

The Diversity of Village Deities in Santhal: An Anthropological Study of Bonga.

Satyam Kumar & Dr. Ajeet Kumar Rai

Research Scholar Veer Kunwar Singh University Ara
Assistant Professor and Head of Department, Deptt. of History, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel College, Bhabua

Abstract

The Santhal religious system is an intricate tapestry of beliefs, rituals, and mythologies that intertwine the natural and supernatural worlds in remarkable harmony. Central to this worldview is the concept of *Bonga*—a diverse class of spiritual beings that bridge the gap between humans and the divine. This paper explores the anthropological and cultural diversity of these Bongas, especially as they manifest in the form of *village deities* or *Gramadevatas*. Drawing on ethnographic accounts, oral traditions, and classical anthropological writings by scholars such as S.C. Roy and Majumdar, this study examines the spiritual ecology of Santhal communities, focusing on the roles, attributes, and worship patterns of major *Bongas* like *Marang Buru*, *Jaher Era*, *Moreko Turuiko*, *Sima Bonga*, *Bahre Bonga*, *Manjhi-Haram-Bonga*, and *Pargana-Bonga*.

The research underscores that Santhal spirituality is deeply localized—each deity corresponds to a specific natural element, social function, or ecological boundary. *Marang Buru* represents the mountain and embodies ancestral wisdom, while *Jaher Era* personifies fertility, protection, and the sanctity of the sacred grove. Similarly, *Sima Bonga* and *Bahre Bonga*, fierce spirits of the village boundaries and outskirts, embody the liminal zones where safety meets danger. The rituals associated with these deities—ranging from communal sacrifices at the *Jaher-than* to the blood-offering (*Bul Mayam*) by the *Kudum Naeki*—reflect both reverence and fear, demonstrating how Santhal cosmology integrates life, death, and nature into a single continuum of existence.

Moreover, this study reveals the dual nature of Santhal religious thought: it is both deeply spiritual and profoundly pragmatic. The Bongas are not distant or abstract deities; they are immediate presences woven into the rhythm of everyday life—guardians of crops, livestock, health, and social harmony. Each ritual reinforces the Santhals' ecological awareness, moral responsibility, and collective identity. Importantly, the *Jaher-than* (sacred grove) serves not merely as a ritual space but as a symbol of environmental balance and communal solidarity.

By documenting the diversity and ritual practices surrounding the Santhal village deities, this paper seeks to highlight how indigenous belief systems preserve ecological consciousness, moral order, and social cohesion through religious symbolism. The Santhal worldview, rooted in respect for the unseen forces of nature, represents a living dialogue between humanity and environment—one that continues to define their cultural resilience and spiritual vitality in the modern age.

A village deity, also known as a *Gramadevata*, is a tutelary deity worshipped primarily at the village level in Hinduism, especially in rural India. These deities are believed to protect the village inhabitants from dangers such as bandits, epidemics, natural disasters, and diseases, and are deeply linked to the local environment and community well-being.¹

In the Santhal region, there are lots of the *Gramadevata* such as *Manjhi-Haram-Bonga*, *Pargana-Bonga*, *Sima Bonga*, *Bahar Bonga* etc. The spiritual world holds a place of deep importance in the lives of the people, and within this belief system exists a wide range of supernatural beings known as *Bonga*. These *Bonga* are considered divine entities or spiritual forces that influence both the natural and human worlds.² Each *Bonga* has its own distinct personality, role, and domain—some are benevolent and protective, while others are associated with danger or misfortune. Together, they form a complex spiritual hierarchy that connects the Santhal people to nature, their ancestors, and the unseen energies surrounding them. Such as *Sima Bonga*, *Bahar Bonga* are considered as a village deity. As per *Sima Bonga* he is the protector of village

¹ Gramadevata, Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gramadevata>

² Kochar, V. K (1966), Village Deities of the Santhal and Associated Rituals, Anthropos, pp. 241-257

and closely related to boundary of the village. *Bahar Bonga*, *Bahar* which is another name of spring, is also worshipped in the spring season during February and March months.³

The word *Bonga* itself is often used to refer to gods or divine powers that are closely linked with *Thakur*⁴, the supreme being in Santhal cosmology. *Thakur* is regarded as the ultimate source of all creation, the origin of both good and evil, and the guiding force behind the universe. He is described as a mysterious and omnipresent power, associated with secrecy, fear, reverence, and miraculous happenings that shape the world and the destiny of humankind. *Thakur* — also known as *Sing Bonga* — is revered as the creator of the cosmos, the sun, and all living beings. He is believed to govern the balance between light and darkness, life and death, and harmony and chaos. As the benevolent guardian of the spirits, *Sing Bonga* watches over his creation, ensuring that order is maintained in both the physical and spiritual realms. Through rituals, songs, and offerings, the Santhal people express their devotion to *Bonga* and *Thakur*, seeking blessings, protection, and guidance in every aspect of life.⁵ He is worshipped every 5th or 10th year by offering a sacrifice of goat.⁶ There are lot of the narratives related to *Thakur* and *Bonga*, we will discuss those later in this paper.

