

Understanding Interrelationship of Man and Environment: Tribal Perspective

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Abstract

The interrelationship between humans and the environment is an increasingly significant topic, especially in the context of today's environmental crisis. Tribes, often considered the most closely connected to their natural surroundings, provide valuable insights into this relationship. This paper aims to explore the Santal tribal philosophy of the interrelationship between humans and the environment, focusing on the role of both living and non-living phenomena. Environmentalists often emphasize the importance of living entities, such as plants, animals, and ecosystems, in maintaining ecological balance. However, tribal cultures extend this understanding to include non-living phenomena like rocks, rivers, trees, and even the weather. Central to the tribal worldview is the belief in an unseen, supernatural force that binds all these elements together. This force is commonly known as Bonga by Santal tribe, this term is used in Santal tribal culture to refer to a spirit or power that governs the natural world. The tribal philosophy of the interrelationship between man and the environment highlights the importance of a holistic worldview that encompasses both living and non-living elements. The unseen supernatural power of Bonga reinforces the interconnectedness of all things, guiding tribal people to live in balance with the earth and to value the environment not just for its resources, but for its intrinsic spiritual significance.

Keywords: environment, interrelationship, interconnectedness, holistic, worldview.

Introduction

The term "environment" refers to the surroundings or conditions in which humans, animals, or plants live and function. It is the space where various phenomena, both living and non-living, interact with each other. The environment encompasses water, air, and land, and involves complex interrelationships between these elements, as well as with humans, other living organisms, and the natural world. To study the environment, one must draw upon insights from multiple disciplines. (Joshi, 2016) Understanding the interconnectedness between humans and the environment has become a crucial need today. This awareness is growing, partly due to the recognition of how Indigenous communities have historically maintained a balanced relationship with nature. In today's world, however, many people are focused on survival, prioritizing basic needs like food and shelter, while others concentrate on finances, health, or relationships. Despite these concerns, the connection between humans and nature remains, whether acknowledged consciously or not. Humans bear the responsibility of nurturing and protecting this relationship. Ethical principles guide our duties and responsibilities toward the earth's natural environment, as well as the animals and plants that share it with us. (Taylor, 2011)

Environment is caught up with many diseases due to the imbalance condition in the man and nature relationship. Hence, many plants and animals are getting extinct. Healing of these plants and animals can be achieved through changing how we value ecosystem and interact with nature. One must realize that the ecological crisis. One must, re-think about the crisis and understand that sustainable innovation is a matter of mindset and perspective where humans need to recognize that Nature is finite, living and intelligent. Everything in Nature is connected to everything. Professor (Lombardi, 1983) has argued that, though plants and animals may be considered to have inherent value, their worth is often viewed as secondary to that of humans. However, it is clear that humans are deeply dependent on plants and animals for survival, and their value cannot be underestimated. In fact, it should be acknowledged in a broader context, recognizing the essential role they play in our ecosystems. Therefore, the protection of plants and animals in our environment is crucial.

Our planet urgently needs us to take responsibility and address the damage we have caused through careless actions. From air pollution and plastic waste to toxic chemicals contaminating our water, there is much work to be done to restore balance to our ecosystems. It is essential that we take meaningful steps to clean up the messes we have created and work toward a healthier, more sustainable environment. Environmental justice (Correa, 2022) for one and all should be our core mission. Going by the statement of Peter Singer an Australian philosopher "... concern for the well-being of a child growing up in America would require that we teach him to read; concern for the well-being of pig may require no more than that we leave him alone with other pigs in a place where there is adequate food and room to run freely." (Singer, 1975), one can understand how environmental justice can be made with other living phenomena. Mahatma Gandhi said, "Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed." What Gandhi meant was that the nature earth has enough resources and means to meet the basic requirements of a man but it can't serve the endless greed of man. (Gandhi, 1869-1948) He reminds us point where one should know the limit for acquiring things from the environment. One should understand and reclaim our sacred relationship with Nature. Besides, it is insightful to reframe a new perspective that the earth as a living organism and humans are responsible to take care of ecosystems and species.

