Chapter 4

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The preceding chapter describes Study I of the present research. It showed that children in two Santali and non-tribal groups show successive increase from lower to higher level of HU with increasing age/grades. The study also showed that scores of the two cultural groups on the test of historical understanding were significantly different from each other. Their notion of history and way to approach history differed across the two cultural groups. It was found that the Santali children showed more affiliation to the ancient historical time as past. Their approach towards past was also different from their non-tribal counterparts. Thus, the Santali children showed features of historical understanding which was different from the non-tribal children. In order to ensure such differences were due to their cultural background or it was a random difference, another study was undertaken. This study explored the notion of History and past in Santali adults. It sought to investigate the culture specific features of historical understanding among Santali adults.

Objective

➢ To explore the notion of History among the Santali adults

As discussed in Chapter 1, people in one particular cultural context have some common features about their knowledge and belief system which is different from the people of other cultural group. These elements can be referred to as the characteristic features of that particular group. The existing body of historical knowledge in any society, its
representation in any socio-cultural group, and their practices, may give rise to culture specific notions of history. It can be argued that the culture specific notions of history are the results of many factors; the social practices, the cultural artifacts and the schooling experience. Because all these factors together inform the members of its society about their past and consequently shape their opinion and understanding about history and past. Thus, societies with a particular social belief system, modes of operations and rituals, can have corresponding characteristics in understanding of their past. Santali society is such a society which operates through informal regulations. There is a predominance of myths and rituals in this society. The past of the society is passed on to generations through the stories and legends. It can be thus, argued that the Santali adult’s notion of history can have culture specific features. Since, a lot of historical knowledge is provided in schools also, it is quite possible that the cultural influences on historical understanding are mediated by the formal schooling also, and therefore the notion of history might differ in the schooled and unschooled adults of the same community. This leads to the hypothesis that:

**Hypothesis:** The Santali adults will show characteristic features about their Historical Understanding, which will be mediated by their schooling/education.
4.1 Method

4.1.1 Sample: The present study was conducted in two settings, in five different villages in Singhbhum district of Jharkhand state. These villages were Dhandi Di, Dudra, Karandi, Sundarnagar and Mango. Twenty nine adult respondents- 17 males and 12 females were interviewed. The age range of these tribal adults was 25 to 70 years.

The background characteristics of Santali tribe in Jamshedpur (Singhbhum, Jharkhand): According to the Anthropological Survey of India, the Santalis are the third largest tribe of India and one of the largest tribes of eastern India. They are primarily located in states of Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa and Assam. According to the 1971 Census, they represent 36.5 % of the tribal population of then Bihar. There were no written history and record about the Santali community until recent centuries. The information about their past and histories have been preserved and passed on through the generations by spoken word in the form of songs and legends. Santalis trace their origin to Ahiri Pipri and Chai Champa in Hazaribag, Jharkhand from where they moved to Chotanagpur. Their migration started after the 1770 famine into the Santali Pargana and other places where they are residing till now. In Bihar and Jharkhand they are primarily located in Dumka, sahibganj, Godda, Deoghar, Bhagalpur, Hazaribag, Dhanbad, Purnea and Singhbhum districts. They speak their own language, Santali, which belong to Austro-Asiatic sub-family. They can also speak Hindi and Bengali. According to People of India Vol XVI (2008) the Santali language is written in Devnagri or Bengali script, but
recently it is being written in a new script called *Ol chikki*, developed by late Pandit Raghunath Murmu.

The Santali societies operate through customs and informal sanctions; there is no written or imposed law in the society. The society is taken to be a part of the natural order and there is an overwhelming predominance of myth and rituals among its people. Santalis have a traditional community council system. The head of a village council is the *Manjhi (Morehar)*. He is assisted by other councilors in looking after village affairs. A larger unit Pargana is constituted of 10-15 villages headed by *Paragnait*. The traditional religious beliefs and ideas of Santali community centre on evil and spirits. They worship *thakur*, the creator god and the *Sin Bonga*.

