
**ORAL NARRATIVES AND COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS IN
SANTALI TRADITION**

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Abstract

This study explores how oral traditions preserve the unwritten history of the Santali community as documented in *The Santals and Their Folk Literature*. It argues that myths, songs, and folktales function as living archives of memory, identity, and resistance. Drawing on Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Jan Vansina, the study shows how oral narratives challenge dominant written histories and preserve subaltern voices.

Keywords: Santali Oral Tradition, Oral Memory, Identity, Subaltern Studies, Folk Literature, Cultural History.

Introduction

Oral tradition has existed long before the development of written civilization. In many ancient societies, knowledge was preserved not through books or written records but through memory, repetition, rhythm, and collective participation. Communities transmitted their beliefs, customs, myths, and histories from one generation to another through storytelling, songs, chants, and ritual performances. Such traditions were not considered secondary forms of knowledge; rather, they functioned as the primary means through which cultural identity and social memory survived across centuries. Oral narratives therefore served not merely as entertainment but as systems of education, preservation, and historical continuity. In societies where writing was absent or limited, memory itself became an archive, and the human voice became a medium of historical transmission.

The Santali community represents one such rich oral civilization where collective memory continues to survive through spoken narratives and performative traditions. Their songs, myths, folktales, proverbs, and ritual chants preserve experiences that often remain absent from official written histories. These oral forms function as living cultural records that connect the present generation with ancestral knowledge and shared identity. Unlike

written texts, oral traditions remain dynamic because each act of narration renews memory within the community. Storytelling among the Santals is therefore not simply a literary activity but a social and cultural practice that strengthens collective belonging and continuity. Their oral literature preserves ecological awareness, social ethics, spiritual beliefs, and communal relationships in forms that remain emotionally connected with everyday life.

A similar dependence upon oral preservation can also be observed in ancient Indian civilization, particularly in the transmission of the Vedas. Before the widespread use of writing, the Vedas were carefully memorized and orally transmitted by sages and disciples across generations. The Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda survived for centuries through recitation, repetition, and disciplined oral practice. Ancient Hindu sages developed highly sophisticated mnemonic methods to preserve pronunciation, rhythm, and accuracy within Vedic chanting. In this sense, memory functioned as a sacred medium of cultural preservation. The oral transmission of the Vedas demonstrates that some of the earliest forms of Indian knowledge were also dependent upon collective remembrance rather than written documentation. Although the Vedic tradition and Santali oral culture emerge from different social and historical contexts, both reveal the importance of voice, repetition, and intergenerational transmission in preserving cultural identity.

However, there exists an important distinction between these traditions. Vedic oral transmission eventually became institutionalized within structured religious and scholarly systems associated with Brahmanical authority, whereas Santali oral traditions largely remained community-centered and performative. Santali narratives are closely connected with festivals, agricultural life, forests, seasons, dance, music, and communal participation. Their stories are not confined to sacred specialists alone but are shared collectively within everyday social life. Nevertheless, both traditions demonstrate that oral knowledge possesses historical value and intellectual depth. They challenge the assumption that only written texts can preserve civilization or history. Oral traditions, whether Vedic or Santali, reveal that memory itself can function as a powerful cultural archive.

Jan Vansina strongly argues that oral traditions should be understood as historical sources rather than dismissed as unreliable folklore. According to Vansina, oral narratives preserve “historical information” embedded within collective memory and cultural continuity (Vansina 27). His argument becomes particularly significant while studying indigenous communities whose histories were often excluded from official written records. Similarly, Walter J. Ong explains that oral cultures rely upon repetition, rhythm, and communal participation because memory must be continuously reinforced through performance and shared experience. In oral societies, words do not exist as fixed objects upon a page but as living sounds connected with human interaction and social presence (Ong 31). These theoretical perspectives help us understand Santali oral traditions not as primitive

remnants of the past but as complex systems of cultural preservation and historical consciousness.