Environmental Education is holistic, Environmental education represents "an approach, a philosophy, a tool, and a profession" (Monroe M.C., 2007) It is lifelong learning process directed at creating responsible individuals who explore and identify environmental issues, engage in problem solving, and take action effectively to improve the environment. Education for sustainable development recognizes the interdependence of environmental, social and economic perspectives and the dependence of humanity on a healthy biosphere. (Irma Allen, Magnus Apelqvist, Per Bergstrom, Wolfgang Brunner, Iris Jane Mary Chimbodza, Lilian Chipatu, Dick Kachilonda, Caleb Mandikonza, Fanuel Manyinyire, Timothy Kamuzu Phiri and Shepherd Urenje., 2012) As a result, individuals gain a deeper awareness and understanding of environmental issues, equipping them with the skills to make informed and responsible decisions that contribute to addressing environmental challenges.

The indigenous people, such as the Santal tribe, have long maintained a holistic approach to the environment. The Santals, one of the largest tribal groups in India, are closely connected to the natural world. Tribal myths challenge the notion of human uniqueness, particularly in terms of origins. They are not unique even in the realm of knowledge. Primordial knowledge was passed down from birds and animals. The "priest" of all creatures, a figure born before humanity, embodies the cosmic intelligence that serves as the self-existent source of knowledge. Humans live on Earth alongside animals and spirits,

with the natural elements controlled by the spirit. These spirits, though invisible, are omnipresent and act as controllers, capable of being influenced by the priest (Mathur, 2001). The Santal understanding of this invisible control and its role in the environment can be further explored.

Santals and Environment

In the Santal worldview, all of nature is under the supervision of the supernatural being, *Bonga*. Consequently, human interactions with the natural world are centered around *Bonga*. According to Santal oral tradition, the people experienced a profound sense of loneliness in the vastness of nature. As they sought a place to settle, they expressed their feelings of displacement in songs that reflected their lost state. The songs convey the boundlessness of nature, which was both vast and intimidating. The verses also tell of the first male and female, Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi, who pondered their origins, questioning who created them. The creator, however, was beyond their understanding. Despite their loneliness, nature did not isolate them; instead, it became a source of interaction and sustenance. Through their relationship with nature, the Santals found comfort and support, and they grew deeply indebted to the natural world that provided for them in their uncertain existence.

Relation of Clan and Nature

The Santals, a people with a deep connection to nature, mastered the art of living and established kingship while residing in the kingdom of Chai-Champa Disom, a period regarded as a golden era for them. Their songs continue to reflect the splendor of the majestic fort from that time. Over time, the Santals organized themselves into twelve sub-clans, each emerging from their growing population and the variety of activities they engaged in while interacting with nature. These sub-clans are: Baskey, Bedea, Besra, Core, Hansdak, Hembrom, Kisku, Mardi, Murmu, Pauriya, Soren, and Tudu. The names of these clans are derived from various plant and animal species, as well as celestial bodies, reflecting the Santals' sacred relationship with their respective totems. Each clan holds a unique identity and is associated with specific talents and roles. The division into sub-clans is not a means of separation or exclusion but rather a way of organizing based on the different tasks and responsibilities performed by each group.

Man's Relationship with Different Phenomena

The Santals have a profound connection with animals, plants, birds, and celestial elements, which play a crucial role in their social structure and cultural identity. Each clan traces its origins and roles to these natural elements, as described below:

1. Hansdak

Symbol: Goose ("Hans") and water ("Dak").

Significance: The Hansdak clan claims descent from the eldest son of the first human pair, linking them to the primordial state of the world. The goose, a unique creature that has nests on land, swims in water, and flies in the air, symbolizes mastery over the elements—earth, water, and air.

Cultural Role: This clan holds the highest status, serving as advisors and embodying authority over the natural order.

2. Murmu

Symbol: Nilgai or antelope.

Significance: The antelope was the first animal hunted and sacrificed by the Santal ancestors. This con-

ction to hunting grounds the Murmu clan in traditions of sustenance and spirituality. As land animals, antelopes contrast with the water-associated geese of the Hansdak, reinforcing distinct identities and prohibiting intermarriage.

