

Banam

SANTHAL FOLKLORE AND THE BANAM





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Published by:

Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre

Kolkata

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Design, Layout & Printed in India by:

The Cybernetics

57 Rash Behari Avenue, Kolkata 700 026

Price: Rs.250





Music and dance are an integral part of the life of the *Santhal* community. *Santhals* are born dancers. Celebrations in the *Santhal* community are always accompanied by singing and dancing. There are special songs and dances for different occasions like the sowing of seeds, harvesting, weddings, the birth of children and, even, the death of a member of the community. The *Santhals* live in communion with nature and this attitude towards their ecology forms an integral part of their peaceful and meaningful existence. The *Santhals*, as a community, are therefore seen in the context of their environment and ecology and their strong belief in the powers of the supernatural world. The music is always created by using a range of indigenous musical instruments like the *Tirio* (a bamboo flute with seven holes), *Tumdak*, *Tamak*, *Junko* and *Singha*. One of the most interesting musical instruments is the *Banam*, a popular accompaniment during all festivities, particularly those associated with the fertility of the soil and harvesting. It is a kind of a folk fiddle and is seen in eastern and north eastern India and in Bangladesh. Though the instrument has been classified as *Tendor Banam*, *Dhodro Banam*, *Huka Banam* and several other names, the classification is based more on the ornamentation of the instrument rather than its structure. Each instrument bears the artistic vision of its maker and hence a wide variety of *Banams* can be seen.

The religion of the *Santhals* is *Sari Dhorom*. The community does not have any temples of their own and they do not worship idols. In *Santhali* language the Sal tree is *Sarjom* and the great Sal tree which is the embodiment of the great creator *Thakur* is called *Sari Sorjom* (*Sari* meaning “Truth”). The place under the *Sal* tree is the *Jaherthan* or “holy grove”, the abode of the deities. Every *Santhal* village is *Jaherthan*-based. The gods and goddesses who are worshipped here include





Marangburu, Jaher Era, Dharom Gosain, Mare-Ko and Turui-Ko. The *Jaherthan* is managed by a five member managing committee headed by the *Manjhi*. The *Nayake* or priest performs the elaborate system of invoking the blessings of the gods and spirits and particularly of *Jaher Era* or Mother Earth. The invocations are sacred and, like all sacred chants, there are certain restrictions regarding their chanting. The village priest alone can chant the invocation to Mother Earth at the time of sowing the seeds. Animal sacrifices are made to appease the gods and goddesses. Religion is not only an important part of *Santhali* culture but also plays an equally important social role.

Every facet of *Santhal* life is characterized by the belief in and the worship of *Bongas* or spirits. In the happenings and incidents which are beyond his comprehension, the *Santhal* perceives the hand of the supernatural. Fear has him in obeisance which takes the form of offerings and rituals. The *Santhals* believe that they are surrounded by a world of invisible *Bongas* and they have an intimate relationship with these supernatural beings. The spirits reside in their houses, village, forests

and mountains and the *Santhali* people like many other tribal communities are totally governed by the diktats of the supernatural world. The *Bongas* are believed to exercise power over the contingencies of nature. *Santhals* believe in these supernatural spirits and the ways of entering into relationships with them constitutes their religion.





The *Bintis* of the *Santhals* are orally transmitted traditional narrations on life, creation and settlement. *Jomsim Binti* describes the creation of the universe and the first man and woman. *Thakur*, the Supreme God, and his wife, *Thakurain*, lived in the heavens. One day, while bathing, *Thakurain* created a drake (*Hans*) and a duck (*Hansil*), from her collar grime. *Thakur* breathed life into them and they flew away. Time passed and *Hansil* laid two eggs on a lotus leaf, from which two human children



were born – they were the first man, *Pilchu Haram*, and the first woman, *Pilchu Burhi*. When the lotus leaf started sinking under the weight of the human children, *Hans* and *Hansil* carried them on their backs and kept flying in the sky for twelve years. They then alighted on the newly created earth. With the passage of time, the progeny of *Pilchu Haram* and *Pilchu Burhi* kept growing.

