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## **The Evolution of Santali Literature: Contexts, Phases, and Historical Background**

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### **Abstract**

The history of the Santali literature, as considered in this paper, was put into the framework of a multi-layered, phase-specific model of expressive culture, which relates oral culture, script evolution, and contemporary literary production. Santali is a Munda language of the Austroasiatic language family, spoken in the Eastern regions of India and has had a strong oral tradition of creation stories, ritual songs, farm songs, and moral tales for several centuries. They were not occasional performances but rather structured archives of knowledge of the surrounding world, where the relations between community, geography, and cosmology are beyond the comprehension into the category of folklore. According to ethno-science and cultural ecological studies, the study analyzes the Santali literature as an indigenous classification system, which is applied to the land, forest, water, and wildlife to form a moral universe. Through this, four historical stages are marked: initial cosmological and oral tradition phase, the colonial documentation phase, the transformative script reform phase following the production of the Ol Chiki script by Raghunath Murmu in 1925 and the current phase of political mobilization and environmental criticism. Through qualitative textual analysis and reconstruction of history, we come to understand that the new Santali literature is a reworking of old ecological symbols to oppose industrial extraction, land alienation and displacement. Santali literature, therefore, seems to be an epistemic archive of indigenous knowledge and also a critical discourse that depicts the environmental realities of the modern world.

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## Introduction

Santali literary tradition occupies a special, poorly theorized position in the literary topography of South Asia (Hansdah 850). ‘Santali is a language of the Munda language family of the Austroasiatic-speaking peoples that developed their literary tradition that was independent of the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian branches of the literary tradition in India’ (Eftakhar 142). Santals who inhabit Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, and Assam have a sophisticated aesthetic culture rooted in oral narration. The idea of origin “myths”, chants and agricultural songs, or narrative series was not just a source of entertainment; it determined ecological knowledge, social behaviour coded in social behaviour and cosmological order laid down in a series of narrative (Hansda 53). However, in the bulk of existing scholarship, these materials have been tabulated as folklore, and not as part of a meaningful literary system (Saren, “Contemporary”, 61).

The history of the development of the Santali literary expression reveals a chain of transformative yet correlating moments (Roy 23). In the nineteenth century, the emergence of print media and the codification of a language on missionary paper led to the transformation of preservation and transmission methods (Khatun 119). In 1925, a radical change occurred, as the script became institutionalized through the invention of the Ol Chiki script by Raghunath Murmu and introduced the institutionalization of education and networks of publication, which in turn resulted in the formation of a modern literary space (Tanaka and Ishizaki 31). The following decades were characterized by the fact that Santali writing increasingly committed itself to the problems of land alienation, industrial extraction, migration, and political acknowledgment, particularly in regions such as Jharkhand that are very rich in mineral deposits (Gope 41). This indicates that the transformation in the literary world cannot be divorced of the changes in the experience of the environment and shared identity.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to rewrite the history of Santali literature with the help of a phase-based analytical approach emphasizing the importance of the environmental representation as one of the fundamental patterns of changes. The paper is expected to meet



three goals; first, to provide the general historical stages of oral and modern textual production; second, to investigate the hierarchical representation of land, forest, water, and wildlife in literary trips; and third, to trace the transformation of the perception of environmental change in different generations (Kandhway and López-Calvo 93). Putting the historical experience of environmental representation in the context of the overall socio-political process, the study seeks to step beyond the realms of descriptive history and explore how literary form mediates historical consciousness (Karmakar and De 83).

### 1. Background

Among the cultural and linguistic map of eastern India, Santali literary tradition plays a special role. Santalis are a structural and historical unique language whose variety is in the Munda subfamily of the Austroasiatic languages and not the Indo-Aryan languages that predominate the Indian subcontinent and consequently the Indian literary history. Santals inhabiting the Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, and Assam states possessed a rich literary culture even before the emergence of the print culture. The oral literature of the Santals with the myths of origin, ritualistic odes, seasonal songs, epic narratives, and didactic folktales was not only the literary performance but also the source of the social memory and social norms. This knowledge was transmitted by means of collective recitation, ritual performance and intergenerational transmission and demonstrated a performance-based complex literary ecology. It cannot be called a pre-literary but it is another form of epistemology when the power of the narration was grounded in communal participation and persistent ritual.

