Dhobaddi Village, Bankura, West Bengal, India**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Traditional knowledge passes through generations and bears importance in day to day life of ethnic groups. As the studied Santal tribesmen live in or near proximity to the forest area, they have the close association with forest. Once the studied tribesmen used to live on different products of forest e.g. plants products through collection and animal products gained through hunting. Presently they are settled, agriculturist. Hence, now-a-days though they do not depend on hunting for their livelihood but they are in the practice of hunting to maintain their hereditary tradition. There are certain values, rituals and taboos are being followed by the Santal tribesmen in the association of hunting. In the present study, the importance of documentation of prevailed hunting practice among tribesmen has been recognized. The present study also provided with a brief account of different aspects hunting among the Santal tribesmen inhabiting in the Bankura district of West Bengal. Such ethnographic study appears to be fading among the Santal tribesmen of West Bengal.

**Key Words :** Santal tribesmen, Hunting, Tradition, values, Taboos, Rituals

### **INTRODUCTION**

Until 12,000 years ago all humanity were hunter-gatherers, only a tiny fraction any longer subsist entirely or primarily by these means. Yet thousands of people today do remember their hunter-gatherer past (Barnard, 2004). Since times immemorial hunting has been an economic as well as social activity of the tribal community. They used to hunt different types of animals and birds. The horns, nails, bones of animals hunted were used to perform magic. Ornaments and handicrafts were prepared from its horns and bones. Annual Ritual Hunt was an annual religious exercise among the tribals. Worship was an important aspect of the exercise. There was a great deal of co-operation among the tribal groups during the annual ritual hunting, which has a great cultural relevance (Paty, 2007). The Santals are indigenous people of India and are mainly spread over the eastern states of West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Assam, Tripura, and in small numbers in Madhya Pradesh. They are the third largest tribal group in India (Purkayastha and Subramaniam, 2004). The traditional gathering, hunting economy of the Santhals have been changed to settled

agriculture but it is remarkable fact that presently many socio-cultural traditions exist among their society (Tribhuwan, 2003). The primary occupation of the Santal is agriculture. But they also follow different types of traditional hunting festivals as a vital part of their cultural life. These people go to hunting not only for livelihood but to celebrate the traditional customs and as well as for thrill and recreation (Duary, 2010). It is remarkable that the concept of hunting is injected into the child's mind since the very beginning. Whenever male child experiences choking while drinking or sucking milk, water etc., the mother of the child says "you members of the hunting party !take this baby for hunting." So whenever they go to the forest they often carry their bow and arrow. They are expert in shooting and feel proud of their hunting. Whenever they come to know about any hunting, news or see any party going for hunting, they usually give up their work and join the expedition. It has been said in a proverb "if a male Santal has failed to attend the Ayodhya hill hunting since birth, he is still supposed to be in his mother's womb" (Murmun, 1983).

### **Objectives :**

The aim of the present study is to conduct an ethnographic investigation among the Santals residing in *Dhobaddi* village of Bakura district to have an intensive observation on their traditional knowledge about the hunting practices and also to investigate the socio-ritualistic, technical and material aspects of hunting tradition and its implications on the villager's life.

### **Study area :**

Bankura is one of the important districts of West Bengal where most of the area is adjacent to the forest. It is located in the western part of the state West Bengal. The district possesses further importance from ecological perspectives being the connecting link between the plants of West Bengal on the east and Chota Nagpur plateau on the west. Bankura lies between 22°38' and 23°38' North latitude and between 86°36' and 87°46' East longitudes.

The present study has been conducted in a small remote village, named *Dhobaddi*, situated in the south-western part of Bankura district. This is a small village under the Gorabari Gram Panchayat and the dwellers are mainly Santal tribe men. The village is about one square km. in the area. It is about 47 km. away from Bankura Railway Station.

The administrative setting of the area under study is as follows: Gram Panchayet and Post Office- Gorabari, Police Station and Block- Khatra of Bankura District

The sides of the studied village (*Dhobaddi*) shares *Dhagra* village at the North, *Kangsabati* Dam at the south, *Piri Pathor* village at the East and *Kangsabati* river at the West.

