

## MOHUA TREE: A MYTH IN SANTAL SOCIETY

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### Abstract

*Oral traditions reflect the culture of a society and also bring solidarity in a cultural group. This article is centre around a myth on mohua tree in the Santal society of western border district Puruliya of West Bengal.*

**Key Words:** *Mohua, Santhal*

### Locale

Myth is an integral part of folk culture. Every society has some myths and lore related to their origin, migration and every spheres of life, including surrounding of nature i.e. flora, fauna, river, hills, mountain, sea, etc. These oral traditions are transmitted from one generation to other since time immemorial. Oral transmission of the objects of culture is considered one of the attributes of folk culture. These traditions are express through their folk songs and folk tales. It aims at analysing the folk culture from the viewpoint of an interpenetrating relationship between it and the society concerned. This aspect of tribal life is not much studied with anthropological research and documentation. Here it has been described the experiences related to mohua tree (*Bassia latifolia*) during the field work in Santal inhabited multiethnic village named Ranga, situated in the top of the Ayodhya hill of Puruliya district in West Bengal. It has been observed some incidents related to mohua tree in Santal families along with village lanes, forest, weekly markets, social occasion and festivals.

### State of affairs

Mohua tree grows in different climate i.e. tropical, sub tropical, dry, semi-dry or wet and on barren land. It's flowers, leaves, barks, seeds and timbers are the valuable products. This tree has some important roles in the Santal society. In case of marriage, at first, the bride has to be married

with the mohua tree, located at the outskirts of the village. They prepare liquor from its flowers. The female and the children are engaged in collection, processing and preservation work of mohua flowers during spring to summer seasons. The women prepare liquor from mohua flower with the help of indigenous method for their own consumption in day to day life and at the time of festivals and marriage occasions. They also earn a little amount from it.

Santal people often quarrel themselves among the family members in their day to day life. They are very much fond of this liquor for daily consumption as handia or rice beer. But here it is differed from handia taking. They take handia in front of all as their common drink but they take mohua liquor in secretly. Because, to them mahua is considered as a liquor. However, handia is not considered as liquor because it is prepared from boiled rice and to be offered to their deities and guests as their tradition and customs. Sometimes they often drink huge quantity of mohua liquor and create some problems in their daily life. This incident struck in my mind and I try to investigate on this aspect.

### **Fairy tale**

It was a rainy day and at the time of evening, my informant Sukra Hansda freely started for gossiping with me. At that time I intended to know about the mohua preparation. I asked him why you are taking mohua regularly. He replied that 'look my elder brother, it is an age-old tradition of our tribal society and has a well known story behind it'. Had a time to talk? Then he was telling a story which was heard from his grand father. The story like that –once upon a time there was a sadhu or saint who lived in Ayodhya hill in an ashram. He had three kind of wild animals namely tiger, bear and moyna birds and always moved along with them and considered as members of his family. One day the sadhu was expired in natural death due to old age. It was very sad news to all inhabitants of hill. Then all Santal people assembled there for cremation and brought the dead body of the sadhu at nearest water fall for cremation. They performed a ritual and then the dead body was placed on a pyre for burning. Then the tiger, the bear and the moyna suddenly jumped one after another on fire. All the people observed that spellbound incident and discussed with each other about their affection with man and animals. They might be thought that my master is no more and our presence is immaterial.

One a very morning an aged person went to the jungle for collection of sal (*Soria robusta*) leaves and edible tubers. Suddenly he saw a new variety of flowers on ground and immediately observed an uncommon variety of tree and its big branches and sub branches were covered with green leaves and flowers. Then he tried to recall from his memory about the exact spot where pyre was made for cremation of the sadhu. He also calculated the time of about five years before this incident was occurred. Then he took rest under the shadow of that type of tree and chewing the petals of mohua flowers. He felt drowsy in the open space in the jungle. Before departure he had collected a huge amount of flowers and brings to his residence. The family members asked him about that flower. Then he had replied that it was a testy things and which was available in the jungle. His neighbours also eagerly asked about it and its utility. He also shared his experiences to them. After that they discussed about what could be extracted from the flowers. Later they had experimented on it and ultimately succeeded to prepare the liquor in a simple distillation method. From that time, they used to call this tree and liquor by a melodious name as mohua and started to consume as liquor. Mr. Sukra, the informant told that this liquor had three characters which were very much related to tiger, bear and moyna. After taking of mohua liquor they used to start shouting like a tiger, lying on ground like a bear and play a song like a moyna. All those characters automatically expressed through their behaviour. Lastly, he told that mohua tree was an integral part of our tradition since time immorial and we are very much like it as a valuable tree in our locality.

### **Ending**

The Santals of Ayodhya hills of Puruliya district of west Bengal are living in the lap of the nature. They have own identity in language as well as culture. Their rich traditional artistic life is reflecting through different forms like myths, oral literature, architecture, dance, arts and crafts. Here myth of the mohua tree is an example to give some message about the relation to man, animal and plant. The myth also depicts their love, affection and emotion. They have hundreds of folk traditions which are gradually fading due to the many reasons like impact of modernization, urbanization and fast communication. It is a high time to think over it and document it through multidisciplinary approach including audio visual aids. In this regard Dundes stated that “.....although folklore might be a key to the past, it likewise reflected the present culture and thus was also a key to present .....if folklore was not limited to dead survivals but included living

materials, than the study of folklore did not have to be limited to the search for origins. Instead, the present day functions of folklore could be investigated (1980:6-7).

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