However, even the switch to written remains of the nineteenth century, owing to missionary linguistics and colonial ethnography, writing Santali in Roman and regional scripts. Although such activities helped to save the valuable oral tradition, they also coded the indigenous knowledge based on the foreign interpretive patterns. The tremendous change was reached in 1925, when Raghunath Murmu developed the Ol Chiki script and such a novelty was a synthesis of language imaginativeness and cultural identity. Standardization was brought about by the appearance of a native script, institutionalized education and the



generation of all modern literary forms or genres: poetry, drama and prose fiction. The two decades younger saw the Santali writing become more apprehensive of land alienation, identity politics, cultural resurgence, and social transformation. This way Santali literature can never be viewed as a simple movement between orality and literacy but a complex path of reforming the language, gaining political awareness, and the struggle between the tradition and modernity.

## 2. Literature Review

‘The academic interest in Santali literature as a field of study has not been evenly distributed due to its adoption of the fluctuating intellectual paradigm and political circumstances’ (Ghosal and Singh 281). Mostly because of the work done by the ethnographers in an attempt to chronicle Santali grammar, vocabulary, and oral narrative, the colonial era led to the development of the first mass of literature (Sujatha 47). Grammar, dictionaries, religious literature translated, and documented folk-tales were the results of this literature, thus preserving a substantial amount of content that otherwise would have been lost (Taraphdar and Dhar, “Unveiling”, 93). However, this treatment of this literature was philological and evangelical. Rather than the analytical approach being applied to the structured literary tradition and aesthetic principles of the performances, oral storytelling was recorded as an ethnographic source or linguistic material (Bartl and Paolocá 135). Mythic cycles, ritual songs, and seasonal songs were not recorded based on the lexical or cultural interest, but not based on the narrative form, the performance context, however, complexity of the symbols and audience interest (Das 80). Thus, on the one hand, we can say that the colonial archive is an unbelievably useful source of written conservation, on the other hand it can hardly be useful as a source of information about Santali aesthetic or native epistemology.

As the decades have passed following Indian independence, the research interest slowly changed to the interpretation, rather than documentation. Scholars started placing the Santali expressive tradition in the framework of the broader Munda linguistic tradition and interpreting its oral poetics, metaphorical structures, and elements of performance (Andersen



and Mehdi 6). ‘Rather than regarding oral literature as the fixed folklore, researchers started to see it as an active cultural system embedded in the rituals, ecological, and social structure’ (Kumar 27). It was this change in emphasis, which was a moment in wider shift within anthropology and in literary studies, where the emphasis of performance theory and structural analysis resulted in an increased attention to narrative form and systems of symbols (Ghosh and Challa 11502). ‘The Santali myths and songs were now being viewed not merely as a repository of tradition but also as a mode of worldview, which was articulating a complex sense of land, ancestors, and people’ (Carrin 1448).

The development of the Ol Chiki script in 1925 by Raghunath Murmu served as a turning point to both literary and academic activity. The shift in the nature of an indigenous script altered the balance of textuality, and gave rise to a renewed interest in the academic level towards the issues of orthographic change, standardisation of language and identity construction (Taraphdar and Dhar, “Mapping”, 395). Scholarly interest started paying attention to how the innovation of new scripts facilitated the growth of education, network of publications, and canon formation (Mandi). The literature discussion that was developing in the areas of the Jharkhand or West Bengal, where the tribal status was becoming more demanded, was bound to the issues of autonomy and self-representation of cultures (Ahmed 106). It is in this sense that Ol Chiki script became perceived not only as a technological achievement but also as a form of epistemic salvation - as an empowering medium according to which the community of Santali speakers could manifest its historical awareness and literary agency (Mahapatra and Sarangi 2291).