Cultural Role: Priests and spiritual leaders, the Murmu share a superior status alongside the Hansdak clan.

3. Kisku

Symbol: Kingfisher bird.

Significance: The Kisku clan traces its lineage to royalty, once ruling in a place called Champa. The kingfisher, known for its grace and precision, represents leadership and regality.

Cultural Role: Historically recognized as rulers and leaders, often referred to as “Kisku Rapaj.”

4. Hembrom

Symbol: Betel nut.

Significance: The ancestor of the Hembrom clan is believed to have been born under a betel nut tree. This association reflects strength, nobility, and truthfulness, akin to the hardness of the betel nut.

Cultural Role: Appointed as judges, Hembroms maintain social order and oversee legal matters.

5. Mardi

Symbol: Grass or weed.

Significance: The Mardi clan's connection to grass symbolizes simplicity and resourcefulness. As treasurers, they managed royal finances and expenditures.

Cultural Role: Responsible for safeguarding and allocating resources.

6. Soren

Symbol: Stars.

Significance: The celestial link to stars emphasizes vigilance and guardianship, reflecting the Soren clan's role in protecting the community.

Cultural Role: Soldiers and defenders, often referred to as “Soren-Sipahi.”

7. Tudu

Symbol: Owl.

Significance: The owl, a symbol of wisdom and nocturnal activity, aligns with the Tudu clan's passion for music and dance.

Cultural Role: Custodians of cultural traditions, known for their skills in performing arts.

8. Baskey

Symbol: Cooks and stale (sour) rice.

Significance: The Baskey clan is renowned for their cooking and trading skills. Their ritual offerings of stale rice to the gods prohibit them from consuming it themselves.

Cultural Role: Traders and providers of essential goods, crucial to the community's economy.

9. Besra

Symbol: Hawk.

Significance: The hawk symbolizes sharpness and skill, reflected in the Besra women's expertise as midwives.

Cultural Role: Providers of maternal care and health services.

10. Bedea

Symbol: Sheep.

Significance: The Bedea clan, though rare today, is linked to sheep, representing pastoral traditions and

simplicity.

Cultural Role: Historically associated with herding and pastoral activities.

11. Paurias and Chore

Symbols: Pigeons and lizards.

Significance: These clans' ancestors likely focused on hunting pigeons and lizards, reflecting adaptability and reliance on local fauna.

Cultural Role: Hunters, contributing to the community's sustenance through specific prey.

The Santals' symbolic relationships with nature not only define their social roles but also demonstrate their integrated worldview, where every element of life, earthly or celestial holds cultural and spiritual significance. Each clan's unique identity strengthens the harmony and balance within their society. (Peffer, 1984)

The division into clans among the Santals emerged as a result of different roles and functions within their society, as well as their interactions with nature. Over time, these functions led to the formation of various sub-clans, each of which adopted names derived from plants, animals, or natural elements. This naming system reflects the Santals' deep connection to the natural world and their totemic beliefs. The Santals maintain a sacred bond with their totemic species, which they regard as family members. As such, harming or consuming the totem is strictly forbidden. These totems are believed to exert a powerful influence on the habits and lives of the Santals. Killing a totem is seen as equivalent to killing a member of one's own family. The clan system plays a crucial role in safeguarding nature. Each clan is entrusted with the responsibility of protecting its respective totem species, whether animal or plant ensuring that the natural balance is preserved for future generations.

Animals, Plants and Medicine

Beyond their deep connection with animals and plants, the Santals gained foundational knowledge of medicine through keen observation of wildlife behavior. They studied how animals like lizards and mongooses reacted to injuries or venomous bites. For instance, when stung by scorpions or bitten by snakes, these creatures would rub against specific plants or consume parts of them to recover. The Santals noted the effectiveness of these plants and adapted them as remedies for human ailments. Similarly, they learned antidotes for cobra bites by observing monkeys treating their young. The Santals have a rich repertoire of natural remedies derived from plants and animals. Some examples include:

For headaches: The blood of a garden lizard is smeared on the forehead.

For a cow's sore from ploughing: Iguana fat is applied to the affected area.

For muscular or arthritic pain: Pig fat is used as a massage oil.

