



# Understanding and an Analysis of the “Handi” (Rice-Beer) Of “Santal Tribe”- A Ritualistic Drinks Viewpoint

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**Abstract:** *The comprehensive idea of this article is to highlight the embedded predominance of usage of rice-beer in the Santal Tribe. The practice of rice-beer in the Santal tribe is encircled in their ritualistic ceremonies, festivals and cultural practices. This ritualistic drink (rice-beer) gradually turns into a drinking habituation which paves way to deterioration of health and number of health issues in the Santal community. The reason behind falling victims to excessive drinking habits might be also cheap availability of traditionally made rice-beer and the presence of the rice-beer in each and every occasion. This traditional and ritualistic drink has a great amount of destructive nature for most Santal men and women in long run. It is the common reality in the Santal tribe all over India and elsewhere. Santals usually consume an indigenous fermented rice- beer called ‘handi’. Alcoholism is one of the major drawbacks of Santal community’s backwardness and the problem of illiteracy among the majority of them. The harmful effects of alcoholism among the Santal tribe suggest that an alternative healthy possibility and lifestyle needs to be improved upon to help this tribe.*

**Keywords-** Santal Tribe, ‘Handi’ (rice-beer), Rituals, Tradition, Culture, Festivals & Exploitation

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Santals are tribals. L. O’Malley writes, “This tribal community even today consists of one of the largest, most cohesive and resilient tribes in eastern India. They have certainly been the most written about in song and literature beginning from the days of the Raj”. [1] Santals belong to a Proto-Austroloid racial group. Other than West Bengal, their major concentration is in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha and Tripura. In Assam they are not classified as a tribe and their lot is clubbed with the generic “Tea Tribes of Assam”. There is a sizable Santal community in Bangladesh, and a smaller group in Nepal. Traditionally mixed farmers with a recent past of hunting and gathering, Santals have found their way to employment in agriculture, industry all over India, a very few of them as government employees and in private sectors. Their primary occupation is agriculture and daily labour though there is an increasing move among youth towards better education and self-sufficiency. [2]“Santal” is the only term currently used by outsiders for the tribe. It is also recognized as an ethnic term by the Santals themselves as ‘Hoꞗ hopon ko’ (human children) and ‘Hoꞗ ko’ (men). [3]

## II. History of Rice-Beer in General

Rice-beer is probably the oldest manufactured drink in the world. Many ancient civilizations have Gods assigned specifically to the task of brewing beer. Over the years, beer has grown into types and styles; Indian rice beer is one such type of beer. [4] ‘Handi’ (fermented rice-beer) of the Santal tribe is one such too. Alcohol has played a central role in almost all human cultures since Neolithic times (about 4000 BC). All societies, without exception, make use of intoxicating substances, alcohol being by far the most common. There is convincing evidence that the development of agriculture - regarded as the foundation of

civilization - was based on the cultivation of grain for beer, as much as for bread. The persistence of alcohol use, on a near-universal scale, throughout human evolution, suggests that drinking must have had some significant adaptive benefits, although this does not imply that the practice is invariably beneficial.[5] From the earliest recorded use of alcohol, drinking has been a social activity, and both consumption and behaviour have been subject to self-imposed social controls. Attempts at prohibition have never been successful except when couched in terms of sacred rules in highly religious cultures.