Nevertheless, over the past few decades, the field became even larger as Indigenous studies, subaltern historiography, and postcolonial literary theory was also incorporated (Choksi 104). It has been followed in the development of Santali literary genres, which started with ritualistic and mythological, up to contemporary poetry, drama, and prose fiction handling land alienation, migration, climate degradation and political marginalization (Chakraborty 14). Recent interpretations have been influenced by the area of environmental humanities in its relation to the portrayal of land and forest as a disputed space when it comes to extractive development (Behera and Dash 57). This line of study has created awareness of



the adaptive strength of the Santali literary culture giving the indication that the cosmological themes that are inherited by the people have been reborn in the present socio-political environment.

Despite these accomplishments, literature remains disjointed. The study of linguistics, recording of folklore, script and the study of modern literature are usually run simultaneously in parallel with each other but not in dialogue with the other (Mahana 141). Few studies have tried to reconstruct, in a cohering historical order, oral tradition, colonial intervention, script reform and modern literary production through a key phased reconstruction (Saren, “The Role of Santal”, 471). Moreover, the discourses of the theory are frequently transferred without much interaction with the indigenous aesthetical categories and the epistemological frameworks (Ghosh and Rath 92). This disintegration, therefore, confirms the necessity of a systematic and integrative strategy that puts Santali literature in the ever-fluid socio-political reality and demonstrates its conceptual wholeness. To this gap, to fill at least, the present study intends to go, in order to offer a more historically yet theoretically-sensitive account of the Santali literary development.

### **3.1. Ethnoscience: Conceptual Orientation**

Ethnoscience is the concept that has appeared as a consequence of ethnocentrism; it meant that everything was known by Europeans. This is based on the ethnoscience concepts to decode the Santali literary tradition as culturally mediated system of knowledge and not a simple combination of isolated oral texts. Ethnoscience is a branch of cognitive anthropology that also deals with how cultural groups classify their world by making plants, animals, landscapes, kinship, and spiritual powers group into coherent cognitive groups. It assumes that these structures of classification are consistent and intellectually vigorous, even where they are off the centre of epistemology.

This technique enables the decoding of oral tales, ritual songs and seasonal tunes in the context of Santali literary culture as cognitive maps. The creation myths trace out intricate cosmologies whereby human beings, ancestral figures and natural forces exist in a relational ontology. Knowledge of natural processes, moral obligations and social reciprocity is



encoded in the practice of farming in the use of songs. These cultural practices can be regarded as such that, besides being an aesthetic performance, they can also be viewed as a storehouse of eco-knowledge and social control. By emphasising the value of indigenous epistemology, the ethno-scientific approach brings out straight the goal of the research to recreate the development of the Santali literary culture on the basis of its own conceptual system as opposed to the external literary standards.

#### **4.2 Culture, Perception and Environment**

Culture, perception and environment are issues that are supposed to be studied; therefore, they will not be covered in this article. The Santali literature practice cannot be dissociated off the environment and social structures that it was practiced. The Santhal cosmology is knowledgeable based on their experience of forested land, the agricultural cycles and the geographies of the sacred by which they organize their means of subsistence as well as their visualization of the world. The rhythmic festivals Sohrai and Karam represent the sites of staging the time of nature, time of the sacred and time of social being are intertwined.

The type of analysis that is being performed within the present paper is associated with the studies of cultural ecology and phenomenological searches that view perception as the process mediated by culture. The concept of land as a notion in Santali mind has a different understanding in that it can be understood as a territory that experiences spiritual and historical meaning as opposed to a commodified resource. The notion of land conceived in this special manner gets of utmost importance when one is researching the contemporary Santali poetry and Santali fiction that relates to the population in the area, the mining sector, and the land alienation in a state such as Jharkhand and West Bengal.

#### **4.3 Santhal Community, Santhal Identity and Literary Self-Articulation**

Oral tradition to written literature is not merely a matter of the technical transfer of this material, but it is also a pointer of a change in the form of collective identity. Directly, the work of Raghunath Murmu in creating the Ol Chiki script in 1925 was more of an



orthographic development, but it was a cultural intervention as well, which transformed the means of representation. Formal education, publication networks and the creation of a modern literary field became possible due to the standardization of the script. It reinforced at the same time linguistic self-consciousness at a time when Santali speakers were struggling to face marginalization, in dominant linguistic and political structures.