Santali society is an agricultural based society with strong cultural, spiritual and economic relation to the forests and nature. Hunting and agricultural techniques have been the traditional economic activities of this community. Nowadays, with many industries being set up in their surrounding areas, many people come to town to work in several industries. The villages where they come from are generally 5-25 kilometers away from the town. Many of the families have also migrated to the towns in the search of livelihood, and have received good education and socioeconomic status as well. A majority of people still earn their livelihood from agricultural pursuits.
The Santali societies have their traditional methods of imparting knowledge and wisdom to their children. Children learn from their parents, grand parents and other community members. The 1981 Census of India shows the literacy rate of Santalis as 12.6% which is lower than the general literacy rate of the overall literacy STs in Jharkhand i.e. 17%. It shows the literacy rate of women to be 4.1% while the same for male is 20.8%. The *People of India Vol. XVI*, reports that though, Government had several plans for educational and social development of tribal people however, "The employment and other opportunities provided by the government through IRDP and other development schemes could not be fully utilized by Santalis due to their lack of education" (2008, p. 848). However, Santalis nowadays, are becoming aware of their rights and the instrumentality of education in their development. Most of the families send their children to the rural primary or higher secondary schools. Still many families can not send their children to the formal schools only due to financial reasons. Most of the villagers live hand to mouth and have to struggle for their livelihood. All the villages however, do not have schools and many a times children have to go far away to the schools.

**4.1.2. Procedure:** The Santali adults were contacted in their village, either in groups or at home. After some informal introduction they were told that the researcher wanted to know about the past of their community; how their predecessors lived and what do they know about past. They were then asked questions about their past and history. There
was no strict interview schedule prepared. The interview was in a semi-structured form.

The major outline of the questions is as follows:

• Tell me something about the old times. How did people used to live in earlier times?
• How long have you been staying in this village?
• How do you calculate dates?
• What festivals do you celebrate? Do you have any story behind it? Can you narrate the stories to me?
• Do you think these stories are all correct?
• If there are different versions of one story how do you discriminate between right and wrong story?
• How do you come to know about the history or these stories?

(The educated tribal adults were asked the difference between the textbook history and the stories told by their community members)

• Which story do you think is right, the one you read in books or the one your elders tell you?

1.1.3. Analysis: The interview was more in a conversation mode, rather than in a strict question answer format. The order of the questions was not the same as presented above. The respondents were just prompted by the above questions and were allowed to talk as much as they wanted about things and lives in past. Their responses were recorded and content analyzed. The analysis of the responses sought to discover major themes running across the answers of most of the respondents. The responses which were repeatedly observed in most of the respondents were considered as the major themes around which the responses revolved.
4.2. Results: The Notion of Past among Santali Adults

The notions of past in Santali adults are not different from their cultural suppositions. Their conception of past reflected their cultural traditions, beliefs and customs. Their responses show that past for them is not a separate field or a branch of knowledge. Their past is imbibed in their lives, customs and traditional practices. The past of Santali society is to be traced in their stories, folklores and their life styles. Their belief system is what characterizes their past. On being asked about their past they cannot narrate much, as they believe that most of the stories are now forgotten by the community, but they cannot dismiss their strong belief in their past.

The major themes that surfaced in the responses of Santali adults are delineated below:

4.2.1. Past as a Part of Community’s Lifestyle:

The responses of the Santali adults show that past, for them is not a separate field of knowledge or something to be learnt separately. It is a part of their lifestyle and culture. They practice all the rituals done in past, which they believe can not be separated from their lifestyle. The folklores that they sing and the stories that they share for amusement are all immersed in past. They have a tradition of singing and dancing on all the festive occasions. During their festivals, they do mass worship and also dance in groups. Their worship ceremonies include processions, wherein they sing traditional songs. Songs are sung during any ceremony in the village. These songs include the narrations and stories about their origin and development. Thus, children and adults come to know about past through participating in community events. Apart from these,
the senior village member or the village priest preaches through these stories. At home very often children come to know about past through their parents and grand parents. This tradition of telling stories to children however is diminishing gradually.