Roy (1925) and Majumdar (1942) states that some people also to believe that all *bonga* spirits are actually different forms of one single, all-pervading source of energy or power⁷ and some believe that none of these *Bonga* have their own personal properties.⁸ There are no known theories about *Bonga* among the Santhal people. Because *Bonga* is considered a very supreme power, people rarely talk about it. This poses a major obstacle to research, limiting the amount of information available about *Bonga*. Furthermore, whatever narratives priests tell us are often unclear.

The Santhal people worship *Bonga* in many different forms, each representing a unique aspect of spiritual power and protection. Among these, one of the most significant is the Family Deity (*Kuldevata*), who is believed to safeguard the household and its members. The worship of the Family Deity takes place within the sacred enclosure of the home, known as the *Bhitri*, where rituals and offerings are performed with great devotion, usually once a year. This ceremony not only strengthens the family's spiritual bond but also connects them to their ancestors and the divine forces that guide their lives, also some *Bonga* worship as Village Deity (*Gramadevata*) by headman of village (*Manjhi*) in the sacred grove *Jaher*⁹.¹⁰ According to Santhal traditions, in the earliest times, the Santhals did not worship any *Bonga*; their devotion was directed solely toward *Thakur*, the supreme being. Over time, as their spiritual understanding evolved, they began to worship *Marang Buru*, who is regarded as one of the most powerful and benevolent *Bonga*. Later, at a place called *Champa*, the tribe introduced the worship of other important deities such as *Moreko Turuiko*, *Gosaen Era*, and *Jaher Era*, and these divine beings were enshrined within the *Jaher Than* — the sacred grove that serves as a spiritual centre for the community.¹¹ It was beneath a *Sal* tree in this sacred grove that the Santhals are believed to have received divine guidance from the *Bonga*. These spiritual beings taught them the moral values, customs, and the proper way to live in harmony with nature, society, and the divine. From that time onward, the worship of various *Bonga* became an essential part of Santhal religious life, symbolizing their deep connection to both the natural and spiritual worlds.

In Santhal villages, *Marang Buru* is often regarded as belonging to the same divine group as *Jaher Era*, *Gosaen Era*, and *Moreko Turuiko*. Among all the village deities, these four hold the highest spiritual status and are considered central figures in the Santhal religious system. Based on the accounts of local priests and the observed rituals, it is evident that this primary group of deities stands apart from the other minor village deities. For this reason, these four *Bonga* are collectively referred to as the *Jaher deities*, distinguishing them from the lesser village spirits who are worshipped for more specific or localized purposes.

Within Santhal society, certain families belonging to specific sub-clans, known as *khut*¹², maintain a close ritual connection with the *Jaher* deities. These families worship them as their *Abge-Bonga* (ancestral or clan deities). However, they do not

³ The Imperial Gazetteer of India, vol. xxii., (1908), pp. 67 et seq.

⁴ In the Santhal context, "*Thakur*" can refer to *Thakur Jiu*, a supreme creator deity, or to a *legendary figure* believed to have led the Santhals in the 1855 rebellion against the British and outsiders ("*dikus*"). This legendary *Thakur* is a symbol of the Santhals' strength and struggle to reclaim their land and identity. Read more: <https://www.researchpublish.com/papers/santhal-rebellion--a-counter-insurgency-against-outsiders-as-ordained-by-a-thakur>

⁵ Das, Nayan Jyoti (2015), The Santhal Pantheon of Supernatural Agencies, Pratidhwani the echo, Vol. iv, pp. 70.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Majumdar, D. N (1942) : Bongaism. In: Mills J. P. et al., [edit.], Essays in Anthropology Presented to S. C. Roy. Lucknow, pp. 60-79.

⁸ Risley,(1903) p. 352

⁹ *Jaher* is a traditional place of worship for the Santhal and other Sarna communities.