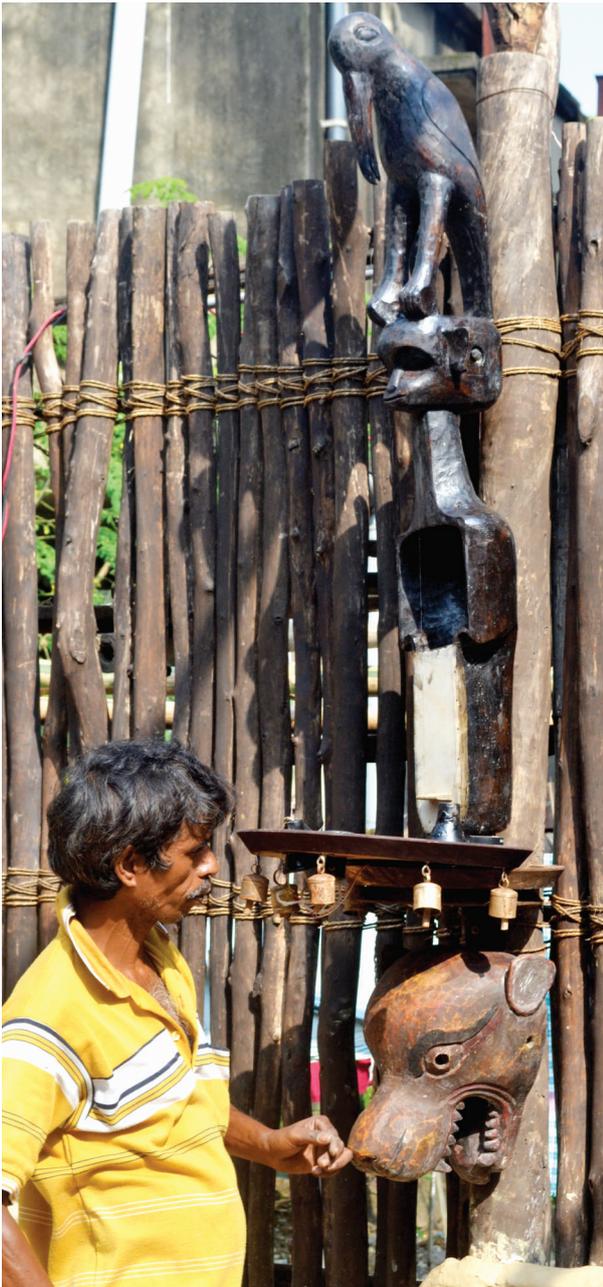
The *Karam Binti* highlights the qualities of patience, devotion, sincerity and diligence -- attributes that every *Santhal* must possess to lead a fruitful life. It emphasizes the importance of internal discipline for the community in relation to natural surroundings. *Karamu* and *Dharamu* were twin brothers who undertook an arduous journey across the seas and rivers in search of *Karam Gosain*, the deity of activities and

wealth, who had left the community and gone far away. When they eventually found her she refused to return with them. So they carried her back on their shoulders. The story emphasizes the significance of sincerity and devotion in overcoming all misery and obstacles. The *Karma* Festival is celebrated by the community with much gaiety after the completion of the rituals connected with it. The ritualistic ceremony starts from the house of the headman or priest, where the whole village assembles. Two small boys are selected to represent *Karamu* and *Dharamu*. Unmarried girls, signifying purity, dance in the courtyard. Two girls are selected who carry pitchers of water and join the procession which moves to the outskirts of the village in search of a *Karma* tree. Rituals are performed at the base of the selected tree to propitiate and appease the goddess.



As a part of the rituals, twigs of the tree are tied together with thread, a representation of the strong bond between the inseparable twins. Two branches are broken and handed over to the boys who lead the procession back to the village. The girls carry the pitchers, symbolizing goddess *Karma Gosain*, and follow the boys in the procession. The

procession is welcomed back with the villagers washing the feet of the priest, the two boys and the two girls. The branches which were ceremonially brought back are planted and worshipped. A sacrificial goat is offered to appease the goddess, so that she blesses the community with prosperity, peace and happiness.