The Santhal people, which is situated geographically in eastern India that includes Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar and Assam, have been engaged in cultural assertion and political bargaining. This paper interprets Santali literature as a discursive energy in which the historical experience, the memory of the culture and the need to be heard are expressed according to the Indigenous literary theory and the subaltern historiography. The approach provides an integrated source of explanations of the intricate process of Santali literary practice in its oral, reformist and modern representations due to its combination of ethno-science with cultural ecology, and identity-based analysis. The Santhal literary expressions share relationship with mainstream Indian literatures just the way autoethnographic writings did for the colonial works as “the whole idea of auto-ethnographic writings problematized the Orientalist paradigm that always sought to represent the colonized on their behalf silencing their own voices’ (Chatterjee 5). The Santals wanted to register the voices of their own the way the colonised did for the representations by the colonisers.

## 5. Sources

The research is primarily based on secondary resources which include published Santali poetry, drama, prose, translated oral stories, missionary linguistic research, and present-day scholarly studies. The main sources on the Ol Chiki script and its introduction by Raghunath Murmu are also addressed to be able to understand how the reform in scripts influenced the literary production. The scholarly literature and the policy discourses that have been brought about by the localities of Jharkhand and West Bengal are required in elucidating the socio-political background, particularly, regarding the aspect of language-recognition. The research therefore makes sure that assessments of claims held during interpretation are settled on dependable sources.



## 6. Results

### 6.1 Santali Literature Interpretative Conceptions of Environment

This close discussion of the text, both oral and written will enable one to comprehend that the concept of the environment that is introduced in the Santali writings is not a locale but a very dynamic cultural space that is organized along cosmological, ritual, and collective memory lines. The topography of the initial oral traditions of the genesis mythology and the rhythmic melodies in an oral tradition has been assimilated into a narrative logic. The hills, forests, rivers and the agricultural lands bear some spiritual moral agency and are not inert environments they constitute a part of relational ontology. These texts allude to the fact that the ecological perception has become an organizing principle in the Santali expressive culture. The politicization of the same landscape is an increasingly common feature in the later written works, especially in the poetry and prose of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The landscape of the land becomes a battlefield with the visualization of the sacred space because of industrialization, mining and displacement.

**Table 1: Intergenerational Variations in Environmental Representation in Santali Literature**

<b>Environmental Dimension</b>	<b>Oral Tradition (Earlier Generation)</b>	<b>Transitional / Reform Period</b>	<b>Contemporary Written Literature</b>
<b>Land</b>	Sacred ancestral territory; ritually invoked; collective stewardship emphasized	Emergence of land as socio-political space; awareness of legal ownership and reform	Land depicted as contested resource; themes of displacement, mining, and resistance



<b>Forest / Plant Life</b>	Forest as spiritual habitat and mythic origin space; source of subsistence	Gradual acknowledgment of ecological pressure; symbolic continuity maintained	Forest portrayed as endangered landscape; memory of loss and ecological critique prominent
<b>Water Resources</b>	Rivers and rain symbolizing fertility, renewal, and ritual purity	Recognition of changing agricultural patterns; subtle concern for scarcity	Water framed within narratives of pollution, scarcity, and environmental vulnerability
<b>Animal Life</b>	Animals integrated within cosmological order; moral and symbolic agency	Coexistence theme continues; increasing anthropocentric references	Concern for habitat destruction; symbolic use of animals to critique ecological imbalance
<b>Human–Environment Relationship</b>	Reciprocal, cyclical, spiritually mediated	Transition from ritual harmony to socio-economic negotiation	Relational ethics reframed as ecological resistance and cultural assertion
<b>Narrative Tone</b>	Affirmative, cyclical, cosmologically stable	Reflective, transitional, adaptive	Critical, politically aware, environmentally anxious

## 6.2 Perceptual Hierarchies and environmental ordering

The study also shows that there exists a structured stratification of the literary expression of the environmental resources. This hierarchy does not depend on the extraction



value, but on centrality to rituals and cosmology place. The lowest one is land which is then followed with forests and vegetation, water resources and animal species all of which are interrelated in a web. This classification is an outcome of native classification system which adheres to the ethno-scientific principles as stipulated in the theoretical framework. These resources are hardly discrete in literary expression but are usually placed in a trap of reciprocity, obligation and mediation by the use of spirituality.