## **METHODOLOGY**

An ethnographic study has been carried out in November 2009 in the village *Dhobaddi*, Bankura, West Bengal. The primary data were collected through intensive interviews. In some cases, data collection also proceeded through the use of Semi-Structured Schedule. Key informants like hunting practitioners, old experienced persons, persons associated with ritualistic aspects of hunting are interviewed.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Hunting is a traditional practice of numerous tribesmen residing in remote areas of India. Traditionally Santal tribesmen around India remained associated with hunting. The Santal villagers

of the present studied *Dhobaddi* village is one of the carriers of the age-old hunting tradition like most of their predecessors. The hunting is being practised by them from generation after generation without any gap. Once they used to hunt to maintain their hereditary practice in successive order and also to gain the products of the hunted games. When got settled in the area, as the forest dwellers they not only adopted hunting as one of their livelihood strategies but also they adopted collection, fishing. Now-a-days with the rapid removal forests in the area, they shifted their livelihood strategy towards peasantry (to neighbouring villager's lands) and then to cultivation. Now they are mostly settled cultivators holding a definite amount of land assigned to them. Though certain practices of hunting, collection, fishing and peasantry can still be found in them as cultivation is not that much productive and as they do prefer to carry forward their traditional knowledge.

During the survey, it has been found that the maintenance of tradition is the main purpose of hunting for the Santal villagers of *Dhobaddi* village. While the collection of animal products is the secondary purpose or not even a purpose because they had to take the meat of hunted game at any cost, it's a taboo and the other products e.g. skin, nail, feather, teeth are being kept after taking some preservation measure to demonstrate braveness. Nowadays with the lessening of forest and in addition urban impacts (mostly due to some governmental projects) the tribesmen of *Dhobaddi* village show less interest towards the traditional activities like hunting. Especially as a livelihood strategy hunting is being not preferred by them because hunting is not a simple job. Given to the uncertainty, risk and extreme vigour needed to practice hunting, presently hunting is not being considered as an occupation at all. It has been informed that during big hunting practice (*Sanginre Sikar*) there remains a certain probability of injury and even life risk. But there is less risk in small hunting (*Noko Sikar*). While in annual communal hunting (*Demarang Sikar*) has great life risk. Presently the concept of big hunting got replaced by annual communal hunting. In addition, the 'wild animal conservation law' is being violated by the traditional hunting practice of Santal people of *Dhobaddi* village, which is also a matter of concern both from ecological and governmental perspectives.

### Types :

In the course of the present survey, it has been found that the Santal tribesmen of *Dhobaddi* village are in practice of two types of hunting. Those are as follows with brief details.

**Small hunting- being** practiced in local jungles. It necessarily doesn't include any ritual. Thought some taboos are being maintained during such hunting. Taboos include protection of certain plants and animals possessing special values in the tribesmen's culture and tradition. They even don't hunt any lactating animal and don't demolish any germinating plants while hunting.

**Big hunting and annual communal hunting-**The group hunting in distant areas were calling as *Sanginre Sikar* (big hunting). The Santal tribesmen of *Dhobaddi* village presently are not in practice of this kind of hunting as hunting is not still a livelihood activity for them. Presently they like to refer annual communal hunting (*Demarang Sikar*) as big hunting (*Sanginre Sikar*). The 'Annual communal hunting' has been performing by the peoples of several villages. The Santal tribe men of *Dhobaddi* village accompany with their neighbouring villagers for this purpose. It does occur in the biggest jangle within the participant villages or within the biggest jangle near about of these villages. Sometimes it is also occurring at *Ajoddha Pahar* (Ayodhya hill of Purulia District) then it is being called as *Ajoddha Sikar Jatra* (Ayodhya hunting expedition).

All the taboos of Small hunting are being maintained during Big and/ or Annual communal hunting. In addition, there are certain taboos and rituals which could be identified just only in the

cases of latter kinds of hunting which are being described below :

### Implements :

There were some common and some specific implements for the practice of hunting. These are as follows:

**Small hunting implements-** Club (*Thenga*), Axe (*Kuthar/Tanga*), Billhook (*Dna*), Bow and Arrow (*Aa-Sa*), Cast net (*Phandijal*), Spike (*Gojperek*) etc.

**Big hunting and/or Annual communal hunting implements-** Spear (*Laaja*), Sword (*Torwari*), Bow and arrow, axe etc.

In addition to hunting implements, they also take a tamed dog with them at the time of hunting to identify the location of the prey. During hunting Big and/or Annual communal hunting expedition they use to play different musical instrument e.g. *Dhamsa*, *Madol*, *Ragra*, *Jhumur*. *The music played by those musical instruments helps them* to identify the group member's location and also to pass the signal of danger. Brief information about some hunting implements in use in the study village is given in Table 1.