### III. Origin of ‘Handi’ (rice-beer) According to Santal Tribe’s Myth

The origin of the traditional drink ‘Handi’ (rice-beer) among Santals is very much connected with their creation story. ‘Handi’ i.e. rice-beer, is the most sacred and indispensable drink of the Santals. Santals believe in one "supreme being" whom they call Thakur Jiu (Life Giver) or Marangburu (Great Mountain) who is considered to be the "supreme" among all the "religious beings." The most common term used for the Supreme Being these days is Cando Baba (Sun Father).[6] According to a myth, the Supreme deity, ‘Maran Buru’, taught the first human pair of ‘Pilchu Haram’ and ‘Pilchu Budhi’ to prepare ‘handi’. Maran Buru brought the Soma to be with man; the first parents then they made a bowl of green leaves and offered a drink to ‘Maran Buru’. [7] It is, therefore, a very sacred drink to them. [8] The festivals of the Santals would appear lifeless without the rice-beer. It may be noted that Santals would drink not only to enjoy its tastes, but to become nearly intoxicated, so as to forget the troubles of this world. P. O. Bodding also made a similar observation: according to what has been told, they pass through all the stages, some become hilarious, others melancholy, some become abusive, others sing and tell stories and so on. [9]

### IV. Process of Making Rice-Beer in Santal Community

Rice-beer is prepared on most occasions of Santals. The process of making rice-beer is very simple and at the same time it is very complicated for the one who has not experienced it. Rice is cooked and spread over a mat (mostly preferred a mat (Fig.1a), made out of date palm leaves) for 1–2 hours for cooling. After cooling, a home-made ingredient (Fig.2) (made out of a kind of creeper’s bark which is called “Ranu Dari” (Fig.3) in Santali language and non-boiled rice powder) approximately 100 to 200 gm. is mixed with cold rice of approximately 2-3 kg. The mixture (Fig. 1b) is placed in a container mostly preferred mud-pot (Tukuc) (Fig. 4a) and covered with an old jute sack (Fig. 4b) or piece of clean cloth, mostly preferred jute sack, so that minimum vapors can escape out of the container, and kept for 3-5days, it can be more days, depending on the weather conditions hot or cold. After 3-5 days, water is added and kept again for more than 2-3 hours minimum and it can be kept maximum hours. The water is extracted out and consumed as uninstalled rice beer. [10]For distilled rice beer, the mixture is heated and the vapor is collected in another container: a sizable plastic jar, now-a-days preferred mostly glass bottle, the vapors from mud-pot is allowed to pass through a thin plastic pipe into another container for distilled rice-beer (Fig.5).



(Fig. 2)

(Fig. 3)

(Fig. 1a &amp; Fig. 1b)

(Fig.4a &amp; Fig. 4b)

(Fig. 5)

### V. The Ancestors and ‘Handi’ (rice-beer)

From the rites and rituals as practiced by the Santals, it is quite evident that ancestor- worship is a common feature among them. The dead ancestors are the real benefactors of the families or groups to which they belonged and they are easily approachable by their living kin people.[11] Hence, at all important occasions of birth, of marriage, or of death the deceased ancestors are remembered and offered sacrifices. As a symbol

of remembrance and reverence can be like, tumbling a few drops of Handi or Liquor of the bowl made out of leaf or in tumbler where it is served along.

## VI. The ‘Bongas’ (Spirits) and ‘Handi’ (rice-beer)

The Santal believe that the world is inhabited by large number of spiritual beings of various kinds, called ‘bonga’ some of whom are directly connected with the welfare of particular persons and groups. Santals do not have concrete knowledge about the ‘bongas’. The fear, mystery, secrecy of ‘bongas’ (spirits) are psychological factors for being attached to concept of believing ‘bongas’ (spirits). [13] The bonga have much influence on daily living of the Santals. To ensure their continuing care, beside annual sacrifices, the bonga are also remembered on a daily basis. According to the Santal religious beliefs there are two types of bonga—the malevolent and the benevolent ones. The bonga-worship is primarily to please and to invoke the powers of the benevolent bonga and to avert the ill will of the malevolent bonga. The Santals have an innate relationship with their bonga and consider themselves living with them. [14] This relationship is mostly of dependence, submission, propitiation, and reverential fear. They offer supplications—rice-beer and animal sacrifices—in the name of the bonga.