The importance of oral history becomes even more relevant in postcolonial and subaltern studies. Colonial historiography frequently privileged written archives while marginalizing communities whose histories survived through oral narratives. As a result, tribal and indigenous communities were often represented through the perspectives of colonial administrators, anthropologists, or outsiders rather than through their own voices. Ranajit Guha's concept of "history from below" attempts to recover these neglected voices and experiences by challenging elite-centered historiography. Guha argues that the experiences of marginalized communities possess their own historical agency even when absent from official documentation. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding Santali oral literature because much of Santali history survives through songs, myths, ritual narratives, and collective memory rather than written chronicles.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak further complicates this issue through her discussion of representation and subaltern identity. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak questions whether marginalized communities can truly represent themselves within dominant academic and institutional structures. Her concerns become important while examining tribal oral traditions because the act of documenting oral narratives may sometimes reshape or reinterpret them according to external frameworks. Chittaranjan Kumar Patnaik's *The Santals and Their Folk Literature* therefore becomes especially valuable because it attempts to preserve Santali oral narratives while remaining attentive to their cultural context and performative nature. Patnaik does not merely collect folklore as anthropological material; rather, he presents oral narratives as expressions of collective identity, memory, spirituality, and historical consciousness.

The myth of Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi, for example, reflects not merely an origin story but an entire worldview shaped by coexistence with nature and spiritual balance. Through such narratives, the Santals articulate their relationship with forests, animals, seasons, ancestors, and communal ethics. Oral stories thereby function as repositories of ecological knowledge and cultural philosophy. Festival songs associated with Baha Parab and Sohrai similarly preserve social memory through collective singing and ritual performance. These traditions are repeatedly renewed through participation, allowing the past to remain alive within the present. Unlike written texts that remain physically fixed, oral traditions survive through continuous human interaction and remembrance.

The relationship between memory and identity therefore forms one of the central concerns of this study. Cultural identity is not maintained through biological continuity alone but through shared narratives and collective remembrance. Communities remember themselves through stories, rituals, songs, and myths that connect generations across time.

In Santali society, oral tradition functions as a means through which identity is emotionally and socially reproduced. Stories teach values, explain origins, preserve customs, and strengthen communal belonging. The disappearance of such oral traditions would therefore signify not merely the loss of stories but also the erosion of cultural memory itself.

This study therefore approaches Santali oral literature as both a cultural archive and a form of historical expression. By examining myths, songs, folktales, and collective narratives documented in *The Santals and Their Folk Literature*, the research seeks to understand how oral traditions preserve identity, memory, and subaltern history beyond the boundaries of written historiography. The comparison with Vedic oral transmission further demonstrates that oral preservation has historically played a foundational role in Indian civilization itself. Through this perspective, the study argues that Santali oral literature deserves recognition not merely as folklore but as an important intellectual and historical tradition that continues to preserve the voice, memory, and identity of an indigenous community across generations.

Literature Review

The study of oral tradition has received significant attention from historians, anthropologists, folklorists, and literary scholars who argue that oral narratives preserve cultural memory and historical consciousness beyond written documentation. Among the most influential scholars in this field is Jan Vansina, whose work *Oral Tradition as History* established oral narratives as valuable historical sources rather than unreliable folklore. Vansina argues that oral traditions preserve collective experiences, social values, and historical memory through repeated transmission across generations (Vansina 27). His work challenged the dominance of written historiography and opened new possibilities for studying indigenous and marginalized communities whose histories often survive primarily through speech and performance.

Walter J. Ong further expanded the understanding of oral cultures in *Orality and Literacy*. Ong explains that oral societies depend upon repetition, rhythm, mnemonic patterns, and communal participation because memory functions as the central medium of preservation (Ong 31). According to him, oral expression remains dynamic and performative rather than fixed like written texts. His ideas become particularly relevant while studying Santali oral traditions where myths, songs, folktales, and ritual performances continue to function as living cultural practices.

Within the field of subaltern studies, Ranajit Guha's concept of "history from below" became highly influential in recovering marginalized voices excluded from elite historiography. Guha argues that traditional historical writing frequently ignores the experiences of tribal, peasant, and indigenous communities because their histories do not always appear within official written archives. His theoretical framework therefore provides

an important foundation for understanding Santali oral narratives as alternative forms of historical expression and cultural memory.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" further complicates questions of representation and voice within postcolonial discourse. Spivak highlights the difficulties involved when marginalized communities are represented through dominant academic or institutional structures. Her arguments are particularly significant while examining tribal oral traditions because the process of documentation may sometimes reshape or reinterpret indigenous voices according to external perspectives.