Table 1 : Hunting Implements							
Sr. No.	English name	Local name	Parts	Material used	Market price	Durability	Motive of use
<b>Chopping and Cutting Implements</b>							
1.	Flat axe with curvature	<i>Tabla</i>	Cutting edge, Butt end, Handle.	The cutting edge and butt end are made of iron while the handle is of wood.	40-50 Rupees	Almost lifelong	This implement is in use for chopping the hunted games.
2.	Sword	<i>Torwari</i>	Cutting edge, Butt end, Handle.	All of the three parts are made of iron.	60-80 Rupees	Lifelong	It is being used to chop the flesh of the hunting games.
3.	Axe	<i>Kuthar/Tanga</i>	Cutting edge, Butt end, Handle.	The Cutting edge and Butt end are made of iron. The handle is wooden.	40-50 rupees	Almost lifelong	It is being used to attack the traced games. The cut wound is being caused by this implement to the chased games to lessen their speed and then to get them captured.
<b>Bruising and Crushing Implement</b>							
4.	Club	<i>Thenga</i>	Striking end, Handle	It is made of only wood.	No price (Self-made)	They use one club for one hunting season only.	The club is in use to crush the traced game when they are very close to hands.
<b>Piercing Implements</b>							
5.	Spear with three piercing ends.	<i>Bollom/Trisul</i>	Piercing end, Handle	The piercing end is made of iron and bamboo segment is in use to make the handle.	20-25 Rupees	4-5 hunting season.	It is in use to pierce or to make puncture wounds to the chased game.

Table 1 contd....

Contd.... Table 1

6.	Bow and arrow	Aa-Sa	<b>Bow:</b> Releasing portion, String.	<b>Bow:</b> Bamboo segment and string are being used.	12-15 Rupees	2-3 hunting seasons.	It is using to attack the aimed animal by piercing from a considerable distance.
7.	Spear	Laaja	<b>Arrow:</b> Shaft, Head	<b>Arrow:</b> Wood and iron is in use	55-60 Rupees	Lifelong	It is in use to attack big games at a short distance.
<b>Trapping Implements</b>							
8.	Cast net	Phadijal	String, Net, Entrance.	All parts are entirely made of nylon.	200 Rupees	5-6 time hunting	It is in use to catch the game alive.
9.	Spike	Gojperek	Piercing end, the Blunt end.	Iron	25 paisa per piece.	2-3 times of hunting.	Spikes are in use. Those are being used by placing in reverse order within a big hole (made in advance by the hunter on the way of prey) to trap them by making them fall within the hole and on spikes, which will cause further injury to the prey.

**Number of hunting participants :**

Throughout the study, it has been found that in practice the number of hunting participants varies depending on the type of hunting. At the time of Small hunting, it's being performed simply by own effort of individual hunters. Though sometimes individual hunters make it convenient by letting one or two men with sufficient knowledge accompany him. While in big hunting 20-25 men takes part. The big hunting participants are certainly the members of the same village. In case of Annual communal hunting around 30-35 hunters of Dhobaddi and neighbouring Mukutmanipur village takes part. In this type of hunting different villages' hunters and experienced persons takes part. Just a few years before in an Annual communal hunting apparently around 300-450 participants were taking part. But presently the numbers of participants have got reduced considerably.

**Hunting games :**

Conventionally some wild species are being identified as hunting games. For the hunters of Dhobaddi village, small hunting games are Rabbit/ hare (*Lepus nigricollis*), Wildcat (*Felis silvestris*), Wild hen (*Gallus gallus*), Fox (*Vulpes bengalensis*), Jackal (*Canis aureusindicus*). Further, some other animals and birds found in the local forests are being hunted to meet small hunting purpose. Big hunting and/or Annual communal hunting games does include Fox, Jackal, Peacock (*Pavocristatus*), Tiger (*Panthera tigris*), Wild ox (*Bos taurus*) etc.