¹⁰ Kochar, V. K (1966), pp. 242

¹¹ Skrefsrud, p. 10;

¹²¹³ In the *Santhal* community, a "*khut*" is a *sub-clan* within a larger clan or *paris*. These sub-clans are crucial social units, and marriage is strictly prohibited between members of the same *khut*. This practice, known as *exogamy*, is part of the larger social and kinship structure of the Santhal people.

venerate all the village gods; their offerings and sacrifices are made exclusively to the three principal deities — *Jaher Era*, *Gosaen Era*, and *Moreko Turuiko*. The former village priest from the *Naeki-Khil* sub-clan, for instance, was known to perform sacred rituals and sacrifices for these three *Jaher* deities within his *Bhitri* (family shrine) during the important festivals of *Baha*¹³ and *Nawae*¹⁴¹⁵

Another important *Jaher* deity is *Marang-Buru* (Mountain God) (Misspelled name *Nurung*¹⁶). There is always a debate between Anthropologists that, what is the place in the hierarchy of the *jaher* group of *bonga*? Since *Marang Buru* is offered libations and sacrifices on various occasions that relate to multiple levels of *Santhal* social life — including the individual, the family, the clan, the village community, and even the tribe as a whole — his spiritual status in the *Santhal* pantheon stands apart and somewhat independent from his association with the *Jaher* group of *Bonga*. His worship extends beyond the confines of any single ritual or location, symbolizing his universal presence and influence within *Santhal* belief. Among the numerous *Bonga* of the *Santhal* tradition, *Marang Buru* is one of the few deities who possess a distinct mythical background. Stories and oral traditions describe him as a powerful and benevolent force who guides humanity, teaches moral conduct, and ensures balance between nature and human life. Because of his supreme authority and the depth of his mythological significance, several scholars and traditional narratives have placed *Marang Buru* in an exalted position — ranking just below the creator, *Thakur* (or *Sing Bonga*).¹⁷¹⁸ *Kolean guru*¹⁹ assigned the third place to *Marang Buru*.²⁰

In everyday practice, *Marang Buru* is honored with great devotion. Whenever a *Santhal* sits down to drink *handi* (rice beer), it is customary to sprinkle a few drops on the ground as an offering to the ancestors and to *Marang Buru*. This simple yet sacred gesture is rooted in their myth of origin. According to *Santhal* legend, when the first human pair, *Pilchu-Haram* and *Pilchu-Budhi*²¹, wandered aimlessly upon the earth, *Marang Buru* appeared before them and introduced himself as their grandfather. He taught them essential skills such as cultivation, hunting, dancing, and even the brewing of rice beer. This intimate connection established *Marang Buru* not merely as a god, but as a loving ancestor — a “*good old fellow*” — whose guidance shaped the foundation of human life. In *Santhal* culture, the affectionate and playful bond between grandparents and grandchildren mirrors this divine relationship, emphasizing *Marang Buru*’s benevolent and protective nature. Importantly, in divinations and ritual practices, *Marang Buru* is never regarded as the originator of evil. Another myth tells of the origin of his worship. During their early wanderings, the *Santhal* tribe once found themselves trapped in a valley surrounded by an enormous mountain. No matter how hard they tried, they could not find a way out. In desperation, they promised to worship the spirit that resided within the “big mountain” and named it *Marang Buru* — meaning “the great hill.” After making this vow, they miraculously discovered a path to freedom. To fulfill their promise and express their gratitude, they began to worship *Marang Buru*, a practice that has continued from that time onward.²² In this narrative, *Marang Buru* emerges as a savior-like deity — one who responds to faith and delivers his people from hardship.

However, a third myth portrays *Marang Buru* in a very different light. It suggests that, in ancient times, all *Bonga* were divine messengers (*goret*) of the supreme god *Thakur*, faithfully carrying out his will. *Marang Buru* was among the most trusted of these divine beings. But over time, a struggle for power arose; *Marang Buru* and the other *Bonga* desired greater authority. Angered by their ambition, *Thakur* cast them out of the heavens and hurled them down to the earth. The *Bonga* fell in different places — upon hills, trees, and rivers — while *Marang Buru* landed upon a great mountain. From there,

¹³ “*Baha*” means flower, and it is also the name of a major spring festival (*Baha Parab*) celebrated by the *Santhal* tribe.

¹⁴ In the *Santhali* language, the word ‘*Nawae*’ is related to the idea of “new” or “fresh”. The word is most frequently seen in the context of the harvest festival, *Nawae Porob*, which celebrates the new rice crop.

¹⁵ Kochar, 1965: pp. 63

¹⁶ Tylor, E. B. (1877). Mr. Spencer’s Principles of Sociology. *Mind*, 2(6), pp. 154. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2246373>

¹⁷ Culshaw 1949: 109.

¹⁸ O’Malley, p. 14.

¹⁹ *Kolean Guru* gave a hierarchy in the following order: *Marang-Buru* (whose real name is *Lita*), *Jaher-Era* (whose real name is *Ram-Salgi*), *Moreko- Turuiko*, *Gosaen-Era*, *Pargana-Bonga*.

²⁰ Skrefsrud, p. 159

²¹ *Pilchu-Budhi* is the first woman in the [Santhal creation myth](#), along with her husband *Pilchu-Haram*, who are considered the ancestral progenitors of the *Santhal* people. According to the myth, they were born from the egg of *Has* and *Hasin* birds and later had many children, which led to the growth of their family and the establishment of the *Santhal* clans.

