

Marriage and Fertility Among the Santals

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RECENTLY a survey had been carried out among the Santals of Midnapur District, West Bengal from the Indian Statistical Institute. In accordance with an appropriate statistical design the survey covered a sample of 119 out of total 510 Santal families which were enlisted from *twenty-six* sample villages falling under the jurisdiction of *six* police stations (sampled) of Binpur, Jhargram, Dantan, Narayangarh, Kharagpur (local) and Keshiari of Midnapur, 1963. These police stations are known to contain fairly dense population of Santals. Data on household composition, clan-affiliation, civil condition and a few other social characteristics were recorded for each family-unit under examination. Precise attempt was made to note clan-identity of in-law's family concerned of each and every ever-married Santal male of the families in question.

Characteristics of the Santals and their marriage system are anthropologically well known from earlier studies²; nevertheless, in this paper an attempt has been made to highlight some interesting evidences which are generated by the relevant marriage-data obtained from the recent survey in question. These data are though limited to Santal population of the given sample-villages and/or families, yet on the strength of

the elaborate statistical design employed in the survey-operation there is no reason to doubt that our subsequent findings would fail to portray in general a representative picture of social behaviour of the Santals of Midnapur as a whole. Marriage and family statistics that have been furnished hereafter are limited to the facts given by the basic social units of 119 Santal families, each family being considered as 'a group of two or more persons related by blood, marriage or adoption who live together'³ and share a common kitchen.

As 'marriage institutions are intimately connected with family institutions and family groups' in regulating concurrently the relations between the sexes and the socially approved way of founding a family of procreation,⁴ due consideration of structural features of Santal families becomes, indeed, imperative. Among the patrilocal Santals the female children, as a general rule of their society, leave their individual family of origin after their respective marriage and accordingly, such married females who were also enumerated in any Santal family during the survey have been left out of consideration in computing marriage or family statistics in view.

Risley pointed out⁵ long ago that 'no Santal

may marry within his sept (*paris*), nor within any of the sub-septs (*khunt*) in which the sept is divided. He may marry into any other sept including the sept to which his mother belonged'. It is also known that 'polygamy is not favoured by the custom of the tribe', instances showing deviation from the same are 'looked upon with disfavour'. Divorce and widow remarriage are socially approved and accepted. 'A widow may marry again. It is thought the right thing for her to marry her late husband's younger brother, if one survives him, and under no circumstances may she marry his elder brother'. In another dimension clan-wise marriage unions happen to play a vital part among the Santals who possess traditionally twelve exogamous septs. Of these twelve septs Hansdak, Murmu, Kisku, Hembram, Marndi, Saren, and Tudu rank prominently in Santal society. 'They preserve the memory of the tie of blood which connects the members of the sept, and thus furnish an additional security against unconscious incest'.

Taking the above social background of the Santals we proceed to examine our findings. In 119 Santal family units under study, 175 couples who have joined in wedlock by *monogamous* marriages are obtained. Of these couples the *complete* units of both spouses with or without children persist in 73 per cent cases. It means at once that in as many as 27 per cent cases the married spouses concerned had meanwhile suffered dissolution of either husband or wife relation. These spouses present thus *incomplete* unit of couples. Units of married couple without any children but with other patri-and/or matrilkins⁹ exist in only 4 per cent cases, while in 2 cases only the incomplete couple-units without any kin-attachment are noticed. Thus, in large majority of the Santal families monogamous couples—complete and incomplete—were maintaining cohesive attachment with other familial kins to uphold family stability. Polygamous unions in the form of *polygyny* are available in only four cases.

Santal males who have contracted polygynous marriages happen to be young adults within 28 to 35 years in age. One of them (aged 30 yrs.)

reported no child issue by either of his two wives, while the other three respectively had one or two progenies by their respective wife. On the other hand, two of these males (aged 35 and 30 years) are members of joint family, where as the remaining two Santal adults (aged 35 and 28 years) maintain simple family with only unmarried progenies. These four Santal adults claimed clan-affiliation to Hansda, Baske, Saren and Murmu. Within 26 Santal villages (sampled) under survey two of four polygynous marriages have been noted from Bichitrapur village (Keshiari P.S.), one from Shuria village (Narayangarh P.S.) and one from Balarampur village (Kharagpur Local P.S.).

In general, monogamous marriages prevail, thus, among the Santals under examination. Further, it has been observed that in five cases only the married couples concerned were living without any issue in kinship units of husband and wife, while in 57 familial units resulting from monogamous marriages the couples (complete and incomplete) concerned were residing in those simple kinship units which are composed by parents/parent with *unmarried* offsprings of both sexes. In two cases more the simple family units were, as stated above, the products of polygynous unions. In contrast, joint family units which were formed by the Santals concerned under monogamous marriage system dominate in 51 cases. Of these 51 units in 82 per cent cases frequency of monogamous marriages is limited among only two consanguineous members of the families in question, senior consanguine being in parental generation and junior one in filial generation.

