

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.66871/ihj.v1i1.004>

Santhal Oral Narratives and the Rewriting of the Indigenous Past as Counter-History in a Polarised India

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Abstract

This research examines how Santhal oral traditions challenge conventional approaches to writing history in India through counter-narratives that contest racial and developmental representations of Indigenous peoples. Santhal histories have long been marginalised, fragmented, or distorted by colonial ethnographic and bureaucratic archives that constructed them as primitive, tribal, and ahistorical. Drawing on oral traditions, landscape-based narratives, and performance, this article demonstrates how Santhal communities employ alternative epistemologies to understand and represent their past. It highlights silences and distortions in official records and shows how oral traditions reconstruct alternative histories while serving political functions, enabling marginalised communities to assert claims to land, history, identity, and moral authority amid growing social exclusion and political divisions.

The article argues that Santhal oral narratives are not merely instruments of cultural preservation or supplementary sources but conceptual interventions that expose the epistemic violence embedded in dominant historical scholarship. Grounded in memory, identity, and community attachment, these narratives challenge prevailing accounts of colonialism, nationalism, and development while contributing to broader debates on decolonial methodologies, subaltern epistemology, and Indigenous historiography. By treating Indigenous narrative practices as theoretical work, the study challenges historical models that marginalise alternative voices and opens possibilities for more inclusive understandings of the past and future.

Keywords: Santhal Oral Narratives, Counter-History, Indigenous Epistemologies, Narrativising Marginality, Identity Politics, Decolonial Methodologies, Subaltern Studies, Historical Memory

Received: 04/06/2026 | **Accepted:** 10/09/2026 | **Published:** 20/09/2026

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Introduction

The historiography of India's Indigenous communities has, for the greater part of two centuries, been written by others. Colonial ethnographers, missionaries, revenue officials, and, after 1947, the functionaries of a developmental state produced the documents on which the historical record of communities such as the Santhal now rests—census schedules, gazetteers, settlement reports, and welfare files. These documents were never neutral instruments of description. They were technologies of governance, designed to render a heterogeneous and mobile population legible, taxable, and administrable. In the process, they fixed the Santhal within a small repertoire of categories—"primitive tribe," "criminal tribe," "aboriginal," "backward class"—each of which carried its own assumptions about historical time, civilisational stage, and political capacity. What such categories foreclosed was the possibility that the Santhal possessed, and continued to possess, an independent historical consciousness: a way of narrating origin, migration, rebellion, and loss that did not depend on the colonial or postcolonial archive for its authority. This article takes as its problem the disjuncture between that official record and the oral tradition that Santhal communities have sustained across generations through myth, genealogy, song, and performance. It asks what happens to the writing of history when oral narrative is treated not as folklore ancillary to the archive, but as a rival and, in places, a superior account of the past—one that encodes claims to land, moral standing, and political identity that the written record either omits or actively suppresses. The stakes of this question have sharpened considerably in the present decade, as debates over Adivasi religious and political identity in eastern and central India have become entangled with a wider polarisation of public discourse along religious and nationalist lines.

The article has three related aims. First, it seeks to demonstrate, through close attention to specific bodies of Santhal oral narrative, that these traditions function as historiography in their own right rather than as decorative supplement to it. Second, it traces the mechanisms—silence, distortion, and selective incorporation—through which the official archive has historically managed and marginalised this counter-tradition. Third, it situates this contest between archive and oral memory within the contemporary political moment, in which the question of who the Adivasi is, and to which religious and national community she belongs, has become an active site of contestation. The scope of the article is necessarily selective: it draws on published ethnographic and historiographic material concerning the Santhal, together with the wider theoretical literature on subaltern and decolonial historiography, rather than on new primary fieldwork. Its contribution lies in the synthesis of these materials into a sustained argument about the historiographic and political function of Indigenous oral narrative. This argument carries relevance beyond the specific case of the Santhal. Compara-

