

APPENDIX  
THE SĀNTĀLS OF BĀNKURĀ

THE Sāntāls in this district number 105,682—a total exceeded only in three other districts, viz., Mānbhūm, Midnapore, and the Sāntāl Parganas. Though far away from the main body of the race, they have preserved many of its distinctive customs, and the old tribal life has to a certain extent remained intact. They suffer, however, from the disadvantage of living outside the Sāntāl Parganas, in which special laws have been introduced to protect the simple cultivators from Hindu *mahājans* and to secure them in possession of their lands. For want of such protection, most of the villages in the south and south-west of the district, which until perhaps 20 or 30 years ago almost invariably belonged to Sāntāls, have passed into the possession of Hindu money-lenders; and it is doubtful if the *mahājan* has not obtained a footing in the few villages that are still purely Sāntāl. It is true the Sāntāls still cultivate the village lands, but instead of paying a nominal rent, they now have to make over half the produce of their fields to their landlord, and instead of having a permanent right in the land, they are merely annual tenants.

In spite of this, the character of the Bānkuṛā Sāntāl has not yet been altogether spoiled. He may be described as naturally a brave but shy child of the jungle—simple, truthful, honest and industrious—before he is brought into contact with alien influences and taught to cheat, lie and steal. Even now, it is a somewhat instructive fact that, whereas in a Hindu village agricultural implements have to be carefully housed every night, if they are to be available for the next day's labour, the Sāntāl villager leaves his goods and chattels lying about anywhere, confident that the trust he reposes in his neighbours will not be abused. In Hindu villages again the cultivators find it necessary to erect shelters, and to watch their ripening crops throughout

For this account of the Bānkuṛā Sāntāls I am indebted to a note kindly communicated by the Rev. G. Woodford of the Wesleyan Mission at Sārengā.

the night, in order to prevent the theft of ears of grain. But the Sāntāl in a purely Sāntāl village never dreams of watching for anything but a bear or a wild pig, both of which are apt to play havoc with the little patch of sugarcane that secures the few simple luxuries of the household.

As a cultivator the Sāntāl may not be able to compete with the Bengali in raising the better kinds of rice, but on high rough jungle lands he is much more expert. He has a peculiar skill in converting jungle and waste land into rice fields, and is as much an enemy of jungle as he is of wild beasts. Nor is the latter characteristic unnatural, for apart from the damage caused by bear and wild pig, leopards often cause him heavy loss, constantly carrying off pigs, goats and calves, and not infrequently attacking cows and bullocks as they graze in the jungle. In spite of such drawbacks, many Sāntāl, although possessing very little good rice land, manage in good years to live fairly comfortably on their crops of maize, *kodo*, *til*, linseed and mustard, produced on land that the Bengali cultivator would never attempt to cultivate. Many of the men too are expert weavers, making their own primitive looms. A little patch of cotton surrounds almost every house, and when the women of the family have picked, cleaned and spun it into thread, the head of the household will sit down to weave the cloth for the family for the coming year. And good strong material he produces—not so showy as the imported cloth worn by Bengali women and girls, but often lasting twice as long. The men, as a rule, are content with a small loin cloth, but the women are invariably clad decently in a *sārī* some 15 feet long. This they do not wear over the head like their Bengali sisters, but in graceful folds over their shoulders. The women are exceedingly fond of flowers, and whenever possible, wear one stuck in their hair, which is arranged in a knot at the back of the head.

Practically all the simple necessities of the Sāntāl's life are produced on his own land. He grows his own tobacco; he makes his own oil, which is used for anointing the body as well as for cooking; and most of the spices required for his curry and all his vegetables are home-grown. His intoxicants—and he unfortunately gets through a good deal in the course of the year—he can purchase cheaply at the Government shop; but the *rati* liquor is not to his taste and the force of habit is strong,

so that very frequently the old rice liquor (*hānriā*), prepared in the old way, is still his most usual means of banishing dull care. Practically, the only thing that a fairly well-to-do Sāntāl villager requires to purchase is salt, and this is paid for in kind,—it may be by rice, or by the dried flowers of the *mahuā* tree, or by any other commodity of which he happens to possess more than his family will require for their own use.