It becomes evident that the Santals of to-day contract commonly monogamous unions to sustain 'the social recognition and expression of genealogical relationships, both consanguineal and affinal'⁷ in their social life. From the standpoint of kinship ties it is observed that parent-child relationship dominates in 48 units of joint family. Of these 48 joint families 4 per cent are the products of monogamous parents and polygynous children. Fraternal (sib-sib) relationship exists in other 3 joint units and of which in two cases

respectively one sib only had contracted monogamous marriage against his unmarried sibs and in the remaining one case three consanguineous brothers contracted individually monogamous marriage and were living together with their progenies. Again, in two more joint family units grandparent grandchildren relationship is especially noted, grandchildren being unmarried in civil condition. Incidentally, it may be pointed out here that in only six Santal families under study more than two marriages were contracted. Precisely speaking, in five Santal families three couples per family have been recorded, but in one Santal family four pairs of couples living under the same roof were singularly observed.

Within the *monogamous* simple families the couples concerned offer varying number of *surviving* children, the range being from minimum one to maximum six issues. Fifty-seven couples (complete and incomplete) yield altogether 153 children (at the time of survey). Another two couples of *polygynous* simple families give 8 progenies in total. Thus, *average number of surviving children per Santal couple living in simple families turns to be 2.7*. Further, out of 57 couples (joined through monogamous marriage contracts) while 28 per cent possessed respectively only and only one child, 19 per cent reported two children per couple and 26 per cent had individually three progenies. Thus, at the time of survey in little less than three-fourth cases the given Santal couples had respectively *not more than* three children to look after in their individual simple family. More than three but not more than six children were surviving in 15 *monogamous* simple family units only.

In another dimension 97 couples (complete and incomplete) have been found to constitute those 48 joint family units (non-fraternal) in which each couple is united by monogamous marriage system. These couples specifically yield together a total of 176 surviving children (at the time of survey). Thus, *average number of surviving children per Santal couple living in joint families (non-fraternal) comes to be 1.8 only*. Contextually, it is stated that within the joint

family units in question 48 couples in *parental generation presented* 1.7 children per couple on average, whereas 49 couples in *filial generation* contributed 1.9 children per couple on average (Vide Table).

On the other hand, in other two joint family units the polygynous male spouses in filial generation presented only one child and four children respectively. Again, out of three fraternal joint family units, in two cases the married spouses who are united by monogamous marriages were childless, while in the remaining one case three married brothers who have also individually contracted monogamous marriage yield jointly as many as 15 children (surviving). It is interesting that within the joint families (non-fraternal) 71 per cent of the couples concerned in *parental* generation had only and one surviving child per couple and three couples had each three surviving children. In the remaining 10 per cent cases the couples had children between four and eight per pair. In contrast, amongst the monogamous couples who are in the filial generation of the non-fraternal joint families as high as 28 per cent had *no* children, but 23 per cent maintained *only* one child per couple. Those who reported two and three children per couple accounted for 11 per cent and 21 per cent cases respectively. Only 17 per cent of the couples in question had four to five children per couple. More than five children were not reported for any couple placed in filial generation of the joint family units of the Santals.

Irrespective of the fact of differential fertility amongst the couples of simple family units against the couples of joint family units of the Santals under examination, it is noteworthy that *average* number of persons per simple family unit happens to be lesser (5.0) than the *average* number of persons (6.3) per joint family unit. Incidentally, *average size* of the given Santal families is 5.4 (male : 2.7 and female : 2.7).

In the last decade of the last century anthropological knowledge about inter-clan marriage system among Santal population of India was, in brief, primarily based upon this social fact that

Number of children (surviving) of Santal couples living in Simple and Joint families (1963)

Santal couples living in	number of monogamous couple with children									Total couples & total children	average number of children per couple	
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8			9
(1)	(2)									(3)	(4)	
1. Simple family	-	16	11	15	7	6	2	0	0	0	57 couples	
total children	-	16	22	45	28	30	12	0	0	0	153 children	2.7
2. Joint family (lineal)												
(a) couples in parental generation	0	34	6	3	1	2	1	0	1	0	48 couples	
total children :	0	34	12	9	4	10	6	0	8	0	83 children	1.7
(b) couples in filial generation	13	12	5	10	4	5	0	0	0	0	49 couples	
total children :	0	12	10	30	16	25	0	0	0	0	93 children	1.9
all couples of Joint families	13	46	11	13	5	7	1	0	1	0	97 couples	
and their total children	0	46	22	39	20	35	6	0	8	0	176 children	1.8

'no Santal may marry within his sept (*paris*), nor within any of the sub-sept (*khunt*) in which the sept is divided'. In 1909 Bompas⁹ remarked that 'the Santals are divided into exogamous septs—originally twelve in number, and their social observances are complex, e.g., while some relations treat each other with the greatest reserve, between others the utmost freedom of intercourse is allowed'. By the beginning of the second half of the present century new studies on the Santals provided with the facts that their sub-sept happened to be 'a division due to cultural difference'¹⁰ bearing upon their family distinction and tradition. In general, a clear image of some dichotomy in sept-/sub-sept-structures in terms of *Nij* (proper) and *Sada* (non-users of vermilion) prevailed in conscience of the Santals to delineate 'the social area of choice of partners in marriage'.