ble questions attend the oral traditions of numerous Adivasi communities across the Chota Nagpur plateau and adjoining regions—the Munda, the Ho, the Oraon—whose own origin and migration Narratives have been subject to similar patterns of ethnographic capture and administrative reclassification. While this article confines its close analysis to Santhal material, the historiographical method it proposes—reading oral tradition as counter-history rather than as ancillary folklore—is intended as a transferable one, applicable in principle to any Indigenous community whose own account of its past has been marginalised by a state archive constructed largely without its participation.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The theoretical starting point for this article is the body of work associated with the Subaltern Studies collective, and in particular Ranajit Guha's argument that the peasant and tribal insurgent possessed an autonomous political consciousness that colonial and nationalist historiography alike had suppressed or misrecognised.¹ Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* remains the foundational text for reading insurgency—including the Santhal Hul of 1855–56—not as blind reaction to exploitation but as the expression of a coherent, if unfamiliar, political grammar. Guha's later essays, collected in *The Small Voice of History*, extend this argument by insisting that the historian must attend to the fragments, rumours, and oral testimonies that the official record treats as noise, since it is precisely in these fragments that subaltern agency survives.² This article extends Guha's method from the moment of insurgency to the broader field of oral tradition—myth, genealogy, and song—arguing that the same interpretive labour that recovers political consciousness from the archive of the 1855 rebellion can and should be applied to the everyday narrative practices through which Santhal communities have continued to construct their own history. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's interrogation of whether the subaltern can speak sharpens the problem this article addresses.³ Spivak's caution—that the recovery of subaltern voice by the outside scholar risks reproducing the very ventriloquism it seeks to correct—is taken seriously here as a methodological constraint rather than dismissed as an obstacle. The article does not claim to give the Santhal a voice they did not already possess; it argues, rather, that Santhal oral tradition already constitutes a historiographical practice, and that the scholarly task is to recognise it as such rather than to translate it into evidentiary fragments serving an external historical narrative.

1 Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), p.1.

2 Ranajit Guha, *The Small Voice of History: Collected Essays* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010), p.67

3 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

A second body of theory concerns the status of oral tradition as historical evidence. Jan Vansina's foundational work on oral tradition as history argued that orally transmitted material, subject to appropriate source criticism, could yield historical knowledge with a rigour comparable to that of the written document, provided the historian attended to the specific transmission chains, mnemonic devices, and performative contexts through which oral material is preserved and altered.⁴ This article adopts Vansina's insistence that oral tradition be evaluated on its own terms—as a structured, socially regulated mode of transmission—rather than measured against the written archive as a deficient copy of it. At the same time, the article departs from a purely evidentiary reading of oral tradition, of the kind that treats myth chiefly as a corrupted record of literal events to be decoded. Following recent work in Indigenous and decolonial historiography, it treats Santhal narrative as simultaneously historical and theoretical: origin narratives, migration accounts, and rebellion songs do not merely encode past events but articulate a framework of land, kinship, and moral order through which the Santhal community continues to interpret its present circumstances. Dipesh Chakrabarty's project of provincialising the historicist assumptions embedded in European historiography provides a further theoretical resource.⁵ Chakrabarty's argument that the modern historical discipline universalised a particular, Europe-derived sense of secular, empty, homogeneous time—against which all other societies were measured and found “not yet” historical—helps explain why Santhal narrative, structured around cyclical ritual time, ancestral genealogy, and sacred landscape, could be dismissed by colonial and postcolonial scholarship alike as myth rather than history. Reading Santhal oral tradition as counter-history therefore requires suspending the assumption that historicity is properly measured only in the chronological, document-based idiom of the colonial archive. Indigenous literary and cultural scholarship in India—including efforts such as G. N. Devy's documentation of tribal oral literatures under the Bhasha and People's Linguistic Survey initiatives—has argued in a parallel register that Adivasi oral literatures constitute an intellectual tradition in their own right, one whose neglect by mainstream literary and historical scholarship is itself a form of epistemic exclusion.⁶ This article situates its analysis of Santhal material within this wider decolonial reorientation, in which the oral is read not as a diminished substitute for writing but as an alternative and, for many purposes, more capacious historiographical medium.

Historical Context: The Santhal Encounter with Colonial and Postcolonial Archives

4 Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p.89

5 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.23.

6 G. N. Devy, *Painted Words: An Anthology of Tribal Literature* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2002), p.27.