When asked for ‘their history’ most of the uneducated people were not able to tell much more than about the times that they have seen. Their knowledge past is much more than mere history. They are not conscious about something called history of Santali society, however when they are asked about the stories of past, they narrate many of them. For example an uneducated Santali adult (aged around 40 years) said,

Respondent: ...how can I tell about something that I have not seen? At most I can tell you about my childhood times that how were things back then... Yes!! I have some idea of their times as well, since my grand father used to narrate stories about his childhood...

Researcher: How do you then come to know about past?
Respondent: the elderly people tell us...if we really want to find out we can also listen to the stories popular in our societies. The village priest can tell all that...thereby we can know.

This Santali respondent shows no knowledge of ‘History’ as such. However, he reflects an awareness and understanding of past life of their community and also shows an awareness of the different sources, which are part of their life style. It shows that he is not accustomed to a ‘history’ which is separate from their ‘stories of past’. But he certainly indicates that their life style and the functions involve past. Their folk songs
which are sung on all the important contain stories of past for example consider a song sung on marriage ceremony:

\[
\text{Dong do okaredo janam len,} \\
\text{Dong do okaredo busur len,} \\
\text{Dong do dong lisai- lasai,} \\
\text{Dong do Hihiri janam len,} \\
\text{Don de pipari busur len,} \\
\text{Dong do dong lisai- lasai”}
\]

Meaning:

[where a marriage is originated, \\
Where it came into being! \\
The marriage is attractive and enchanting. \\
A marriage is born at Hihiri, \\
A marriage is come into being in Pipiri, \\
A marriage is grand and beautiful]

(Recited and translated by the respondent)

There are various songs like this, sung on many occasions, which relate Santalis to their past and their history. It can be seen that since Santalis don’t have a written record of their past they probably have this system whereby they remain connected with their past.

The artifacts in the Santali society such as, their dresses, ‘dhol’, tools for farming and kitchen equipments all have their role in the worship at the village temple or festivals. They have customs which incorporates all these cultural tools and artifacts. They signify their cultural value and historical significance. They signify the continuity of all those
things being used since 'beginning'. So the historical significance of these artifacts also is learned by the members of the community by participating in the community life.

4.2.2. Immense Faith in Past:

All the Santali adults, whether educated or uneducated, were driven by a strong faith in their traditions and cultural beliefs. These beliefs were common in the response of all the people; the beliefs such as that of witchcraft, the essentiality of rituals, and the belief in the souls of their ancestors. All people voiced a faith in the stories of past and their authenticity. Consider this conversation with an old, unschooled person—

Researcher: ...the stories must be true! Or you think they are fabricated?

Old man:... they might be true only, otherwise why will people celebrate those festivals!!...we don't know...but if we don't celebrate these festivals some mis-happening will definitely take place....

This was an uneducated old man, who did not have much arguments for his view but he was not at all convinced that these stories can be wrong. The people had a strong abiding to their stories.

The respondents did accept that some stories might not be true; still they did not dismiss their faith in the same. People who had gone to school up to 12th (10+2) showed a disbelief and neutrality towards their ancient knowledge system. They also accepted that these stories may or may not be true, but they are trusted. Santalis with schooling up to 12th undermined their cultural historical knowledge system.
Consider the following conversation, both the respondents has schooling up to 12th (10+2):

Researcher: Do you think you can do without your rituals? I mean is it necessary to celebrate these festivals?
Respondent 1: Yes definitely...we must celebrate all the festivals and perform all the rituals.
Respondent 2: We can not ignore them. If we do so, we will have disastrous results. The Gods become angry...
Researcher: Can you tell me something about the past; the stories behind any of the rituals that you celebrate?
Respondent 1: We don’t know the stories. Some old people can tell. But all we know is that we must perform all the rituals and poojas. Otherwise somebody from the family will die...Yes its true!!.....but not many people are aware about them. Even we don’t know much, forget about our children.
Researcher: But, do you want your children to learn all this?
Respondent 1: ...they don’t gain anything from these stories. It is better for them to concentrate on their studies only.