See more at : <http://www.santhaltoday.in/santhal%20page%20links/pilchu%20dampati%20ke%20bacche.html>

²² Bodding 1926, pp. 67

he became the leader of all *Bonga* on earth. Under his rule, these spirits began to oppose *Thakur*'s divine order, often disrupting human life and bringing challenges to mankind.²³

The worship of *Marang Buru* among the Santhal people, both as a family deity and as a *Jaher deity*, reflects the intricate layering of meanings and traditions within their religious system. While *Jaher* deities are regarded as the spiritual guardians of the entire village or tribe, family deities are considered private divinities belonging exclusively to particular households or lineages. This distinction underscores an important feature of Santhal ritual life — the concept of group ownership of deities. Every *Bonga* or divine spirit is ritually connected to a specific group, and its worship holds meaning and validity only within that group's spiritual framework.

However, when it comes to *Marang Buru*, his exact group affiliation remains somewhat ambiguous. In different regions and among related tribes, his role and status vary, reflecting the fluid and evolving nature of tribal religious beliefs. For instance, among the *Birhor*, *Marang Buru* is regarded as a family god, but only within certain families²⁴. Similarly, the *Buru-Bonga*, or the spirits of the hills in general, are often adopted as *Orak-Bonga*²⁵ (clan deities) among some *Birhor* clans. These hill spirits are believed to inhabit the mountains that originally served as the ancestral homes of these clans²⁶. During clan sacrifices, totemic symbols are also employed, representing the deep connection between the clan's identity, the land, and its protective spirits.²⁷

Such practices among the *Birhor*, one of the most ancient and culturally conservative tribes of the Munda group, suggest that during the early stages of their migrations, the Munda peoples may have adopted *Buru-Bonga* (hill spirits) as their clan deities. Over time, these localized spirits gradually evolved into more powerful and generalized deities. The Santhal, who are believed to have descended from the larger *Kharwar* or *Mundaric* peoples, may once have constituted a single clan or sub-tribe in the distant past.

According to the anthropologist S.C. Roy, *Marang Buru* among the Munda represents an accumulated totemic symbol — a unification of the various *Buru-Bonga* or hill deities once worshipped by distinct clans within a shared region. As Roy explains, "At this stage, the *Buru-Bonga* or clan gods of the different clans settled within an area of several miles appear to have merged into a high god or general deity called by the Munda *Marang-Bonga* or *Marang Bum*".²⁸

In this sense, *Marang Buru* came to embody the collective spiritual identity of the Munda and Santhal people — a divine figure uniting local hill spirits into one overarching deity. Among the Munda and Santhal, *Marang Buru* is thus recognized as a high god, often described in Munda mythology as the elder brother of *Sing Bonga*, who himself is identified with *Thakur*, the supreme being.

Interestingly, this hierarchy shifts among other tribes within the Munda group. For example, among the *Ho*, *Marang Buru* is considered a minor clan deity²⁹, whereas among the *Birhor*, *Marang Buru* or *Buru-Bonga* continue to function primarily as *Orak-Bonga*, or clan-specific spirits.³⁰ In the *Tamaria* region, the Munda recognize *Buru-Bonga* as *Killi-Bonga*, or clan gods, again emphasizing their localized nature.³¹

Another important *Jaher* deity is *Moreko-Turuiko*³², which literally translates to "five-six," is regarded in Santhal belief as a composite spiritual entity — a unified spirit made up of multiple divine aspects. Within the Santhal religious system, *Moreko-Turuiko* holds a position of great significance, as this deity is believed to preside over the general welfare of the village, influencing essential aspects of life such as rainfall, the fertility of crops, and the control of epidemics among both humans and cattle.³³

²³ Ibid, pp. 68

²⁴ Roy, 1925a, p.313

²⁵ *Orak-Bonga* refers to the **household deity** that protects the family. This spirit is considered personal to the household and is believed to safeguard them from malevolent spirits. The name of the *Orak-Bonga* is passed down from the head of the household to the eldest son only before the head's death, and its name is kept a secret to avoid misfortune.

See more : Das, Nayan Jyoti (2015)

²⁶ Ibid, p. 300

²⁷ Roy, 1925b: 165–166

²⁸ Roy, 1925b: pp. 173

²⁹ Majumdar, 1950: pp. 258

³⁰ Roy, 1925a: pp. 300

³¹ Roy, 1925b: pp. 173

³² **Moreko-Turuiko** is a tutelary spirit or village deity associated with the welfare of the village, including control over rain, crops, and epidemics. They are often worshiped during festivals and ceremonies, such as the *Mag More*, to ward off evils and ensure good fortune. *Moreko-Turuiko* is believed to have been five brothers married to six sisters, and they are sometimes symbolized by a tree in the sacred grove, alongside the spirits *Marang Buru* and *Jaher Era*