Chittaranjan Kumar Patnaik's *The Santals and Their Folk Literature* occupies an important position within the study of Santali oral culture because the text does not merely collect folktales and songs as isolated folklore materials but presents them as expressions of collective memory and community identity. Patnaik documents myths, ritual songs, proverbs, and oral narratives in ways that reveal the deep relationship between storytelling, spirituality, nature, and social life within Santali society. His work demonstrates that Santali oral traditions preserve not only entertainment and cultural customs but also historical consciousness, ethical values, ecological understanding, and ancestral memory. Through his documentation of narratives such as the myth of Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi, Patnaik brings attention to the richness of Santali oral heritage and its importance as a living cultural archive that continues to sustain identity across generations.

Objectives of the Study

The present study aims to examine how Santali oral traditions preserve collective memory, cultural identity, and historical consciousness through myths, songs, and folktales documented in *The Santals and Their Folk Literature*. The study also seeks to analyze oral narratives as forms of subaltern expression that challenge dominant written histories and sustain indigenous cultural continuity across generations.

Methodology of the Study

This study follows a qualitative and analytical research methodology based primarily on textual analysis and theoretical interpretation. The research examines myths, songs, folktales, and oral narratives documented in Chittaranjan Kumar Patnaik's *The Santals and Their Folk Literature* in order to understand the relationship between oral tradition, memory, and identity within Santali culture. The study also draws upon theoretical perspectives from oral tradition studies, subaltern studies, and postcolonial criticism, particularly the works of Jan Vansina, Walter J. Ong, Ranajit Guha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and scholarly discussions related to oral history and indigenous traditions have also been consulted to support the analysis.

Myth, Song, Memory and Ancestral Consciousness

Santali oral tradition reflects a profound relationship between memory, identity, spirituality, and collective existence. Within Santali society, myths, folktales, songs, proverbs, ritual chants, and festival performances function not merely as cultural

entertainment but as living archives of historical consciousness and ancestral continuity. Oral narratives preserve experiences, beliefs, ethical values, ecological understanding, and communal identity across generations through repeated storytelling and collective participation. Unlike written literature, oral tradition survives through memory, voice, rhythm, and performance, making storytelling itself an important social act. Chittaranjan Kumar Patnaik's *The Santals and Their Folk Literature* becomes especially significant because it documents these oral expressions while preserving their cultural and spiritual context. His work demonstrates that Santali oral narratives are deeply connected with everyday life, nature, ritual practice, and ancestral remembrance rather than existing as isolated literary forms.

One of the central narratives within Santali oral tradition is the myth of Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi, who are regarded as the first human ancestors within Santali cosmology. According to the narrative documented by Patnaik, Thakur Jiu created Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi and placed them within the natural world surrounded by forests, rivers, birds, animals, and spiritual forces (Patnaik 42). Their existence depended upon coexistence with nature and respect for spiritual balance rather than domination over the environment. Through this origin myth, the Santals express a worldview where human life remains interconnected with ecological and spiritual harmony. The narrative therefore functions not only as a creation story but also as a philosophical reflection upon the relationship between humanity and nature.

In several ways, the narrative of Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi bears thematic similarities to the Hindu mythological figures Manu and Satarupa, who are also associated with the origin of humankind within Hindu cosmology. However, an important distinction separates these traditions. The stories of Manu and Satarupa gradually became preserved within written scriptures and religious texts, whereas the Santali origin myth survived primarily through oral transmission and communal storytelling across generations. This distinction highlights the cultural importance of oral memory within Santali society. While written traditions depend upon textual preservation, Santali cultural continuity relies upon collective remembrance, performance, and oral narration. Patnaik's documentation therefore becomes important because it records oral narratives that previously survived mainly through spoken tradition (Patnaik 45).