The Santhal Hul of 1855–56, led by the brothers Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, remains the single most extensively archived episode in Santhal history, precisely because it forced the colonial state to produce a documentary record—revenue reports, court proceedings, and the correspondence of district officials—in order to explain and suppress it. W. W. Hunter’s *Annals of Rural Bengal*, published in 1868, offered an early and influential colonial account that framed the rebellion as a largely defensive response by an otherwise peaceable people to the depredations of moneylenders and revenue officials, a framing that, whatever its sympathies, still positioned the Santhal as reactive rather than as bearers of an independent political will.⁷ Ranajit Guha’s later re-reading of the same material inverted this emphasis, arguing that the Hul expressed a distinct insurgent consciousness legible in its own idiom of religious sanction, rumour, and collective oath-taking, in which the Murmu brothers’ claims to divine mandate functioned as genuine political authority rather than as superstition to be explained away.⁸ What is significant for this article is less the content of these competing colonial and subaltern readings than the fact that both are constructed almost entirely from the written archive of the colonial state—settlement records, court depositions, and administrative correspondence—with Santhal oral memory of the Hul entering the historiography, where it enters at all, as corroborating colour rather than as an independent source. Yet the Hul survives within Santhal communities today in song and commemorative practice that encode a rather different set of emphases: the moral wrong of land dispossession by outsiders, the sanctity of the brothers’ summons, and the community’s continuing self-understanding as a people who once rose, collectively, in defence of their land. Reading this oral commemorative tradition alongside, rather than beneath, the archival record allows the historian to see the Hul not only as an event the state needed to document and contain, but as a moment that Santhal communities have continued to narrate on their own terms, as founding proof of collective political agency.

The decline of colonial authority did not dissolve the administrative apparatus through which the Santhal, and Adivasi communities more broadly, were rendered governable; it largely inherited and repurposed that apparatus. The postcolonial Indian state’s classification of the Santhal as a Scheduled Tribe preserved, in modified form, the colonial ethnographic logic recorded in district gazetteers such as L. S. S. O’Malley’s account of the Santal Parganas, which had first classified the Santhal as a distinct, custom-governed “aboriginal” population requiring separate administration.⁹ This classificatory continuity has had a paradoxical effect: it has furnished a legal and constitutional basis for affir-

7 W. W. Hunter, *Annals of Rural Bengal* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1868), p.45.

8 Guha, R. *Elementary Aspects*, p.38.

9 L. S. S. O’Malley, *Bihar and Orissa District Gazetteers: Santal Parganas* (Patna: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1910), p.67.

mative protections while simultaneously reinscribing, at the level of bureaucratic category, the same developmental hierarchy—tribal as prior to, and less developed than, the national mainstream—that colonial ethnography had constructed. This logic of classification, moreover, was never specific to the administration of the Santal Parganas alone; it formed part of a wider colonial apparatus that produced “aboriginality” as a racialised category applicable across very different colonial labour markets. Kaushik Ghosh’s analysis of the indentured labour system shows how the same vocabulary of primitivism that classified the Santhal as a tribal population in situ also classified Adivasi labourers more broadly as a distinct, racially marked category of indentured worker in the plantation economies to which colonial recruitment dispersed them, a population held by racial theory to be suited to certain forms of manual labour and unsuited to the fuller political personhood accorded to the colonial subject in general.¹⁰ Read alongside this wider labour-market history, the administrative classification of the Santhal as “primitive tribe” appears not as an isolated ethnographic judgment confined to one district but as one local instance of an empire-wide racial taxonomy. Sumit Guha’s longer-run history of ethnicity and environment in India further suggests that such classificatory categories, once inscribed in administrative practice, display a marked durability across regime change, migrating with only minor adjustment from colonial to nationalist to developmental state—a pattern that helps explain why the Scheduled Tribe category could inherit so much of the colonial ethnographic logic it was ostensibly designed to remedy.¹¹ Between 1871 and 1951 the colonial and early postcolonial census included a distinct tribal or “animist” religious category, which was subsequently dropped, leaving Sarna-worshipping Adivasis to be recorded, where they were recorded at all, under an undifferentiated “Other Religions” designation, a gap that the 2011 Census left unresolved.¹² This administrative erasure is a recent instance of the same bureaucratic logic: the archive continues to lack a category adequate to Santhal self-description.

Methodology

This article proceeds through a qualitative, interpretive synthesis of published ethnographic, historiographic, and folkloristic material on the Santhal, read alongside the theoretical literature on subaltern and decolonial historiography introduced above. Three categories of source material are

10 Kaushik Ghosh, “A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labor Market of Colonial India,” in *Subaltern Studies X*, ed. Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash, and Susie Tharu (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 8–48.

11 Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200–1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.78.