See more: Das, Nayan Jyoti (2015) & Kochhar, V. K (1966) & <https://www.ezcc-india.org/pdf/book/banam.pdf>

³³ Das, Nayan Jyoti (2015), pp. 71

This spirit occupies a central place in *Jaher* worship, and sacrifices are offered to *Moreko-Turuiko* during almost all major village rituals.³⁴ The entire community participates collectively in these ceremonies, especially during times of widespread illness, natural calamities, or the outbreak of animal diseases. These communal sacrifices express the collective dependence of the Santhal people on the benevolence of this spirit for maintaining harmony and balance in village life. These public rituals, *Moreko-Turuiko* is also worshipped at the family level.³⁵ Some families offer sacrifices and libations in their *Bhitri* during the sowing season or at the *Baha*. These acts are performed to ensure agricultural prosperity and protection from disease.³⁶ Moreover, individual sacrifices are also made to *Moreko-Turuiko*, typically by families who have made a vow or oath during times of personal crisis or illness. Once the problem is resolved, the family fulfils its promise by performing a ritual sacrifice to honour and thank the deity.³⁷

A particularly notable feature of *Moreko-Turuiko* is that it is the only *Jaher* spirit which regularly appears in the divinations performed by the *Ojha* (magician-cum-medicine-man). When consulted during a time of crisis—such as an epidemic, drought, or personal misfortune—the *Ojha* often reveals *Moreko-Turuiko* as the divine force responsible for the situation. This makes the spirit uniquely active in both communal and individual religious life.³⁸ Scholars have suggested that *Moreko-Turuiko* may have originally been a form of *Bahre-Bonga*, or an ancient regional spirit, associated with a specific habitat of the early Santhal people. Over time, this localized spirit appears to have evolved into a *Jaher deity* of universal importance, reflecting the Santhals' tendency to integrate earlier regional deities into a broader pantheon that connects the natural world, the community, and the divine.

The next important *Jaher* Deities are *Jaher-Era* and *Gosae-Era*. *Jaher Era* is revered as the goddess of the sacred grove, a space carefully preserved in every *Santal* village as the dwelling place of the village *Bongas*. She is regarded as a kind and benevolent deity who watches over the welfare of the villagers. *Jaher Era* is worshipped during almost all festivals, These deities also protect the village from epidemics, floods, or Droughts especially during the *Baha* or flower festival, which celebrates renewal and prosperity. Her blessings are sought for good harvests, the health of the villagers, and the well-being of their cattle. She symbolizes the nurturing and protective spirit of nature, reflecting the Santals' deep connection with their environment.

As per *Gosae-Era*, She is the another spirit associated with the sacred grove, though her nature is somewhat enigmatic within *Santal* belief. While she shares the sacred space (*Jaher than*) with the other deities, much less is known about her compared to *Jaher Era*. Some elders suggest that *Gosae Era* might be *Jaher Era*'s sister. Unlike *Jaher Era*, she is symbolized not by the *sarjom* tree but by the *matkom* tree (*Bassia latifolia*)³⁹. During the *Baha* festival, a separate shade is prepared for her worship, distinct from those of *Marang Buru*, *Jaher Era*, and *Moreko-Turuiko*. Interestingly, while devotees are often possessed by the spirits of *Jaher Era*, *Marang Buru*, and *Moreko-Turuiko* during rituals, no such possession is ever attributed to *Gosae Era*. Her presence thus remains mysterious yet significant within the spiritual landscape of the *Santal* community.⁴⁰ The above-mentioned *Jaher* deities hold a significant place throughout the Santhal region. Meanwhile, the deities worshipped as village deities, including *Bonga*, vary from village to village.

Manjhi-Haram-Bonga is holds an important place of village deity in *Santal* pantheon, which revered as the spirit of the village's original founder. According to the accounts of several informants, this *bonga* is believed to embody not only the spirit of the first headman who established the village but also the collective spirits of all subsequent village headmen, including the one presently living. Thus, *Manjhi-Haram-Bonga* symbolizes the continuity of leadership and the enduring connection between the village's past and present generations.⁴¹

Sacrifices to *Manjhi-Haram-Bonga* are performed by the *naeki* (village priest) during the *jaher* rituals. Some informants have suggested that this practice represents the worship of the *bonga* associated with the *manjhi-haram*—the village headman—implying that the reverence may extend even to the living headman himself. The villagers seem to attribute a

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ C.L Mukharjee States that *Mareko-Turuiko* is now recognized as a deity, but the Santhal people believe that five brothers were married to five sisters, who together restore prosperity, harmony, and unity to the entire village.

³⁷ The Imperial Gazetteer of India, vol. xxii., (1908), pp. 67 et seq.

³⁸ Das, Nayan Jyoti (2015), pp. 71

³⁹ *Matkom* tree is commonly known as *Mahua* tree, which is usually use to make wine.