## VII. Santals’ Life and “Handi” ( rice-beer)

Practice of ‘handi’ (rice-beer) in both forms un-distilled (**Fig. 6**) and distilled (**Fig. 7**) are widespread till today in Santal community. The Santal tribal festival is incomplete without the rice-beer called ‘handi’, an indigenous alcoholic-fermented beverage. ‘Handi’ (rice-beer) occupies a pivotal role in the tribal community, socially, culturally and economically. It has religious usages and values. ‘Handi’ (rice-beer) is offered to local deities and in dead ancestors’ rituals. The usage of ‘handi’ (rice-beer) is very common in the occasion of marriages, birth anniversaries and festivals. [15] ‘Handi’ (rice-beer) is also regarded as purificatory. The religious and communal pollution incurred at each critical juncture of life, i.e. at birth, initiation, marriage and death, are removed by the libation of rice-beer to the spirits and then drinking of it by the whole village. Not only at the turning points of their lifecycle, but also pollution on certain other occasions is removed by drinking rice-beer.[16] ‘Handi’(rice-beer) is associated with other Santal festivals and rituals as well like: 1) Sohrai- harvest festival 2) Sakrat- hunting festival 3) Baha Prob- flower festival and so on and so forth. Thus, rice-beer is not only a most important drink item for the Santals, but also regulates their behaviour with other persons.



(Fig.6)



(Fig. 7)

## VIII. Health Benefits of “Handi” (rice-beer)

When taken in limited amounts, there are several benefits of rice-beer. It is also important to remember that too much of any good thing is bad, this holds true for rice-beer too. Too much rice-beer everyday can lead to several health issues. Let us look at some of the health benefits: 1) Prevents Cancer 2) Helps to control diabetes 3) May prevent kidney stones 4) Reduces inflammation 5) Protects heart 6) Improve mental health 7) Regulates blood pressure 8) Strengthen bones 9) Aids digestive process [17] 10) Prevents the anemia 11) Delays aging. [18]

## IX. The Complications of the Ritualistic Drinks ‘Handi’ (rice-beer) in Santals’ Life

‘Handi’ (rice-beer) no doubt is a healthy drink as mentioned above if taken limited and in the rare occasions. Although rice beer is primarily consumed as a kind of ritualistic and energy drinks that gives instant energy to those poor tribal workers who do not have access to adequate food, it invariably becomes a habit later. As



a consequence, people fall into addiction. Moreover, it is cheap as compared to other drinks and it is readily available since it is manufactured locally in villages. Now, for over many years, it has been so much used, so it has established itself as a sort of staple food for the tribal families. That is how the significance of rice beer changes or has changed from being a ritualistic and energy drink to becoming an alcoholic drink. Rice-beer, if over consumed regularly, dulls the human's brain which has a greater impact on the intellectual capability and economic productivity of a person.[19] This has weakened their psychological strength to fight poverty. Widespread alcoholism (due to over consumption of rice beer) has impacted adversely on their growth as well as it has affected education, health, and economic activity.

The Santal women have to work hard and go out for work because most of the male partners are drunk during the daytime and can't work productively. At times some of the Santal families' women have to really struggle for sustenance of the family and for upbringing of the children. Many at times women from many of the Santal families involve in selling 'handi' (rice-beer) in both form un-distilled and distilled as source of family income. This causes the exploitation of the Santal women undeniably. This is how many Santal families are devastated economically, socially and culturally. Education is hampered badly and they end up in miseries.

## CONCLUSION

As it has been mentioned above that 'handi' (rice-beer) in itself is a healthy drink but the question of its uses remains a short of question mark in terms of ritualistic and cultural ceremonies where 'handi' (rice-beer) is totally fused with it, meaning that without Handi (rice-beer) all ceremonies of the Santal do remain dull and motionless. The question is to be asked is that, is there a great need of Handi (rice-beer) in performing the Santal rituals, cultural functions and other social gatherings? If it is so then it has to be underlined, how 'handi'(rice-beer) can be curtailed and restricted only for performing rituals and ceremonies without hampering and diverting the Santal Community towards alcohol addiction then it looks quite rational and sensible.

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