**Age wise division of hunting participants :**

As per the hunting practitioners of Dhobaddi village at hunting ground, a hunting group needs

two types of participants. These are, Participants with physical and mental strength, for this in hunting group remains 18-30 years old youths. They are being acknowledged about the deed and creed of the previous hunting expeditions and also being given some training about how to manipulate different implements. The main activity of hunting was entirely done by them. There remain other kinds of Participants with experience and sagacity. To maintain this criterion in Santal hunting group remains 40-50 years old persons by whom passive hunting is being done. That is they lead their group and suggests their group members what's to be done in an unexpected situation. They also take vital roles in marking the positions of games and they can predict the indication of danger too.

### **Gender issues :**

The Dhobaddi village's Santal women did not take part in any kind of activity related to hunting. There is entire prohibition about any participation of women in hunting activities. Hunting is a traditional subsidiary occupation of the village tribesmen only. They regard women's hunting-related activity as sinful.

### **Taboos followed :**

As per a myth prevailing within the Dhobaddi villagers, hunting is forbidden for the woman. For them, if any woman takes part in hunting putting on the disguise of the man and if she could be traced by the men hunters then as per taboo she will be immediately killed by them. In this regard, they recall a myth e.g. such kind of women intrusion in hunting activity did by a woman once for which the curse of *Marang Buru* (the great god of Santals) came on them resulting sufficient hamper in agricultural and forest products. As per the prevalent myth in the several neighbouring Santal villages including Dhobaddi, long before a woman took part in Annual communal hunting in disguise of men. But at hunting jangles, while felt thirsty, she drank water from a lake. At the time she was barehanded she attached her two hands together and collected water from a lake. For Santals taking drinking water with two hands is a lady's sign. So the woman immediately got identified by her group mates and got killed by the male hunters to make a fearful example for women to restrict the infringement of Santals taboo and to get rid of *Marang Buru's* curse.

There are quite a few taboos prevailing among the Santal tribesmen of Dhobaddi village. Another of which is as there is great life risk in Annual communal hunting therefore before commencing journey for this type of hunting men removes the iron bangles (*Noa*) of their wives hands and drop it down to the land while commencing journey for Annual communal hunting. In Santals *Noa* bears the indication of a woman being married. After the incident of dropping down *Noa*, women regarded as a widow until their husbands return to home. If the men come back alive then they make their women wear the *Noa* in hands. On that very occasion of wearing *Noa*, on the return of men members of home, their home environment takes a festive mood. They play different types of the musical instrument by this time and also observe rejoice ceremony.

### **Associated rituals :**

Hunting expedition viz., Big and/ or Annual communal hunting is being organized during *Tusu* festival. All Participants of hunting joins this festival in which a small worship of their god *Marang Buru* is also being held praying success in hunting. The safe return of the participants is also being wished by their relatives.

After successful completion of hunting expedition, the villagers distribute the meat of the killed

games among the participants of the hunting group. The one who attacked the hunted animal first gets relatively large portion than the others, he also gets the head of the hunted game. After getting the meat of their respective share each hunter's family cook that and relish that with their relatives. There also held a small rejoice ceremony if their men came back safely. Then the females welcome their men in the house with an association of a small ceremony with the association of music played and songs sung by others.

Throughout the study, it has been found that like all other days phenomena music and songs are also being considered as an integral part even of hunting tradition of Santal tribesmen of the studied village.

### Observation and remarks :

The present study reveals that traditional hunting is still being practised through generations among the rural ethnic group of the study area and hunting has a vital role in the social life of the rural tribesmen. The Santal tribe men live in or near the forest area and they have the close association with forests. They have sufficient knowledge about forests products as well as jungles wild animals. In near past, the studied tribesmen considered hunting as one of their primary occupation. But nowadays hunting is not anymore a way of livelihood for them but a traditional practice, which is being followed by them with the association of different types of taboos, rituals and religious beliefs, which made the study people attached with their roots. In the course of the study from the different ethnographic account, it seems that the real fragrant of hunting is fading away day by day with the approach of modernity.

The outcome of the present study speaks about the need to identify, conserve and protect the traditional hereditary practices to protect the identity of the rural tribesmen. It also to be kept in mind, that in most of the hunting attempts the "Wild Life (Protection) Amendment Act-2002 (after the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972), is being violated by the hunters. So the traditional hunting practices and allied activities of tribesmen should proceed through the blending of indigenous and scientific way. The special campaign is needed to make them aware of the scientific validation regarding the use of wild animals.

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