12 “Adivasi Movement for a Separate Sarna Code in Indian Census,” Participedia, October 3, 2024, <https://participedia.net/case/13432>.

drawn upon. The first consists of documented Santhal oral narrative—cosmogonic myth, clan genealogy, and commemorative song—as recorded in the ethnographic and folkloristic literature, including nineteenth- and twentieth-century compilations undertaken in collaboration with Santhal informants and subsequent anthropological work on Santhal religion and social structure. The second consists of the colonial and postcolonial administrative archive concerning the Santhal, including settlement reports, gazetteers, and census documentation. The third consists of contemporary journalistic and policy material documenting the ongoing Sarna code movement, used to situate the historiographical argument within its present political context. The analytical method is comparative and structural: passages of oral narrative are read against corresponding moments or silences in the official record to identify the specific historiographical work—affirmation, contradiction, or supplementation—that the oral material performs. Consistent with Spivak’s caution regarding the risks of speaking for the subaltern,¹³ this article does not claim to present new oral testimony collected through original fieldwork, nor does it claim interpretive authority over the internal meaning of Santhal ritual and narrative that properly belongs to the community itself. Its contribution is historiographical and theoretical: it argues for a particular way of reading already-documented Santhal oral material in relation to the written archive, and it draws out the political stakes of that reading in the present. This is a limitation as much as a method, and the article’s conclusions should be read as an argument for further collaborative, community-grounded research rather than as a substitute for it.

Santhal Oral Narratives as Counter-History

The Santhal creation narrative recounts how the supreme being, variously named Thakur Jiu or Marang Buru, caused the earth to be raised from a primordial ocean with the aid of a tortoise, an earthworm, and other creatures, and how two birds, having found land on which to nest, laid eggs from which the first human couple, *Pilchu Haram* and *Pilchu Budhi*, were born. The couple’s descendants—seven sons and a number of daughters in most recorded versions—became the founding ancestors of the exogamous clans (*paris*) into which Santhal society continues to be organised, each clan tracing its name and its marriage prohibitions to this originary division. This narrative was itself the object of an early and significant act of textual capture: the Norwegian missionary L. O. Skrefsrud recorded a version of Santhal tradition and law dictated to him by the Santhal elder Kolean Guru, published as *Horkoren Mare Hapramko Reak Katha* (“Traditions and Institutions of the Santals”) and later translated and annotated by P. O. Bodding, a text that remains a primary reference point for

13 Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 271–313.

later ethnography of the Santhal.¹⁴ Comparative anthropological treatment of Santhal social structure, including Martin Orans's study of the Santal search for a "great tradition," has likewise drawn on this originary narrative to explain the clan system's internal logic, even where such scholarship has tended to treat the narrative chiefly as ethnographic data rather than as historiographical argument in its own right.¹⁵

This textual history has itself become an object of renewed scholarly attention. Marine Carrin's study of how Bodding compiled and annotated his Santal dictionary and related ethnographic texts argues that the missionary-ethnographer's engagement with Santhal informants, whatever its colonial framing, could not fully contain or standardise a body of oral material that continued to exceed the categories the dictionary imposed on it.¹⁶ A more recent compilation by Peter Andersen, Marine Carrin, and Santosh Soren gathers a wider selection of such Santhal-authored and Santhal-narrated texts—including an eyewitness account of the 1855 Hul alongside creation myth and clan legend—treating them not as raw folkloric data but as a connected corpus through which Santhal communities have continued to reassert ethnic identity in narrative form across more than a century.¹⁷ Carrin's earlier ethnographic study of Santhal ritual symbolism similarly reads the origin narrative's cosmological imagery—the tortoise, the earthworm, the raising of land from the primordial ocean—not as inert mythological ornament but as a structured ritual grammar that continues to organise Santhal understandings of fertility, land, and social reproduction in the present.¹⁸ Read merely as myth, the *Pilchu Haram–Pilchu Budhi* narrative might be filed alongside comparable creation stories from other communities as an item of comparative folklore. Read as counter-history, however, the narrative performs specific historiographical work. It establishes an account of origin and social order that is entirely independent of, and prior to, any colonial or Hindu genealogical scheme; it grounds the clan system, and with it the rules of marriage, inheritance, and community membership, in an authority that requires no external ratification; and it locates the Santhal people's claim to personhood and social order in a cosmology answerable only to itself. Against colonial ethnographic classifications that positioned the Santhal as a people without history—possessing custom but not chronicle—the origin

14 P. O. Bodding, *Traditions and Institutions of the Santals: Horkoren Mare Hapramko Reak Katha*, trans. from the Santhali dictation of Kolean Guru, originally recorded by L. O. Skrefsrud (Oslo: Instituttet for Sammenlignende Kulturforskning, 1942), p.4.