### **6.2.1. Land Family and Politics Land**

The land is the most corpus ingredient with a symbolic depth. In oral tradition, land is proclaimed by the ancestors as a heritage, and as geography of the sacred, sometimes as a person. Agrarian songs identify the community with the land in an interdependent manner, and they are concerned much on the moral ethics of stewardship. In the modern Santali literature and especially in that which has been captured in literature that has been produced in areas of mineral resource potential like Jharkhand and West Bengal, land has been re-defined in a displacement, resistance way. The sources of displacement that are discussed in stories, poems and short stories are mining, marginalization and degradation of the environment.

### **6.2.2. Plant and Forest Worlds: Memory and Loss.**

Forests in the Santali literature serve two distinct purposes: it is a source of life and on the other it is the universe of cosmos, where the spirits and the ancestors live. The community and the source of power that accompanies rituals are commonly in a forested environment as reflected in oral literature. The woods are a mother and a benefactress. The literature which we possess today does not lose this multiple quality, but acquires a new note of deforestation and degradation. The forest is remembered in the sense of abundance and contrasted to the evident decay and the consequence is a temporal consciousness having ecological memory as a criticism. The forest cuts through a country of mythic continuum to endangered tradition displaying the process of change in relation to the environment.



### **6.2.3. The Water Cyclical Regeneration and the Vulnerability**

The connotation of renewal, fertility and regeneration has always been the connotation of the symbolism of water adopted by the Santali literature. The ritual songs depicting the images of the rivers and the rain represent the agricultural cycles as the means of continuity and divine acceptance. This imagery becomes tricky with the newer writings in the Santali literature though they put emphasis on the severity of scarcity, pollution and disruption. The symbolic register is maintained, but the affective one is changed to the one of anxiety and vulnerability.

### **6.2.4. Animal Life and Relational Ethics**

Animals of the Santali folk stories and oral tales were not depicted as submission animals. They tend to have agency, speech and moral sense. These features of the stories signify a measure of an egalitarian ecological world-view in which human and non-human life is simultaneously sharing the same cosmological space. These classic motifs are contrasted with the motifs of wildlife degradation and destruction of habitats, which are a part of modern practice of literature. The fact that the traditional ethics of relations and the contemporary ecological awareness exist simultaneously testifies that the forms of literature can be plastic and permissible enough to permit continuity and transformation.

### **6.3 Intergenerational Differences in perception of the environment**

The traditional oral sources are compared to the modern written sources by the authors and it is possible to notice that differences are identifiable between the generations. The classical literature leans towards the circle harmony and rite validation and represents natural order as stable and spiritually regulated. A greater awareness of the environment is more discontinued in the more educated group of writers, with migration and exposure to the industrial economies. They would rather talk about uncertainty, displacement and precarity in their writings.



**Table 2: Intergenerational Variations in the Literary Perception of Environmental Change in Santali Texts**

<b>Dimension of Environmental Change</b>	<b>Oral Tradition (Earlier Generation)</b>	<b>Transitional / Reform Period</b>	<b>Contemporary Written Literature</b>
<b>Perception of Ecological Stability</b>	Environment viewed as cyclical and spiritually regulated; change interpreted as part of ritual order	Emerging awareness of external disturbances; subtle narrative shifts	Environment portrayed as fragile and destabilized; emphasis on irreversible change
<b>Causes of Environmental Change</b>	Attributed to moral imbalance or ritual neglect	Recognition of social and economic influences	Explicit reference to industrialization, mining, displacement, and state policies
<b>Emotional Tone</b>	Trust in renewal and ancestral protection	Mixed tone—concern combined with adaptation	Anxiety, loss, protest, and resistance dominate
<b>Human–Nature Relationship</b>	Reciprocal and harmonious; humans embedded in ecological order	Gradual negotiation between tradition and modern pressures	Conflictual or defensive; literature frames environmental defense as identity assertion
<b>Symbolic Representation</b>	Natural elements symbolize fertility and continuity	Dual symbolism—continuity and subtle disruption	Imagery of erosion, fragmentation, and threatened heritage