For high fever: Bear fur is tied around the body as an amulet for relief.

These practices reflect the Santals' intimate understanding of nature's healing properties. They continue to prepare various medicines from plants and animals, showcasing their resourcefulness and reliance on traditional knowledge. (P.O.Bodding, 1927)

Sound and Santals

The Santals trace the origin of *Bonga* to an ancient event involving Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi, the first human beings in their tradition. One day, they threw a stone into a pond, and the resulting sound, "Bung," caught their attention. Although they could perceive and recognize the sound, they found it impossible to capture or hold onto it, it disappeared as quickly as it came. From this experience, they

concluded that *Bonga* exists within sound, giving it a transient yet profound quality. Sound, they realized, comes and goes but carries meaningful messages, fostering a deeper connection between humans and nature. (Arun Pathak, 1993) The Santals, with their profound cultural ethos, hold a deep reverence for sound, encapsulated in the concept of *Bonga*. This belief in the sanctity of sound has shaped their language into a structure imbued with ethics and respect.

Long ago, their ancestors contemplated the mysteries of sound. Seven wise men gathered to seek answers to profound questions: From where does sound originate? Where does it go? Does it leave any imprint or trace of identification? To uncover these truths, they experimented. They coated the surface of an ancient drum with a paste made from the sap of seven different leaves. While six of the wise men observed, the seventh struck the drum with his palm. The drum resonated with a sound and, upon inspection, revealed an imprint left behind on its surface. From this simple yet profound act, the wise men deduced that every sound leaves a mark, an imprint. Inspired by this realization, they began to shape these imprints into forms, creating a medium of expression. Thus, the foundation of their script was born initially and called as khonds.

Nature, Festivals and *Bonga*

Festivals serve as vital reminders for humanity, emphasizing the importance of fulfilling one's duties toward both humankind and nature. Among the Santals, festivals carry profound meaning only when their associated duties are performed diligently. For the Santals, festivals are not mere celebrations; they are expressions of gratitude and joy linked to sowing, harvesting, and the rhythms of nature.

Deeply connected to their environment, the Santals experience the changing seasons and articulate this relationship through their songs and traditions. Human existence, like nature, is dynamic, requiring constant interaction with the cycles of life. Thus, the Santals observe a cycle of festivals throughout the year, each tied to specific agricultural and natural events.

The Eight Major Santal Festivals

Baha Festival (February–March): Celebrated at the beginning of spring, this festival marks the end of the Santal agricultural year and the start of a new one. It coincides with the blossoming of trees, symbolizing renewal and growth.

Erok' Sim (June–July): This festival is observed during the sowing of paddy seeds, signaling hope for a fruitful planting season.

Hariar Sim: Held a few days after Erok' Sim, this festival celebrates the sprouting and early growth of the sown seeds, fostering optimism for a good harvest.

Iri Gundli-Nawai and Jantar (August–September and November–December) These are the primary harvesting festivals. Iri Gundli-Nawai celebrated for the harvesting of millet (iri and gundli) during August–September. Jantar observed in November–December, it marks the harvesting of paddy, a staple crop.

Sohrae (December–January): The most significant harvest festival, Sohrae spans an entire week. Each day of this festival holds unique significance, reflecting the Santals' connection to their agricultural cycle and community.

Magh-Sim (January–February): This festival symbolizes the Santals' care for both sustenance and shelter. It coincides with the maturation of Sauri (thatching grass), which is used to repair and build

homes. The festival embodies gratitude to Mother Nature for providing both food and materials for shelter.

A Year-Round Cycle

The Santals' festivals not only align with the natural calendar but also represent their enduring relationship with the environment. Each festival is a harmonious blend of duty, gratitude, and joy, underscoring the dynamic connection between humans and nature. Through these celebrations, the Santals honor the cycles of life and the sustenance provided by the Earth. (Culshaw, 2004) The Santals' festivals reflect a deep connection with *Bonga*, their spiritual presence, and emphasize a harmonious relationship with nature. *Bonga* serves as a guide, helping them interpret the changes in their environment and adapt their activities accordingly. This understanding fosters a sustainable lifestyle, where they utilize natural resources responsibly without causing harm. Their practices underscore humanity's dependence on nature, promoting coexistence and respect for the natural world, essential for survival. Such traditions highlight the cultural wisdom embedded in their way of life, emphasizing balance and sustainability.