The concept of Hapram further strengthens the connection between ancestry, spirituality, and oral memory within Santali culture. Hapram refers to ancestral spirits who continue to remain emotionally and spiritually connected with the living community. Ancestors are remembered not through written genealogies but through ritual songs, oral invocations, ceremonies, and communal worship practices. Patnaik notes that ancestral remembrance occupies an important place within Santali religious life because the dead are believed to continue guiding and protecting future generations through spiritual presence

(Patnaik 91). Hapram worship therefore functions as both spiritual devotion and collective memory-making. Through oral ritual practices, the community preserves emotional continuity between past and present generations.

This belief system also reveals certain similarities with Hindu ancestral worship traditions, particularly Shraddha and Pitru rituals where ancestors are remembered through ceremonial offerings and prayers. In both traditions, ancestors continue to occupy a respected spiritual position within community life. Yet an important cultural difference remains visible. Hindu ancestral rituals gradually became integrated into scriptural and priest-centered religious structures, whereas Hapram worship continues to remain deeply oral, community-centered, and performative. Songs, chants, dance, ritual participation, and collective remembrance form essential aspects of Santali ancestral worship. Oral tradition therefore remains inseparable from spiritual practice itself.

Festival traditions among the Santals further preserve collective identity through seasonal celebration, communal participation, and oral performance. Baha Parab, the spring flower festival, occupies a central place within Santali cultural life. Celebrated during the arrival of spring, the festival symbolizes fertility, renewal, harmony, and the intimate relationship between humans and nature. Songs associated with Baha Parab celebrate forests, flowers, birds, rivers, and agricultural cycles that sustain community life. Patnaik explains that these festival songs preserve emotional continuity and communal memory through collective singing and ritual performance (Patnaik 67). The oral songs performed during Baha Parab therefore function not only as artistic expressions but also as repositories of ecological consciousness and cultural identity.

In certain ways, Baha Parab may be compared with Indian spring festivals such as Vasant Utsav and Holi, which also celebrate renewal, fertility, seasonal transformation, and collective joy. However, Baha Parab retains a stronger ecological and village-centered identity closely connected with forests, agriculture, and indigenous ritual practices. The celebration emerges directly from the rhythms of nature rather than from institutional religious systems. Flowers and natural elements occupy sacred significance within the festival because they symbolize continuity between human existence and the natural world. Through music, dance, ritual offerings, and communal gathering, oral tradition becomes inseparable from seasonal life itself.

The Sohrai festival similarly reflects the Santals' close connection with agriculture, labor, cattle, and harvest cycles. Celebrated after the harvest season, Sohrai includes songs, ritual dances, wall paintings, and ceremonial gatherings expressing gratitude toward nature and collective survival. Patnaik documents how songs performed during Sohrai preserve memories of agricultural labor, social cooperation, and communal prosperity (Patnaik 73). Oral tradition within the festival therefore becomes a means through which the community

remembers both material survival and spiritual continuity. Music and storytelling transform agricultural celebration into cultural memory.

Songs occupy an especially important place within Santali oral civilization because memory is frequently preserved through rhythm and collective performance. Traditional musical instruments such as the tamak and tumdak accompany oral songs during festivals, marriages, rituals, and communal gatherings. Patnaik observes that Santali folk songs often portray rivers, forests, flowers, birds, and village life with emotional intimacy, reflecting a worldview deeply rooted in ecological coexistence (Patnaik 74). Such songs preserve not merely emotion or entertainment but also collective ethics, social values, and environmental understanding. The repetitive structure of oral songs further helps preserve memory across generations within communities where oral transmission remains central.

Folk dances also contribute significantly to Santali collective identity. Group dancing during festivals symbolizes unity, continuity, and communal participation. Dance performances are usually accompanied by oral songs and musical rhythms that strengthen emotional bonds among participants. Unlike individualistic artistic traditions, Santali dance remains deeply collective and participatory. Cultural memory therefore survives not only through spoken language but also through bodily performance, rhythm, and ritual movement. Oral tradition in Santali culture must therefore be understood as a multidimensional process involving voice, gesture, song, dance, and social participation simultaneously.