This respondent did show a belief, at the same time expressed futility of these stories.

On the other hand people with 0-5-years of schooling and those with college level education showed much more inclination for their community history. The respondents with 0-5 years of schooling believed that the stories are trusted because they have survived the long test of time. They have been there since long time and people follow them. Specially, respondents who have attended a college showed a greater faith in their customs and their rituals. They provided justifications that most of the stories about past are true. They also gave reference to the documentation that had been...
done, in last few decades. They also claimed that most of this documentation has used the narrations about past, as a clue to know about their history.

For example, a discussion with two Santali adults who had attended college, revealed that they assumed themselves to be the predecessors of some people and place unknown to them. He narrated a story which was about the way they came and settled in their village.

Researcher (to respondent 2) Who told this story to you?
Respondent 2: Ahha!! This is known by one and all. Everybody in the community knows this story. Our fathers and fore fathers have told this to us. ...this is true can not be false...

Thus, all the Santali adults have enormous faith in their traditional belief system and the stories about their past. Interestingly, people who had some schooling experience discounted their traditions, as they do not find it useful in their day to day life. Still they believe in their folk stories and follow them. The completely uneducated and highly educated people do show a strong inclination towards their customs and belief systems. The uneducated people give a blind support whereas, the educated people logical evidences to support their belief.

4.2.3. Sense of Community History:

In all their conversation about history and past, the Santali adults reflected sense of a history which is not the same as other sections of the wider society. In other words they expressed sense of belonging to a tradition of history from which people of other sections of society are separate. They expressed belief in a ‘community history.’
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reports about their history, all the Santali adults acknowledged that their history and things about ‘their past’ is not known and/or acknowledged by the members of the other community.

This sort of a thought was more pronounced in the answers of college educated people. Consider the following conversation with 3 people, one of them was a graduate and the other two had studied till 12th (10 + 2):

Respondent1: We follow whatever has been done since long...we don’t do anything new, we worship the nature...

See! In our society... we have many festivals...with your Diwali we have another festival, when we worship animals...

Researcher: What do know about the history of this country?

We know nothing. We just vote. And then we are set apart...we don’t know anything about history ...we have not seen anything how can we know!

Researcher: have you heard of Mahatma Gandhi?

Respondent2: No we have not seen but we trust. Since it is written in books....our stories are not even given in books. People talk about Mahatma Gandhi and Subhas Chandra Bose, but very few people know about the sacrifices made by the tribal leaders...lately a few people has started knowing about the tribal history but even now, not many people know about all this.

It can be seen that these two respondents have a clear demarcated notions of ‘their history’ versus the ‘other history’.

Another person (with a post graduate degree) had given the following details

Our culture has survived millions of centuries... the tribals are the main owner of this land and nothing can be done without their permission.... Aadiwasish fought many
wars...for their land and culture...the National Movement came later. Tribal regard Tirka Majhi...he fought in 1775... There is a whole history of tribal people.

The opinion given by this person also reflects his sense of belongingness to his community and his belief in a separate community history. It is apparent that their notions of history are loaded with their sense of belongingness and sense of community history.

4.2.4. Magical Belief: An Integral Part of Historical Belief

Magic and the witch craft form very essential component in the mental frame of any North Indian tribe or probably any tribal community. Santalis particularly showed a lot of magical belief in their responses. They believe that the elderly people, who die, do not disappear forever. Their souls remain around them to show them path in the times of crisis. These powers or souls, they believe, guide them about their social problems and complicated matters. They talked about ‘room daka’; a process by which they contact supernatural powers, and many such things. Consider the following response of an educated Santali: “…I have once tried to hang a photo of an eminent writer in my ‘bheeter’ (a pious room in every Santali house, where it is believed that the soul of the ancestors reside) but a huge fire broke in my village’s jahir than (the village temple). The ‘roomdaka’ informed that the soul of my ancestors was not happy with that”. This person referred to one of his actions, which was supposedly not liked by his ancestors, as it was against their traditional practice.
People in the Santali community also believe that if something went wrong in their lives or their village the supernatural powers will control it. When an unschooled Santali, of around 60-year-old was asked about the rituals and festivals, consider what he said—

Researcher: What will happen if you don’t do all that?
Respondent: Oh! We can’t even think of that. Some terrible things start happening, people die or a fire might break or any tragedy. The souls of our ancestors get angry.