⁴⁰ Kochar, V. K (1966), pp. 250-251

⁴¹ O'Malley, p. 141

faint spiritual counterpart to their leader, though this notion is usually rejected by the headman. Notably, there is no other example in Santal religious tradition where the spirit of a living person is worshipped at an altar. According to Santal belief, no individual can become a *bonga* until they have been cremated with full ritual honours. Nevertheless, the *Manjh-Haram-Bonga* remains deeply connected to the welfare and prosperity of the village, symbolizing the enduring link between leadership, ancestry, and communal well-being.

The next Pargana-Bonga holds a unique and somewhat ambivalent position within Santal religious belief. He is regarded as the chief of witches, serving as their tutelary guardian and protector. According to Santal tradition, witches (*dayan*) worship Pargana-Bonga to gain training and mastery in the art of witchcraft.⁴² Before undertaking any of their occult missions, they must invoke his presence and seek his permission and blessings.

It is believed that during their nocturnal gatherings, witches bring forth *Pargana-Bonga*, adorned like a king, to preside over their assembly. The deity is said to be susceptible to the enticements of witches and assists them in their supernatural ventures. Moreover, *Pargana-Bonga* is thought to possess authority over the minor and wandering bongas of the region, directing them against human beings at the behest of witches. Traditionally, he is believed to reside in the village cremation ground, the same place where witches are said to hold their meetings.⁴³ Sacrifices to *Pargana-Bonga* are offered in the *jaher-than* during major *jaher* rituals, with the assistant priest (*kudum-naeki*⁴⁴) performing the rites. In times of general illness or when the village faces disturbances attributed to witchcraft, the *ojha* (medicine-man) may also conduct magical sacrifices to propitiate *Pargana-Bonga*. The ritual procedures and personnel involved in such propitiation vary depending on whether the ceremony is held at the *jaher-than* or elsewhere.

Another important village deity is *Sima-Bonga*. It is the collection of more than one deities which is worshipped on the outskirt or the boundary of the village on the definite annual occasion. People believe these deities must be propitiated by human blood. So the *Kudum-Naeki* prick his own thigh, arms, or, when necessary, his chest for blood which is called *Bul Mayam*. Drops of his blood are then allowed to fall upon the rice grains laid out on the sal leaf, thus serving as a substitute for human sacrifice.⁴⁵ ⁴⁶ Through this act of self-inflicted bloodletting, the priest both appeases the wrath of the *Sima-bonga* and reinforces his role as the village's spiritual intermediary with the most volatile and perilous of spirits.

The *Bahre Bongas* are regarded as the spirits of the outskirts, believed to inhabit the peripheral areas surrounding the village. According to traditional Santal belief, their abodes include pools, ditches, streams, ponds, deserted houses, fallow lands, groves, tree stumps, old funeral sites, holes in the ground, hillocks, pits, and mounds. These spirits are considered highly temperamental and often furious, capable of misleading travellers or villagers who wander near their domains. A well-known belief narrates that when a thirsty man is deceived by a *Bahre Bonga* into seeing a mirage of a water reservoir, the spirit makes the water vanish just as the man approaches it, tormenting him with thirst. However, once the man vows to offer a sacrifice, the reservoir is said to reappear, allowing him to drink—thus reaffirming the reciprocal relationship between humans and spirits.

Due to their volatile nature, the abodes of the *Bahre Bongas* are generally avoided by villagers. Yet, their influence is not confined to a single settlement; these spirits are often recognized and shared among neighboring villages, especially those within the same ecological region. A collective sacrifice is offered to them by the *Naeke* during the *Jaher* worship, acknowledging their role in the spiritual ecology surrounding the village.

During certain festivals, fowls are sacrificed in their honor, and the men of the village, excluding women, partake in the communal meal prepared from the sacrificial offerings. In more intense rituals, the *Kudum Naeki* performs *Bul Mayam*, where he mixes his own blood with *adwa chaole* (unboiled rice) and offers it to the *Bahre Bongas* as a mark of appeasement and devotion.

In cases of sickness or misfortune, the *Ojha* determines through divination whether the cause lies with the *Bahre* or *Sima Bongas*. If found responsible, he performs the *Bul Mayam* ceremony on behalf of the afflicted family, invoking the spirit's mercy and restoring balance between the human and supernatural realms.

⁴² Kochar, V. K (1966), pp. 253

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ In the Santal tribal community, the *Kudum Naeki* is the assistant or deputy village priest. The *Kudum Naeki*'s position is a vital part of the traditional village council, or *more hor*. In this council, the *Kudum Naeki* serves the head priest, known as the *Naeki*. While the *Naeki* worships national spirits in the sacred grove (*jaher*), the *Kudum Naeki* assists in various rituals and helps with the worship of specific deities.