Proverbs and folk sayings represent another important dimension of Santali oral literature. These concise expressions preserve practical wisdom, moral values, humor, and collective experience in memorable forms. Patnaik's collection of Santali proverbs demonstrates how closely oral expression remains connected with nature, labor, agriculture, forests, and village relationships (Patnaik 83). Proverbs survive because they can easily be remembered and repeated within everyday social interaction. Through ordinary speech, oral tradition becomes integrated into daily life and communal communication.

The performative character of Santali oral tradition also distinguishes it from written literary culture. Walter J. Ong explains that oral societies depend heavily upon repetition, rhythm, and communal participation because memory requires continuous reinforcement through performance (Ong 31). Santali storytelling traditions clearly reflect this principle. Myths and songs are rarely experienced in isolation; they are performed collectively during rituals, festivals, seasonal celebrations, and village gatherings. Oral narratives therefore remain socially alive because they are continuously renewed through participation and shared remembrance.

The preservation of Santali oral culture also possesses important significance within subaltern studies and postcolonial discourse. Colonial historiography often ignored

indigenous histories because they lacked written documentation and institutional archives. Tribal communities were frequently represented as “primitive” or historically insignificant within colonial frameworks. Ranajit Guha’s concept of “history from below” challenges this exclusion by emphasizing the importance of recovering marginalized voices and experiences outside elite historiography. Santali oral traditions therefore function as alternative historical archives preserving indigenous experiences excluded from dominant written narratives.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s discussion in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” further raises important questions regarding representation and voice. Spivak argues that marginalized communities are often interpreted through dominant institutional structures rather than being allowed to represent themselves directly. This concern becomes relevant while documenting tribal oral traditions because the process of converting oral narratives into written academic discourse may alter their original performative and cultural context. Patnaik’s *The Santals and Their Folk Literature* nevertheless attempts to preserve Santali oral narratives with considerable sensitivity toward indigenous worldview and communal memory.

Ultimately, Santali oral tradition demonstrates that history, identity, and cultural continuity do not depend exclusively upon written archives. Myths, songs, proverbs, dances, rituals, festivals, and ancestral worship together preserve collective memory across generations through oral transmission and communal participation. The Santals maintain continuity with their ancestors not through written historical records but through living performance, storytelling, and ritual remembrance. Chittaranjan Kumar Patnaik’s *The Santals and Their Folk Literature* therefore emerges as an important documentation of indigenous oral civilization where voice itself becomes a carrier of memory, identity, spirituality, and historical consciousness.

Research Scope and Gap

Although oral traditions have been widely studied within folklore, anthropology, and cultural studies, Santali oral literature still remains comparatively underexplored within mainstream literary and historical discourse. Most existing studies focus either on tribal customs or general folklore documentation without examining oral narratives as systems of historical consciousness, memory, and indigenous identity. Limited scholarly attention has been given to the relationship between oral tradition, ecological worldview, ancestral spirituality, and subaltern historiography within Santali culture. This study therefore attempts to bridge the gap between oral tradition studies and subaltern discourse by analyzing myths, songs, festivals, and ancestral beliefs documented in *The Santals and Their Folk Literature*. The research further opens possibilities for future studies on indigenous environmental ethics, performance traditions, translation politics, and the preservation of endangered oral cultures in contemporary society.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Santali oral traditions function as powerful repositories of memory, identity, spirituality, and historical consciousness. Myths, songs, festivals, ancestral beliefs, and ritual performances preserve collective experiences across generations through oral transmission and communal participation. Chittaranjan Kumar Patnaik's *The Santals and Their Folk Literature* reveals that oral narratives are not merely folklore materials but living cultural archives sustaining indigenous identity and ecological understanding. The study also shows that oral traditions challenge the dominance of written historiography by preserving marginalized voices outside official historical records.

In contemporary society, rapid modernization, migration, and digital transformation increasingly threaten indigenous oral cultures. Future research may therefore focus on digital preservation, translation studies, performance documentation, and comparative indigenous literary traditions. Dominant social and academic institutions should actively support indigenous communities through cultural documentation, educational inclusion, linguistic preservation, and respectful representation rather than treating tribal traditions as primitive or disappearing cultures. Indigenous oral heritage must be recognized as an important intellectual and cultural resource capable of enriching broader understandings of history, ecology, community life, and collective memory.

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