Many Santali adults mentioned the magical things, such as witchcraft, and ‘room daka’. Their lifestyle incorporates practices that strengthen such beliefs. They expressed a sense of proud that their tribe was gifted with such skills. In a conversation with two Santalis (schooled up to 10th) they revealed that they practice black magic to prevent themselves from the ‘evil eyes’.

Respondent 1: ...yes we have lot many solutions for any problem which can be solved through our ‘totka’ (magical practices). We have practices through which we can even treat patients. If we go to doctors they themselves will tell us that if you have some thing that you want to do, you can go ahead and do whatever you want to...even they don’t interfere in our system. I mean, we then do the ‘totka’ and worship.

Respondent 2: you know I have faced it with my child... He was struck by something (referred to some evil eye)...nothing seemed to get him out of his sickness. Then we went to our ‘naike’ (the village priest). He then told us that somebody has done something (some black magic).
Researcher: what is that?
Respondent 2: These things are common in our community. People eye upon each other...but now we are very conscious. We do regular worship and take necessary steps to remain unaffected from such things.

The responses of both these participants expressed a strong belief that ‘evil eyes’ cause problems and that these problems can be treated through some—mysterious and superstitious measures. They gave reference to their own problems which they believed was created by somebody’s crooked intentions. Most of them take pride in such skills with which their community is blessed, as it expressed by another graduate respondent, he said “We have always been blessed by our deity. We survived many wars. Many big leaders have been blessed by the divine power.” Thus, Santali people show a trust in the black magic, which according to them, may cause and treat any problem.

4.2.5. Schooling and Notions of History:

The level of education seemed to have influenced the way Santali people perceive their history. In the analysis of their responses three categories of responses emerged. These response patterns were related to their levels of education. The findings showed that understanding of history was quite different among the unschooled adults compared to those who had studies history for over 5 years and those who had received a college level education. Thus, three categories of responses emerged: One, 0 to 5 years of schooling; two, Schooled up to +2 standard and three, graduate or above level of education.

The participants who were educated for 5 years or less including those who had never gone to school showed awareness of historical underpinning of their festivals and
rituals. They said that they came to know about these stories through word of mouth. The following conversation shows these people have faith in their traditions, although, they were not sure about its authenticity:

Respondent: ...we are staying here since very long time...since the time of our forefathers. We don’t know when and how it established. ...

Researcher: You know about the history of the festivals you celebrate?

Respondent: Yes most of the festivals have stories behind them. There are many stories.

Researcher: The stories must be true! or you think they are fabricated?

Respondent: We don’t know. They might be true only. Otherwise why will people celebrate those festivals....we don’t know. Actually we do it only because our ancestors have been doing so...

This respondent is confused on the question of the authenticity of the stories behind their festivals. However, he still believes that they ought to be true. Even those who were not able to give much detailed stories of past did not disapprove the authenticity of the stories. They said that the stories have travelled down the time through word of mouth, therefore they cannot be false. The respondents with 0-5-years of schooling showed a high level of trust in their cultural stories. It can be seen in the following conversation with 3 ladies:

Researcher: Do you know whether the story you narrated is right or wrong?

Respondent 1: It is true only or else how will you know about the story. It’s true that is why so many people know and believe.
Respondent 2: We come to know about past from the ancestors. We name our children on them only. And tell them that it is the name of their forefather or so. There are so many stories in songs but we don’t remember them.

It was observed that the people who had 0 to 5 years of schooling showed almost all the features of the HU of Santali adults. They had a good knowledge of their folk tales, songs and stories. They however, could not give much arguments and justifications for the authenticity of their stories.