Many of the Sāntāls are now labourers pure and simple, having no land at all. These are much sought after by the managers of coal mines and tea gardens on account of their industry and endurance. They prefer, however, to remain in the land of their birth on a much lower wage than they might earn elsewhere; for in Sārengā the cooly earns only 9 pice a day and the *kāmin* or female labourer 6 pice, and they have to keep themselves, whereas near Calcutta men and women can earn 4 annas or even more a day in addition to being provided with food. Still, at certain seasons of the year thousands of Sāntāls may be seen leaving the district in order to obtain work in the fields some five or six days' journey to the east. Often some of the members of the smaller cultivating families go eastward for two or three months in the year, and they usually return with enough cash not only to pay the rent for their land, but also to clear off any little shop debts that the old folk at home may have incurred.

They still largely talk Sāntāli, a language which has been reduced to writing only in recent years. This language, however, is not taught in the schools in the district, and the boys and girls are handicapped badly in having to take their examinations in Bengali. In spite of this, they often manage to hold their own in competition with Bengalis of equal age, and one boy trained in the Wesleyan Mission schools passed the Entrance examination in 1907. But what is perhaps even more encouraging is the fact that in some villages there are now a number of fairly well educated Sāntāls—intelligent, sober, thrifty cultivators of the soil, against whom the wiles of the money-lender should have small chance of success.

The Sāntāls have a well-established and fairly complete system of self-government. The headman of each village, who is known as the *Mānjhi*, is in theory the owner of the village lands, and alone has the power of offering the village sacrifices; when

engaged in his priestly work, he is known as the *Liaya*. The *Mān̄jhi* has three men to assist him in looking after the social and religious welfare of the villagers, known as the *Jog-Mān̄jhi*, the *Parāmānik* and the *Kotāl*. All four offices are hereditary, and their incumbents are responsible for the due performance of all village ceremonies, such as those observed at birth, marriage and death. They give moral instruction to the young, advice to the perplexed, consolation to the bereaved, and, according to their light, endeavour to do good to their village. Over each group of villages there is an officer known as a *Parganait*, to whom an appeal can at any time be made. Should his decision be disputed, a final appeal lies to the whole body of *Parganait*s. These meetings of *Parganait*s usually take place at night at some one or other of the great hunts, when perhaps 6,000 or 8,000 men camp out in the jungle at some particular spot, to which they have come from all quarters of the compass. Except for disputes about land, it is seldom that any disagreements which may arise find their way into the law courts. But the gradual dispossession of their headmen from their lands and the growing power of Hindu *mahājans* in their villages are tending to lessen the power and influence of the *sāntāl* tribunals. Still, as they alone possess, and are likely to continue to possess, the power of outcasting members of the tribe, and thus cutting a man off from all social and religious contact with his fellows, it is unlikely that it will ever be possible to neglect their influence in dealing with the *Sāntāl* either as an individual or a people.

The internal structure of the race is also well preserved. They are divided into 12 tribes or septs, each distinguished by its own family name. Marriage in the same sept is strictly forbidden, and it is probably this fact that is largely responsible for the fine physique of the race. The practice of infant marriage is a growing one, but it is at present far from being customary in this district. Sometimes, when the first wife is childless, a *Sāntāl* will marry a second wife, but polygamy is very unusual. It also happens sometimes that a young wife runs away from her mother-in-law's house back to her father's home; and should she repeat the offence a few times, the price paid to her family will probably be returned to her husband and the marriage dissolved. But her value in the marriage market will have been

considerably reduced by her independent conduct. The *Sāntāls*, like the Hindus, burn their dead. But the burial ceremony is not completed, nor the happiness of the released spirit ensured, until a small portion of the skull has been carried by a friend of the departed to the banks of the *Dāmodar* (the sacred river of the *Sāntāls*) and cast into its waters.

The religion of the *Sāntāls* is of a primitive nature, its main feature being sacrifices made to a number of village and household deities. The village deities reside in the sacred *sāl* trees usually found near the head of the village street, although at times only a stone is found indicating the spot where the trees once stood. The household deities are supposed to reside in a little apartment reserved for their use in every house, however small. Grain and other things are often stored in this apartment, but it is a sacred spot, all the household sacrifices being made at the entrance to it, and no female from any other house may ever enter it. The names of the household deities are kept secret, and are known only to the head of the family. Generally, among the village deities the spirit of the founder of the village, and among the family deities those of departed ancestors are worshipped. The sacrifices usually consist of chickens; but not infrequently goats, and at times even cows, are offered, whilst one of the *Sāntāl* deities has a special preference for the flesh of the pig. The flesh of the animals offered to the deities is consumed by the sacrificers and their friends, and the feast is almost invariably accompanied by drinking and dancing.