Sohrai, a harvest festival, is the most sacred celebration of the *Santhal* tribe. When the Supreme God blessed the *Santhal* people with cattle, He told them to respect the cow as a mother and the bull as a father, because the cow provides milk and the bull works hard to support agriculture. *Thakur* became annoyed when he saw that the cattle were being used and every benefit taken from them, but they were not being cared for. He decided to take the cattle back. *Thakurain* pleaded with him as she realized that the *Santhals* were totally dependent on their cattle and would not be able to survive without them. *Marangburu*, on instructions from *Thakurain*, directed the community to make amends. This was how the three-day *Sohrai* festival started. On the first day, the animals are washed and smeared with oil, and vermilion is applied on their foreheads. The festival is organized in an open area and not in the *Jaerthanh*. The priest draws rectangular compartments side by side on the ground. Rice powder and vermilion is placed in each of the compartments. A hen's egg is placed in one of the compartments and a fowl is sacrificed as a part of the rituals to ensure the healthy life of the village cattle. After the priest completes the chanting of the invocations, the cattle are brought into the field. The cow which treads on and breaks the



egg is the auspicious one and its owner will be blessed with good fortune all through the year. On the second day of the festival all villagers offer prayers in their cowsheds. On the last day, poles are set up in the village and a bundle of straw is tied to the top of the pole. A bull, annointed with oils, painted with vermillion and decorated with flowers, is tied to the pole. Then the villagers start drumming, dancing and screaming, and the frightened animal begins to jump. The skin of a dead animal is also shown to the bull to enrage it further. After the rituals are

completed it is time for merriment and feasting. The *Tundak*, *Tamak*, *Chorchori*, *Tirio*, *Kartal* and *Banam* are the musical instruments played.

The word *Banam* is derived from the *Santhali* words “*Bana*” and “*Am*”. “*Bana*” means “drawing towards oneself” and “*Am*” is “you” or “the self”. The *Banam*, therefore, is an instrument that “draws the best towards yourself.”

The legend surrounding the making of the first *Banam* is interesting and reflects the







simplicity of the people of the community. A long time ago there lived an old couple who had seven sons and a daughter. After the parents died, the siblings moved to the forest. The brothers went out every morning for hunting and the sister stayed at home, looking after the house and cooking the meals. One day while cutting a leafy green vegetable, *Sin Arak*, the girl cut her finger and a few drops of blood fell on the vegetables she was chopping. That evening, the brothers found the food delicious. On being questioned, the girl told her brothers what had happened and what could be the reason for the food tasting different. On hearing the story, the eldest brother thought to himself that if a few drops of his sister's blood could make the food so delicious, how much tastier her flesh would be. So he plotted to kill her and share her flesh with his brothers. One day he saw his sister climbing a tall tree. He immediately seized the opportunity and trapped her by spreading thorns all around the tree. The eldest brother then shot the first arrow at his sister and the other brothers followed. Only the youngest brother who loved his sister dearly was reluctant. The eldest brother threatened to kill the youngest brother if the latter did not obey his command. With the last arrow shot by the youngest brother the girl fell dead. The body was cut into seven pieces and each brother was given a piece. Everyone ate their share except the youngest, who took his share and went near a pond and wept bitterly. Seeing him so sad the fish and the crabs of the pond came out and sympathized with him. After hearing his story, they advised him not to eat the flesh, but to bury it inside a mound of