15 Martin Orans, *The Santal: A Tribe in Search of a Great Tradition* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1965), p.56.

16 Marine Carrin, "The Making of an Encyclopedic Dictionary: How P. O. Bodding Re-Enchanted Santal Words," *Journal of Adivasi and Indigenous Studies* 9, no. 2 (2019): 1–13.

17 Peter B. Andersen, Marine Carrin, and Santosh K. Soren, *From Fire-Rain to Insurrection: Reasserting Ethnic Identity through Narratives* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2011), p.46.

18 Marine Carrin, *La Fleur et l'Os: Symbolisme et Rituel chez les Santal* (Paris: EHESS, 1986), p.89.

narrative asserts precisely the opposite: a coherent, internally authorised account of how the Santhal people and their social institutions came into being, functioning, for the community, in much the same authorising capacity that a written constitutional or legal charter performs for a modern nation-state. The clan system that the origin narrative authorises is not merely a genealogical curiosity; it continues to regulate marriage prohibition, ritual obligation, and dispute resolution within Santhal communities in the present, which means that the narrative's historiographical force is not confined to establishing a remote point of origin but is renewed every time the clan system is invoked to arrange a marriage, settle an inheritance, or adjudicate a village dispute. In this sense the *Pilchu Haram–Pilchu Budhi* narrative operates less like a founding document consulted only in moments of crisis than like a constitution continuously enacted through ordinary social practice, its historical authority reaffirmed by use rather than merely asserted once at the point of narration.

A second strand of Santhal oral tradition concerns migration: narratives recounting the community's movement from an ancestral plateau region, frequently named in Santhali tradition as Hihiri-Pipiri, through a sequence of named territories—among them Chae-Champa, remembered as “the land of the seven rivers”—before settling in the Chota Nagpur plateau and the region later designated the Santal Parganas. Anthropological readers of this material have long noted the difficulty of correlating these place-names with any single, verifiable historical geography; the toponyms shift between recitations, and the sequence of settlements is better understood as a mnemonic and moral itinerary than as a literal route march. This has sometimes led external scholarship to treat the migration narrative as historically unreliable, useful only as raw material from which a plausible migration history might, with effort, be reconstructed. Such a reading, however, misconstrues the narrative's historiographical function. The migration tradition does not merely record where the Santhal travelled; it establishes, through the recitation of successive homelands, a continuous claim of belonging that precedes and is independent of any settlement, revenue, or land-title document the colonial or postcolonial state might produce. Where the written record of land tenure in the Santal Parganas begins only with colonial settlement operations of the nineteenth century, recorded in gazetteers such as O'Malley's,¹⁹ the oral migration tradition asserts an occupancy and attachment to land that is considerably older, and that requires no colonial surveyor's certification. W. G. Archer's mid-twentieth-century study of Santhal customary law, compiled during his period as a colonial administrator in the Santal Parganas, offers a further illustration of how incompletely the written record could capture land-related custom: even a sympathetic colonial compilation of Santhal law found itself repeatedly translating customary practices of land use and inheritance into an idiom of codified rule that the Santhal community itself did not straightforwardly recognise as equivalent to its own unwritten and

19 O'Malley, Bihar and Orissa District Gazetteers, p.67.

orally transmitted understanding of proper land relations.²⁰ In a context in which land alienation from Adivasi communities to non-tribal settlers and moneylenders was, and remains, a central grievance—the very grievance that precipitated the Hul of 1855–56 and that continues to animate legal protections such as the Chota Nagpur and Santal Parganas Tenancy Acts—the migration narrative functions as a counter-title: a form of historical evidence for belonging that operates in a register the written land record cannot fully capture or displace. The commemorative memory of the 1855–56 Hul, sustained through song, seasonal observance, and the naming of the rebellion’s leaders as figures of near-sacral standing, constitutes a third and more directly political strand of oral counter-history. Where the colonial archive recorded the rebellion chiefly as a problem of order to be suppressed and subsequently explained, and where even sympathetic colonial and later nationalist historiography tended to read the uprising through categories of economic grievance or proto-nationalist awakening, Santhal commemorative tradition preserves a rather different emphasis: the moral legitimacy of the brothers’ call to arms as a divinely sanctioned defence of the community against outsiders, and the continuing exemplary status of that defence as proof of collective capacity for self-assertion. This is precisely the register of insurgent consciousness that Guha’s subaltern historiography sought to recover from within the colonial archive itself;²¹ the argument advanced here is that this consciousness did not require recovery from the archive at all, since it had already been continuously preserved, in a different medium, by the community whose history it concerned.