Bonga World-View

The word *Bonga* originates from the Santali term *bange*, meaning "cannot," signifying the invisible and inexplicable force or power behind all phenomena. It represents the mysterious essence that governs and influences the natural world, embodying the unseen energy that connects the Santals to the rhythms of nature and life. This concept reflects their worldview, where the spiritual and material realms are intricately intertwined, fostering reverence for the mysteries of existence and the forces shaping their environment. (Hembrom, 1996) The Santals' concept of *Bonga* represents a profound spiritual philosophy shaped by their intimate interaction with nature. Rooted in the term *bange*, meaning "cannot," *Bonga* embodies the unseen, mysterious force behind every phenomenon. This belief arose as a way to make sense of challenges encountered in nature, what lay beyond human understanding was attributed to *Bonga*. The key aspect of *Bongaism* are:

1. **Transcendence:** *Bonga* signifies something beyond human reasoning and comprehension.
2. **Inherent Presence:** It is not the phenomenon itself but an intrinsic force within every phenomenon.
3. **Intangible and Formless:** *Bonga* cannot be captured in images, territory, or form; it transcends physical representation.
4. **Subjective Experience:** Its presence is individually acknowledged and experienced, without reliance on idols, temples, or rituals.
5. **Founderless Belief System:** *Bonga* is not tied to an official founder or formalized religious structure; it emerged organically from human experience.
6. **Unity in Diversity:** The shared conviction in *Bonga* fosters a collective worldview among the Santals, particularly in their relationship with nature.

T. Hembrom, a scholar, highlights this uniqueness by observing that Santals are non-idol worshippers. Their religion lacks temples, images, holy books, or structured worship. Instead, their faith in *Bonga* is evident in their festivals and creation narratives, illustrating a spiritual connection that is personal, communal, and deeply tied to the rhythms of life and nature.

Significance of *Bongaism*:

This belief system reflects a profound respect for the mysteries of existence and a harmonious way of life rooted in nature. It emphasizes that there is something beyond human capacity to control or understand, encouraging humility and reverence for the forces governing the natural world. The formlessness of *Bonga* and its inherent presence in all things highlight the Santals' intuitive understanding of interconnectedness and the sacredness of life.

Presence of *Bonga* in Every Phenomenon

The Santal creation narrative offers a rich and profound perspective on the interconnectedness of living and non-living phenomena through the concept of Bange Dareyan *Bonga*, or "the unseen power." This worldview implies that every phenomenon, whether animate or inanimate, possesses a unique essence attributed to the presence of *Bonga*, which imbues the universe with spiritual significance.

The Santals' belief aligns with and expands upon anthropological concepts like Edward Burnett Tylor's notion of animism, where every living entity is seen as distinct and animated by a spiritual force. However, the Santal perspective takes this further by asserting that non-living phenomena also share this uniqueness and spiritual essence. This extension challenges the traditional dichotomy of living versus non-living by suggesting a fundamental unity based on the presence of *Bonga*.

The analogy of the human body as a composition of various material parts highlights a parallel between living beings and material objects. Both are described as aggregates of material elements, each unique in their composition and imbued with their own *Bonga*. This universal animism recognizing the presence of innumerable *Bongas* in all phenomena suggests a worldview in which the sacred is omnipresent, and every aspect of the material world holds intrinsic value and individuality.

This perspective encourages a holistic and integrative understanding of existence, where distinctions between life and matter dissolve in the face of an underlying, unifying spiritual essence. It resonates with ecological and philosophical ideas that emphasize interconnectedness and the intrinsic value of all forms of existence. (Evans-Pritchard, 1965)

Order of Phenomena by *Bonga*

The Santal worldview presents a deeply interconnected and purposeful vision of existence, where *Bonga* serves as the fundamental organizing principle of the universe. According to this perspective, nature did not spontaneously arise; instead, it existed prior to human life and was deliberately arranged by *Bonga* to support human survival and flourishing.