A strong belief in witchcraft is firmly established; and the fact that the female members of the community are supposed to have the power of becoming witches is probably, in part at least, accountable for the high esteem in which they are held by the men of the tribe. Should sickness or misfortune overtake anyone, recourse is had at once to a *Kabirāj* (literally, a doctor), one of whom is found in every village. This celebrity has the power of divination by means of *sāl* leaves. When consulted, he takes two leaves and rubs oil on them; then he presses them together; and afterwards he separates them and studies the marks made by the oil. From these he is able to say whether the misfortune is due to sickness pure and simple, or to an evil spirit, or to the malevolence of a witch. If it said to be due to a witch, this is supposed to be outside the domain of the

*Kabirāj*, and recourse is had to the *Jān* or witch doctor, who alone can pronounce authoritatively whether any misfortune is due to witchcraft, and alone can locate the witch. The latter is a much more dreaded foe than a mere spirit, for the latter can be exorcized by a *Kabirāj*, whereas all that one can do with a witch is to use moral suasion, the most effective form of which is believed to be corporal chastisement. The *Jān* also has the power of divining from *sāl* leaves, but the secret of his greatness—and he is indeed great in the *Sāntāl* world—lies in the fact that he is a spirit medium and that his pronouncements are made when he is under intense spiritual influence, when, as the *Sāntāl* tells you, the *wumtig* has taken possession of him. In almost every village there are one or two men who possess the power of putting themselves under the influence of certain spirits, and their aid is frequently sought in the village sacrifices and ceremonies. But their influence is trifling compared with that of the *Jān*, who is often resorted to not only by *Sāntāls*, but also by low caste Hindus, many of whom firmly believe in his power of casting out the demon of cholera from any village that may be attacked.

Hook swinging was, until the last few years, practised in many of the villages near *Sārengā*, and is still practised in spite of the efforts which have been made to suppress it, but it is seldom that a European can get news of it. The *Sāntāls* were as eager to swing as the Hindus, and at one festival some four years ago there were six swings kept busy from early morning until the sun was well nigh overhead. So anxious were the people to secure their turn that frequently two men were lashed together on to the arm of the revolving cross bar, to swing suspended with all their weight taken by a couple of hooks inserted into the muscles of their backs.

The chief amusements of the people are dancing, hunting and cock-fighting; and among these dancing has a foremost place as the national pastime of this primitive people. Generally, but not invariably, only the women and girls dance, and the men play the part of musicians. The women range themselves in a large circle, sometimes two or three rows deep, standing shoulder to shoulder; and half face the centre of the circle, in which the men career wildly about, beating the national drums (*nāgrā*) and marking time for the dancers, who move gracefully

in a stately fashion round and round the circle, slightly advancing and retiring the while. The dance is a harmless and even pretty pastime in itself, but unfortunately it is associated with drinking and its consequent vices. Every now and again the dancers break forth into a weird plaintive kind of chant, somewhat startling when heard for the first time, but not at all unpleasant. All the *Sāntāls'* music appears to a stranger to be like a wailing funeral dirge, but it possesses a certain fascination of its own.

Hunting is another favourite amusement and is practised on a large scale every year in the month of April, i.e., as soon as the *sāl* trees have shed their leaves and progress through the jungle is practicable, and before the work of rice cultivation begins in earnest. The men then swarm through the jungles in their thousands, with their dogs, their bows and arrows, their axes and spears, and woe betide the hare, the jungle-fowl, the peacock, or the deer that crosses their path. Should a leopard charge the line, he may manage to kill or maul one or two of the hunters, but the *Sāntāl's* bow and the spear almost invariably prevail in the end; and when the hunt is over, his skin stuffed with straw will probably be carried round in triumph from village to village, and the fortunate slayer of the common foe congratulated and feasted.

Cock-fighting is exceedingly popular, and nearly every large *Sāntāl* village has its own appointed day each week for the *murgī lauri* as it is called. Often five or six pairs of cocks are fighting at once, in the centre of a ring of some 200 men, usually squatting on the ground, who are keenly excited in the issue of any fight in which their own or their particular friends' cocks are engaged, but take little interest in the others. Spurs, consisting of keen curved blades, are lashed on to the legs of the cocks by the master of the ceremonies, who gets a leg of each cock that is despatched. These ensure a quick termination of the fight, one rush of the combatants often being enough to bring it to a close.