<b>Narrative Function of Change</b>	Reinforces cosmological stability	Signals transition and cultural adaptation	Serves as critique of developmental paradigms and socio-political marginalization
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Table 2 below summarizes the generational transformation of environmental change as conceived in literature texts about Santali, on the comparative analysis of the various stages of environmental changes as discussed in this study. In conventional literary literature, the change of environment is coined in a cosmological conceptualization that envisages the cycle of renewal and spiritual authority whereby environmental turbulence is frequently linked with moral or spiritual imbalance. Conversely, the contemporary literature works theorize the concept of environmental change as a process of historical events of industrial extraction, land alienation and infrastructural development thereby transforming environmental disturbance as a metaphysical event into a socio-political reality and thereby initiates a new form of critical environmental consciousness, utilizing literary texts as a medium of expressing collective anxieties and resistance.

## 7. Discussion

These findings demonstrate that the process of the appearance of the Santali literature entails not only the process of the transfer of the oral form into the written one but is rather a process of the gradual movement of ecological consciousness and group identity. The archaic oral culture of myths, prayers and songs of agriculture brings nature, land, forest, water, and wildlife, in an ordered cosmic system, which is founded on the rules of reciprocity and moral responsibility. Elements of nature are not objects of commodity but are companions of relational ontology. It aligns with the ethnoscientific hypothesis according to which the research is conducted: Santali literature represents the system of indigenous knowledge that organizes ecological awareness with the help of classificatory logic.

A comparative study of generations, however, also makes it evident that there is a



considerable change in the expression of environmental change. Contemporary Santali literature, in particular literature produced in regions like Jharkhand and West Bengal, has transformed the sacred terrain into one that is typified by industrial mining, dispossession, and conservation destruction. Nevertheless, this transformation does not imply the cultural break. Rather, the existing symbolic frameworks especially the significance of ancestral territory are proactively reused to portray a feeling of criticism and opposition. The OI Chiki script was also formalized by Raghunath Murmu, a step that also contributed to this cause by making it easier to produce literature. Santali literature is thus brought out to be a literature that is not only a store of environmental memory but also a way of negotiating the contemporary environmental reality.

## 8. Conclusion

The historical contextualization and theoretically sophisticated analysis of the Santali literature development have been conducted in this study, and it has been revealed that the process of the formation of Santali literature is a consequence of the continuous integration of the indigenous epistemology with the evolving socio-political environment. This discussion explicitly proves that the oral traditions of the early era like myths, ritual songs, agrarian songs and the folktales are indeed organized systems of knowledge whereby, ecological elements are incorporated into a relational moral framework. The land, the forest, the water and animals are not passive backgrounds but are in fact dynamic elements of a cosmological system which orders social requirements and social memories. Using ethnoscientific and cultural-ecological methodology, it has been determined that Santali literature still has a consistent environmental worldview that pre-exists the period of its textualization and cannot be simplistically characterized as folklore.

But the transition to written and, in particular, with the introduction of the OI Chiki script by Raghunath Murmu, the emergence of new forms of self-expression in literature also became possible. The contemporary Santali literature particularly that which has come out of other regions like Jharkhand and West Bengal has reorganized the traditional ecological symbols in response to the industrialization, alienation of land and environmental



degradation. As opposed to signifying a transition, this signifies a continuity of adaptation as traditional ethical systems are used to criticize contemporary processes of dispossession. Santali literature, thus, is not only the cultural storehouse, but a progressive discourse of criticism that still holds on to the indigenous knowledge as it critically interacts with modern issues.



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