⁴⁵ Das, Nayan Jyoti (2015), pp. 72

⁴⁶ Kochar, V. K (1966), pp. 253-254.

Rituals of the Gramadevatas

The *Jaher-than* (or *Johor-than*) is a sacred grove situated near every Santal village, regarded as the spiritual nucleus of the settlement and the abode of the principal Bongas (deities) of the Santal pantheon. Before the establishment of a village, a sacred site is divined and consecrated by offering sacrifices to the Bongas; only after favorable omens do the Santals proceed to build their settlement. The grove, usually located at the western end of the village⁴⁷, traditionally contains five sacred trees — three *sal* (*Shorea robusta*) dedicated to *Marang-Buru*, *Jaher-Era*, and *Moreko-Turuiko*, one *mahua* tree for *Gosaen-Era*, and another for *Pargana-Bonga*.⁴⁸

The *Naeke* conducts rituals and sacrifices during major festivals such as *Erok*, *Sohrae*, *Magh*, and *Baha*, with assistance from village functionaries like the *Goret*, *Jog-Manjhi*, *Paranik*, *Bhogdar*, and *Kudum-Naeke*. Each household contributes rice and fowls for the communal offering, symbolizing the collective nature of the rite. The *Naeke* observes ritual purity, abstaining from food and sexual contact before the sacrifice.⁴⁹

During the ritual, the priest cleanses the ground beneath each sacred tree, marks it with cow dung, flour, and vermillion, and offers fowls while chanting invocations such as:

“Salute to you, Jaher-Era, I give you this offering. Be pleased to accept it. Let no misery enter our village.”

One fowl, usually dedicated to *Jaher-Era* or *Moreko-Turuiko*, is sacrificed in a semi-beheading manner called *Jeba*, possibly reflecting Islamic influence (*turuk*), symbolizing historical cultural contact. The sacrificial meal is prepared collectively on the village outskirts, where men partake of the cooked offerings, and the *Naeke* receives a share from specific sacrifices.⁵⁰

The *Jaher-than* is strictly taboo for women, believed to prevent them from using witchcraft⁵¹ against the Bongas. Within the Santhal worldview, witches (*dain*) occupy a paradoxical and feared position—simultaneously human and supernatural, social yet antisocial. They are believed to derive their destructive powers from secret communion with the *bongas*, the invisible spirits who inhabit every aspect of the natural and social universe. This interaction grants witches the ability to manipulate life forces, bringing sickness, death, or misfortune upon individuals and communities. As recorded in early ethnographic accounts, witches are thought to kill by "eating the entrails" of their victims or by "setting the *bongas*" upon them, thus channeling spiritual energy into acts of harm.⁵²

The *dain* is, therefore, not merely a malignant individual but a symbolic embodiment of chaos and disorder within the Santhal moral cosmos. Her powers represent a reversal of the sacred order that the *naeki* and community rituals strive to uphold. Where the *naeki* mediates between humans and benevolent spirits through sacrifice, the witch perverts this relationship—entering into illicit communion with the *bongas* for destructive ends. The Santhal understanding of witchcraft thus reveals an underlying moral code: when social harmony is disturbed—through jealousy, conflict, or moral decay—the balance between humans and spirits is disrupted, giving rise to illness, crop failure, or animal death.

Anthropologically, the witch becomes the personification of social anxiety. She is blamed for disease outbreaks such as cholera or smallpox, crop blights, and even livestock mortality—events that the Santhal interpret not as random misfortunes but as spiritual disturbances.⁵³ The *dain* embodies the "evil eye" (*najar lagna*) and the "evil mouth" (*bura muh*), believed to transmit misfortune through gaze or speech.⁵⁴ Such beliefs serve both explanatory and regulatory functions within the tribe: they provide a moral rationale for suffering and reinforce community cohesion through collective rituals of identification and purification.

Ritually, the Santhal society responds to witchcraft accusations through divination, confession, and sometimes violent exorcism. The *ojha* (shaman) or *naeki* acts as an intermediary, diagnosing the cause of misfortune and determining whether a *bonga* or *dain* is responsible. The *dain*'s expulsion or punishment thus becomes a symbolic reassertion of order—restoring harmony between the human and the spiritual domains.

From a broader perspective, the Santhal conception of witchcraft reflects a cosmic moral dualism just as benevolent *bongas* protect the village, malevolent forces, whether spirits or witches, threaten it. This duality reinforces the Santhal

⁴⁷ O'Malley, p. 141; Culshaw 1949: 80-81

⁴⁸ Skrefsrud; cf. Bodding 1940: pp. 429-430.