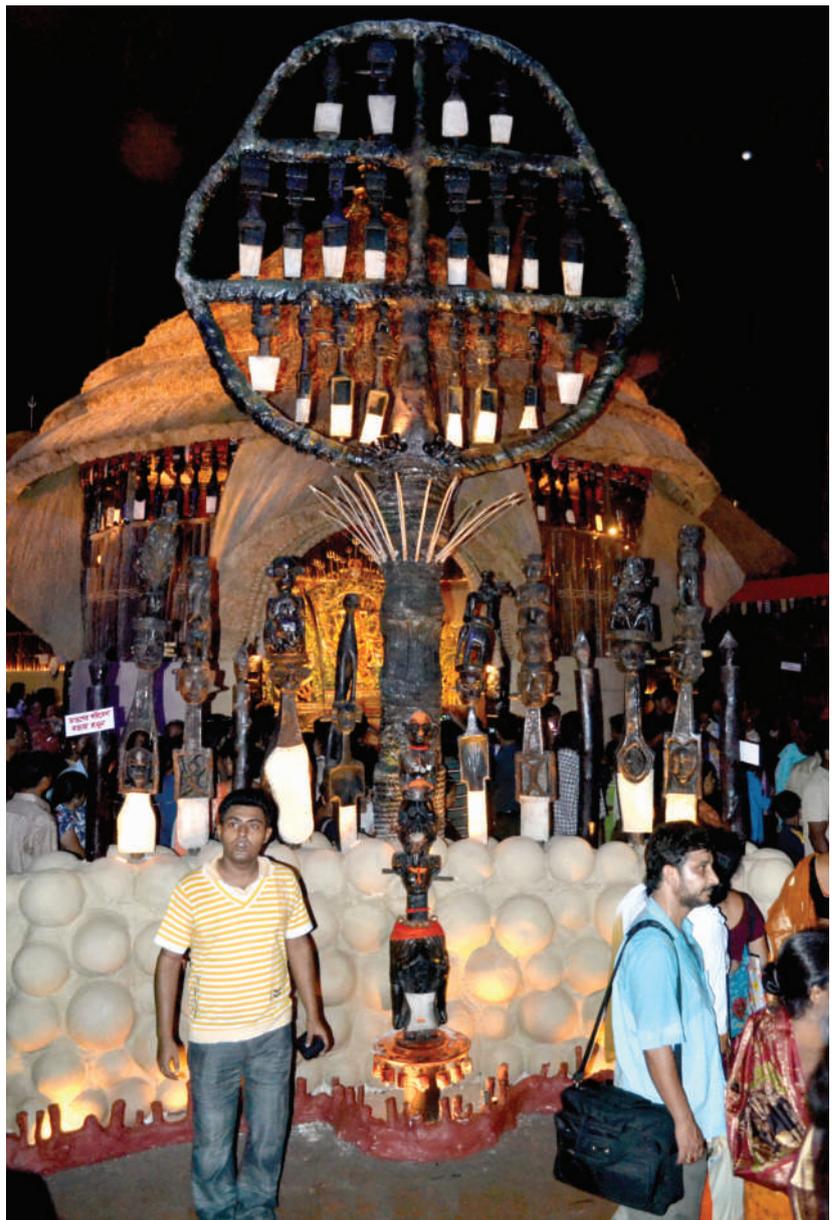


white ants. The boy did as he was told and after some time, a beautiful *Gulanj Baha* or *Gula Cin* tree with fragrant flowers grew on that spot. A *yogi* who often came by to pick flowers was surprised one day when he heard a melodious sound coming from the tree. The tree seemed to be speaking to him in a human voice. So he cut off a branch of the tree and used it to make the very first *Dhodro Banam*. When he started playing the instrument, a human-like voice emanated, and this is how the *Santhals* got their *Gulanj Baha* tree and the *Banam* from it. The myth shows the relationship of the *Santhals* with the environment or nature, out of which the instrument was born. If one delves deeper into the significance of the *Gulanj Baha* tree, one realizes that the myth is as real to the community as the tree and the famous musical instrument. The myth thus reflects the whole man-nature relationship.

The tree is never grown from a seed. There is a seed but it never germinates, perhaps signifying the presence of the young girl who was denied the opportunity to bloom and procreate. A section of the branch is broken and planted and it grows on its own. The branch has the force or *shakti* to send out roots deep into the ground and nourish itself. The branch possibly signifies the

part of the girl's flesh that was buried. The *Santhals* plant the tree near their house for its pretty, delicate, fragrant flowers which the women wear as ornaments.

The *Banam* is constructed out of a single wooden log of the *Gulanj Baha* tree, divided into four equal parts. The *Santhals* consider the *Banam* to be an extension of their physical self. The literal meaning of the word





Dhodro Banam is “hollow instrument”. The fact that they look upon it as a living being is apparent from the morphology of the instrument. The anatomy of the human form is conceived in the different parts of the instrument which is divided into the head, ears, neck, chest and stomach. Although the shape of the instrument always takes the female form, it is always played by a man. The construction begins with the shaping of the *Banam lac* or stomach which is oval in shape and hollowed out. The *Banam korum* or chest is almost the same size, hollow, but rectangular in shape. The *Banam hotok* or neck is narrow and hollowed from inside to facilitate gripping. The *Banam botok* or head is cubical in shape and its posterior part is hollowed out. A hole is made in the head to allow a string to pass through. The string is attached to a peg on the side of the head like an ear.

The *Santhals* have great faith in the magical powers of the *Banam* and believe that it acts as a medium between themselves and the supernatural beings with whose blessings and help they can achieve the impossible. They use the *Banam* to establish communication with their ancestors who they consider to be the benevolent *Bongas*. The malevolent *Bongas* are worshipped and appeased out of fear.