Those adults who were educated up to 10 + 2 (12th) standard, showed lesser awareness and lesser interest in the stories of past. They were mostly young people who could not give much detail of their past and conventional systems. On being asked about past they just said that things were not the same. They expressed a belief that information about past is not useful, nor is anybody interested in learning those old things. They considered it of no use in present times. However, these people also expressed faith in their customs and belief systems. Probably they consider it a sign of progress that they are not much connected with the earlier life style of their community. A respondent said:

...there are many stories about past... (indicated to an elderly man in the group) he might be able tell some of them. How can we know all the stories. Earlier people used to sit in groups and listen to the stories told by elderly people. Now these traditions are diminishing gradually. People like to do other things instead of listening to the stories. A lot of the tribes are not having good income, so they become addict...having hadia and other addictive things.
These respondents (schooled up to 12\textsuperscript{th}) showed a disinterest in knowing and talking about past. They probably wanted to give an impression that they are progressive people who are not obsessed with their tribal identity. A conversation with another respondent was like this:

Researcher: So, you say that all those rituals that were done earlier are done even now?
Respondent: Yes! They have not changed.... But many skills like dholak are decaying these days. We won't find many young children who are interested in learning these skills... moreover when we only don't know the stories of past, who will tell them. Children nowadays are going to school...these things are not useful to them.

The participants educated up to 10 + 2 level, had probably seen the urban life style. They probably want their children to imbibe that progressive urban outlook, and not remain confined in their tribal traditions. In their school curriculum also they had not found any mentioning of a Santali cultural community and its history. Further, their history has never got them marks in school neither have they fetch money out of it. All these reason might be the factor behind their projecting unfamiliarity with their history. Those respondents who had received a college level education responded positively on being asked about their history. They gave an elaborate account of ‘their past’. They also believed that the stories of past are all correct. A conversation with a Santali who was a graduate is as follow:

Respondent: Yes we do have a history. It could not be recorded due to ignorance of the early people but now there is lot of things being written in Ol chikki and in
other languages...we have a lineage to...... But the place is not known since the name is changes. The folklores name the place ‘hihudi piudi’ but we don’t know what place is it.

Researcher: Who told this story to you? Do you think it is correct, as, you said there is no record of the true events?

Respondent: Ahha!! This is known by one-and all. Everybody in the community knows this story. Our fathers and fore fathers have told this to us. ...this is true can not be false.

Many of the respondents in this group also accepted that a few stories might not be true. They however, claimed that most of the stories are true, or else how will they survive for so long time. The educated people also showed belief in magical things and witch craft. They took prided that their community is gifted by such skills. They argued in favor of the authenticity of their knowledge of history. They claimed that since people in earlier days did not have a script, they composed stories and songs that people sing during festivals and rituals. A participant said “the songs that people sing on the occasion of the festivals have been created by our ancestors, so that we don’t forget out legacy...we have many stories which are entertaining and informative about the origin, struggle and development of our society.”

Another respondent who was a post graduate showed similar faith in his traditional beliefs. He talked at length about the history of his community and tried to give substantial details of the same.
Respondent: Our culture has survived millions of centuries...British came and helped us a lot...after them only many people came...Raja, Maharaja, land lords...... There is a whole history of tribal people.

Researcher: Do all your people know about this history?

Yes! all of them know about...

Researcher: But many of them don’t know! I have talked to many people?

Respondent: Yes you are right! Because, they have not studied our history. Uneducated people will know.

Researcher: How do you then know about all this, as, there are many stories and no documentation?

Respondents: We discuss things and come to conclusions...We stayed 3000 years together nicely and well off....people knew about the farming herbal medicine, and education etc... those who don’t have access to books seek information from us....they trust all that is said to them....even we don’t question out ancestors and their knowledge and its sources. We believe firmly whatever is passed on to us by our ancestors.

The educated Santali adults thus, also had all the features of the other tribal adults. The only difference between them and other uneducated Santali adults is that they have a stronger orientation for their community history and they argue strongly in favor of the authenticity of the narrations about their past.