The Concept of Order and Interdependence

The Santals perceive the universe as a "woven web" of interdependence, where every phenomenon is intricately linked. This web represents the harmonious positioning and synchronization of natural elements heat, water, earth, and more into conditions conducive to human survival. The vulnerability of humans to raw elements highlights the necessity of these adaptable conditions, emphasizing the role of *Bonga* as the force that orchestrates and sustains this delicate balance.

***Bonga* as the Sustainer**

The notion that the woven web of interdependence cannot exist in a vacuum underscores the Santals' belief in a transcendent force. For them, *Bonga* is not merely a creator but an ever-present supervisor,

ensuring that the interconnected phenomena remain in harmony. This belief system acknowledges the underlying unity and purpose within the natural order, attributing its stability and continuity to the guiding presence of *Bonga*.

Implications of Santal Belief

The Santal worldview has profound philosophical and ecological implications as:

Holistic Vision: By recognizing the interdependence of all phenomena, the Santals promote a holistic understanding of existence, where humans are not separate from but deeply embedded within nature.

Sacred Interconnection: The belief in *Bonga* as the sustaining force imbues the natural world with sacredness, fostering reverence for all aspects of the environment.

Ecological Balance: The emphasis on harmony and adaptability reflects an early ecological awareness, encouraging the preservation of the conditions necessary for life.

In essence, the Santal creation narrative provides a framework where the sacred and material, human and non-human, living and non-living are all interwoven into a unified whole, with *Bonga* as the eternal thread binding them together. This perspective underscores the value of balance, respect, and interdependence in the natural world.

Conclusion

Man and nature should not be viewed as separate phenomena, but rather they share commonalities (Seymour, 2016). This commonality Santal accepts as *Bonga* base. The commonalities between humans and nature gives way to understand on several levels:

- **Material Basis:** Both humans and natural phenomena are composed of the same material elements, reflecting a shared physical foundation.
- **Dependence:** Humanity depends on nature for survival, drawing on resources like air, water, and food, while nature benefits from human care and stewardship.
- **Spiritual Connection:** Many traditions, including the Santal worldview, recognize a unifying spiritual essence that binds humans and nature. For the Santals, this essence is *Bonga*, the unseen power present in all phenomena.

Santal worldview foster an implications of a unified perspective. Viewing humans and nature as interconnected has significant implications for how we relate to the environment:

- **Mutual Respect:** Recognizing shared commonalities fosters a sense of respect and care for the natural world, as harming nature ultimately harms humanity.
- **Responsibility:** Acknowledging our dependence on nature highlights the need for responsible actions that sustain ecological balance.
- **Harmony:** Seeing ourselves as part of a larger whole encourages attitudes and behaviors that align with nature's rhythms, promoting harmony rather than exploitation.

This integrated view serves as a reminder that humanity's fate is inseparable from that of the natural world. By embracing commonalities rather than focusing on divisions, we can cultivate a worldview rooted in respect, sustainability, and harmony with the environment. This article also describes the Santals' philosophy of reverence and interconnectedness through their belief in *Bonga*, a spiritual presence that underpins all existence. Here's a summary of the key ideas: *Bonga* as the foundation of existence, the Santals view *Bonga* as the unseen, omnipresent force that forms the basis of all phenomena, both living and non-living. This belief cultivates a sense of respect for all aspects of the

natural world. Respect through presence and understanding, humans generally show admiration for what is tangible or directly beneficial, but the Santals' respect for *Bonga* arises from the spiritual understanding and experience of its presence in all phenomena, transcending physical interaction. Open-Air Worship, due to the difficulty of worshipping every individual entity, the Santals practice open-air worship, which symbolizes a holistic acknowledgment of *Bonga's* presence in nature rather than focusing on specific forms. Encouraging a broader perspective, this worldview encourages humans to appreciate the interconnectedness of existence and develop a deep admiration and respect for all beings by recognizing their shared foundation in *Bonga*. This perspective not only reflects the Santal culture's spiritual depth but also serves as a profound reminder of the importance of harmony with nature.

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