From a musical viewpoint the *Banam* is a simple instrument and most often has only one string. Its archaic appearance points to the fact that it could be a regressive form of the *Sarinda*. The shared characteristics of the *Sarinda* and the *Dhodro Banam* are the elongated body and rectangular peg box.





Two features of the *Dhodro Banam* are quite different from the *Sarinda*; the first being, the *Dhodro Banam* is played in a different manner, with the inner surface of the stretched fingers pressing the string. Secondly, the carvings on the top of the *Dhodro Banam* face the listener. The instrument is played with a bow, like a violin, but is held in a vertical position while playing, unlike a violin.

The *Santhals* believe that just as the human body is made up of the five basic elements, that is air, fire, water, earth and ether, so also is this instrument. In a *Banam*, the *bohok* or head is always on the top and represents space or the sky. The *hotok* or neck and *korum* or chest are connected with respiration and represent air. The *lac* or stomach is considered to be a fire bag representing hunger, and the womb is an organ of discharge. Thus, the *lac* represents both fire and water. The string, the most important part of the *Banam*, is considered to be the breath or *prana* of the instrument and the body. It is the life-giving force of the instrument and the living body and unites all the parts of the *Banam* and links together the five basic elements that make up life. The *Banam* as a whole represents the body or the earth – the earth being female is a symbol of fertility and a giver of life.

For the *Santhal* the *Dhodro Banam* is more than a simple musical instrument and this is evident from the elaborate artwork on the instruments. Figurative representations are frequently found in the stringed instruments of the eastern part of the country and the Himalayan region. The *Santhals* are partial to human figures. Animals appear only in juxtaposition with the human figures – that is, being ridden. Quite often the carving has a group of women in a row formation performing a dance dedicated to the fertility of the earth. Sometimes two figures, usually







female, presented realistically or in a simplified manner, decorate the top of the *Dhodro Banam*. In the *Banam*s belonging to the Christian *adivasis*, these two figures are re-interpreted and presented as a naked man and woman depicting Adam and Eve. An old *Dhodro Banam* belonging to the *Bastar* tribe has an engraving of a woman carrying a naked man, representing a bride and a bridegroom. Usually the *Dhol* (drum), *Nagara* (kettle-drum) and *Shehnai* (oboe), accompany the *Banam*, and sometimes the musicians playing the different instruments are depicted in the etchings on the *Banam*. Scenes from everyday life such as a family (comprising of a father, mother and child), horse and elephant riders, and farmers driving carts are also very popular. The drawings are embellished with ornamentations of lines, circular rosettes and scrolls. The sun symbol derived from the Sun God *Sing Bongo* is also frequently used. Newer versions of the *Banam* have further embellishments such as fish, birds and mammals. When the instrument is played, the carvings face the audience and bring alive the legends of *Santhali* folklore. Sometimes the most elaborately carved *Banam*s are the crudest from the musical point of view.

The *Santhals* welcome spring with the *Baha* Festival. The first day of the three-day festival is for purification. The community gather together at the *Jaherthan* and set up an abode for the deity where the priest offers prayers. *Sal* and *Mahua* flowers are collected and these are offered to Mother Earth. On the second day the community sing and dance at the *Jaherthan* while the priest performs various rituals in honour of the deity and their

ancestors. After this he visits the homes in the village, where, as per tradition, the women of the house wash his feet and he gives them *Sal* and *Mahua* flowers. The men tuck the flowers behind their ears and the women adorn their hair with them. The third day is for celebration when the community plays *Baha Baski* by throwing water on each other. Though *Baha* means “flower”, the festival is also a reflection of the spirit of a virgin maid.

According to well-known anthropologist and expert on Indian tribal art, Vernier Elvin, the *Santhals* believe that all beauty created by man is destined to disappear with him and so they usually bury or burn their musical instruments. However, this is not the general rule as there are several *Dhodro Banam*s in the possession of the community which have been played by several generations. Though the instrument looks ancient and worn, the patina appears fresh from constant use. Decorations have been added over the generations and this is evident from the etchings and their depth.

Since the *Santhals* consider the *Banam* to be an embodiment of themselves, the artefact becomes an object of reverence as well as worship – an inanimate object becomes animate for the community. The way a human being sings, so does this instrument. The way the soul keeps the body alive, so does this instrument.





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