⁴⁹ Kochar, V. K (1966), pp. 244.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Shashank Sinha. (2007). Witch-Hunts, Adivasis, and the Uprising in Chhotanagpur. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(19), 1672–1676. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4419566>

⁵² Man, 1983: pp. 152; Raut, 1979: pp. 402

⁵³ Shashank Sinha. (2007)

⁵⁴ Roy, 1985: pp. 257

belief that the world is governed by an intricate network of relationships requiring constant ritual maintenance. The witch, therefore, stands as both a warning and a necessary figure within the spiritual ecology—a reminder that imbalance, whether moral or ritual, can unleash destructive energies that only collective faith and discipline can contain.

At certain festivals such as *Baha*, *Sohrae*, and *Erok*, additional rites accompany the main sacrifice—flower offerings, cattle worship, and rain-invocation ceremonies, respectively. In other areas, the *Jaher-than* ceremonies may also involve ritual possession (*rum-bonga*) and communal dances, though such practices are minimal in *Kuapara*.

No icons, flags, or effigies are used in *Kuapara*; the grove remains simple, marked only by sacred trees. However, in Bankura, Malda, and Dinajpur, some Santals maintain effigies and decorations resembling Hindu practices, indicating regional variations in ritual expression.

Conclusion

The study of Santhal Bongas and their role as village deities offers profound insight into how indigenous societies perceive divinity, community, and ecology as inseparable aspects of a unified reality. For the Santhals, religion is not confined to temples or doctrines; it lives in their fields, forests, and daily acts of survival. Every ritual, from the grand sacrifices of *Marang Buru* to the secretive blood offerings of the *Kudum Naeki*, is a reaffirmation of the delicate balance between humans and the supernatural world.

The diverse Bongas—*Jaher Era*, *Gosaen Era*, *Moreko-Turuiko*, *Manjhi-Haram-Bonga*, *Sima-Bonga*, *Bahre-Bonga*, and *Pargana-Bonga*—together reflect the spiritual topography of Santhal life. Each deity governs a specific domain: the home, the boundary, the forest, the spring, or the village as a whole. Their interconnectedness mirrors the Santhals' belief that no sphere of existence stands alone—every aspect of life is sustained by mutual dependence between people, spirits, and nature. The *Jaher-than*, as the sacred grove, remains the physical and spiritual center of this universe, preserving the bond between the human and non-human realms.

This anthropological study shows that the Santhal concept of *Bonga* transcends mere worship. It represents an entire philosophy of coexistence, morality, and ecological stewardship. The rituals of sacrifice and thanksgiving are not only spiritual duties but acts of renewal—ensuring that cosmic order (*ridi*) is maintained and that both the living and ancestral spirits remain in harmony. The blood sacrifice (*Bul Mayam*) performed by the *Kudum Naeki*, though intense, symbolizes the depth of human commitment to maintaining peace with volatile spiritual forces.

In contemporary times, while many tribal traditions face erosion due to modernization, migration, and cultural assimilation, the resilience of Santhal religious life offers a vital lesson. It reminds us that spirituality, when deeply rooted in land and community, can sustain both cultural and environmental integrity. The Bongas thus serve as metaphors for a worldview where divinity resides in every tree, stone, and stream—an understanding that challenges modern alienation from nature.

Ultimately, the diversity of Santhal village deities reflects not only the variety of the human imagination but also the timeless wisdom of a people who have learned to live in harmony with the unpredictable world around them. The Santhal religion, through its myths, rituals, and oral traditions, continues to embody an indigenous form of humanism—one that reveres both life and the sacred rhythms of the earth. In studying the Bongas, we do not just understand a tribal faith; we encounter a profound reminder of humanity's shared spiritual roots in nature.

Reference:

- Shashank Sinha. (2007). Witch-Hunts, Adivasis, and the Uprising in Chhotanagpur. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(19), 1672–1676. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4419566>
- Kochar, V. K (1966), Village Deities of the Santhal and Associated Rituals, *Anthropos*, pp. 241-257
- Das, Nayan Jyoti (2015), The Santhal Pantheon of Supernatural Agencies, *Pratidhwani the echo*, Vol. iv. <https://www.theecho.in/files/Nayan-jyoti-Das.pdf>
- Majumdar, D. N (1942) : Bongaism. In: Mills J. P. et al., [edit.], Essays in Anthropology Presented to S. C. Roy. Lucknow, pp. 60-79.
- Tylor, E. B. (1877). Mr. Spencer's Principles of Sociology. *Mind*, 2(6), pp. 154. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2246373>
- Skrefsrud L. C. Horkoren Marehpramko Reak Katha [in Santali]. Banagoria. Lucknow 6195
- The Imperial Gazetteer of India, vol. xxii., (1908).
- Risley, H. H., (1903) Census of India, Report. Vol. 1, Part 1 (1901). Calcutta.
- O'Malley, L. S. S.,(1938): District Gazetteer: Santal Parganas. Patna.
- Culshaw W. J. (1949),The Tribal Heritage. London.