Exogamous family units belonging to any particular clan (sept) are not expected to violate societal *norm* prohibiting *intra-clan* marriages and the patriarchal, patrilocal Santals abide naturally by their traditional *norm* related to marriage customs between different clans or sub-clans of different clans. Any deviation from the *norm* is certainly prone to throw up several social problems in the established pattern of kinship and marriage functions. Santal clans have had for ages together an elaborate arrangement through

the media of a large number of sub-clans within principal clans for regulating family choices for marriage-partners between any two given clans. Risley recorded altogether 68 sub-septs under 8 principal septs. It is interesting that under each sept the sub-sept *Nij* appears commonly along with other sub-septs. The memory of blood-tie which binds the constituent families of any sept persists within each and every Santal to earn security against 'unconscious incest' and safeguard against possible deviation from the expected social conduct, especially in marriage issues. *Intra-clan* marriages are obviously, then, to be treated as some social, aberrant manifestations in Santal society.

Lately it has again been reiterated that Santal clans 'are exogamous; and presumably to preserve the blood from being contaminated by unconscious incest, they have certain pass-words to distinguish them. . . . the branching off into numerous sub-clans has made the position easier to avoid the penalty and the stigma of a marriage within the clan'. What was stated by Risley long back has been corroborated in the above recent observation on the characteristics of Santal social organisation. But, it is quite significant to note further that 'the common folk opined that marriages may take place if the sub-clans are different, *the parent clan remaining the same*

But it was apparent that Santals do not like unions within the clan, although the sub-clans of the contracting parties may be altogether different. One thing was clear. The orthodox custom of limiting marriage outside the clan is *no longer* in strict existence, and marriage between the members of different sub-clans of *one parent clan* is being 'tolerated' (emphasis given by authors).

In the immediate background of the above recent observations on Santal marriage practices we would like to record that during the survey while noting clan-affiliation of each Santal family attempt was also made to enquire about the clans of the fathers of those females who have been married into the families under investigation. Information given in this respect throws up some such cases where *intra-clan* unions are apparently discernible. Out of total eleven cases of such intra-clan unions Murmu-Murmu clan unions through monogamous marriages were gathered from five families, Hembram-Hembram marital linkages from four families, and Saren-Saren marriage interconnections from two families. As reported, these incidents of intra-clan marriages pose, no doubt, a moot problem. If the attitude of 'being tolerated' is accepted a solution appears within our understanding to note the cause for such deviations among the Santals under study.

But, since these eleven cases account for as good as 9 per cent of the total cases of marriage-unions within the given Santal families the issue becomes thought-provoking. That a little less than one-tenth of total marital contracts within clans concerned were 'tolerated' against societal *norm* prohibiting intra-clan marriages seems definitely to be a matter for depth-study. During the survey the said depth-study could not, of course, be conducted for various practical reasons. Little probe which was possible to extend in this regard revealed that in two families of Chatarpada and Bichitrapur villages marriages with widows of deceased elder brothers had been contracted by the Santal adult males concerned. Clan-affiliations of these two males (aged 30 and 25 years) were for Murmu and Saren respectively and they reported the same clan-names for their wives.

This incorrect statement has resulted in the said so-called intra-clan marriage events. Actually, re-marriage of widow with deceased's younger brother does not cause any deviation from the custom of inter-clan marriage in these two cases at least. In another family residing in Jaygeria village one Murmu male (aged 30 yrs.) while reporting Murmu clan for his spouse's father declared categorically that he did not believe in the orthodox custom regulating inter-clan marriages. This Santal was a demobilised infantry and with his world-view it is not unlikely that he should carry such belief in post-army life.

In Agarpara village on enquiry it was obtained that Hembram-Hembram union which was received from a male spouse (40 yrs.) in one Santal family clan-distinction was made in terms of superior and inferior status, inferior status being assigned to his wife's Murmu clan. Totem-wise differentiation between the clans seems in this particular case to have been replaced by an evaluation of incipient status-hierarchy. In the same village another case of such Hembram-Hembram union was gathered in a Santal family for a couple (25 and 22 yrs.). For this case no satisfactory explanation could be recorded to account for the given deviation from *norm*. Similarly, in the remaining six-cases of intra-clan linkages through marriages only this much was given to understand that such incidents were lately in vogue among them and they did not suffer any stigma against such marital arrangements. This means that the members of Santal families concerned of Mohanpur, Anandapur, Nahopar, Babalpur, Krishnapur, and Jaygeria had well 'tolerated' the apparent deviations from orthodox custom of limiting marriage outside any parent clan and/or sub-clans under the clan concerned. At any rate, the propensity for 'marriage between the members of different sub-clans of one parent clan' is no longer socially undesirable, as it is evident from present facts, among the Santals and such behavioural development needs, no doubt, careful handling in future anthropological researches on the population in question.

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