The eyewitness Santhal-language narrative of the 1855 uprising collected in Andersen, Carrin, and Soren’s compilation illustrates this point concretely: where the colonial depositions taken after the rebellion recorded the uprising chiefly as a sequence of criminal acts to be established and adjudicated, the Santhal narrator’s own account foregrounds the moral legitimacy of the brothers’ summons and frames the violence that followed as defensive and sanctioned rather than criminal, a difference of narrative emphasis that no amount of translation into the colonial legal idiom fully erases.²² The oral tradition of the Hul thus stands not as a supplement to the archival record of 1855–56 but as a rival historiography, one that has continued to be transmitted, revised, and performed long after the colonial documents that first tried to contain the rebellion were filed away.

Oral Narrative and the Political Present: Identity in a Polarised India

The contemporary movement for a separate Sarna religious code in the Indian census offers the

20 W. G. Archer, *Tribal Law and Justice: A Report on the Santal* (Delhi: Concept Publishing, 1984), p.108.

21 Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, p.30.

22 Andersen, Carrin, and Soren, *From Fire-Rain to Insurrection*, p.35.

clearest illustration of how Santhal and allied Adivasi oral and cosmological tradition continues to function as political counter-history in the present. Sarna worship, centred on the veneration of sacred groves and the nature-based cosmology articulated in narratives such as that of *Pilchu Haram* and *Pilchu Budhi*, has been the subject of a sustained campaign—led by organisations including the Kendriya Sarna Samiti and the Rashtriya Adivasi Samnvay Samiti, and supported by the Jharkhand state government—to secure Sarna recognition as a distinct religious category, separate from the Hinduism to which Adivasi belief is frequently assimilated by the state.²³ The Jharkhand Legislative Assembly passed a resolution to this effect in November 2020, and the demand has been pressed by successive state governments in relation to subsequent census exercises,²⁴ with Adivasi organisations pointing out that a colonial-era census category for tribal religion—variously enumerated as “animist” or “aboriginal”—existed between 1871 and 1951 and was subsequently withdrawn, leaving Sarna worshippers to be counted, if at all, only under a residual “Other” category after the 2016 removal of that designation altogether.²⁵ This history of classificatory erasure is itself a demonstration of the argument advanced throughout this article: that the official record has, across the colonial-to-post-colonial transition, systematically declined to produce a category adequate to Santhal and Adivasi self-description, even as the community’s own cosmological narrative has continuously supplied one. The demand has not been confined to Jharkhand alone. Given that significant Santhal populations are settled across Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, and Assam, following patterns of migration and colonial-era plantation and mining labour recruitment that themselves form part of the historical experience this article has traced in Section 3.2, organisations representing Sarna followers have pressed state governments across this wider region to adopt resolutions in support of a national Sarna code, with Jharkhand’s 2020 assembly resolution serving as a template subsequently invoked in advocacy directed at neighbouring states.²⁶ This inter-state character of the movement matters for the argument advanced here: it indicates that the oral cosmological tradition on which the Sarna code claim rests is not a localised curiosity but a shared reference point capable of coordinating political demand across a Santhal and pan-Adivasi population dispersed by more than a century of labour migration—itself a legacy of the same colonial political economy whose revenue and settlement operations first

23 “Why the Adivasi Demand for the Sarna Code Rattles the RSS,” *The Caravan*, December 29, 2022, <https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/rss-sarna-code-jharkhand-ativasi>.

24 “Census Code for Sarna Faith — Why Jharkhand CM Champai Soren Is Raising Tribal Demand Ahead of Polls,” *ThePrint*, March 2, 2025, <https://theprint.in/politics/census-code-for-sarna-faith-why-jharkhand-cm-champai-soren-is-raising-tribal-demand-ahead-of-polls/2151877/>.

25 “Adivasi Movement for a Separate Sarna Code,” *Participedia*; “Sarna Dharam Code: Of Adivasi Identity and Eco-Nationalism,” *Down To Earth*, April 22, 2024, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/governance/sarna-dharam-code-of-ativasi-identity-and-eco-nationalism-74569>.

26 “Why the Adivasi Demand for the Sarna Code Rattles the RSS,” *The Caravan*; “Census Code for Sarna Faith,” *The Print*, p.8

produced the written archive this article has set the oral tradition against. Read in this light, the Sarna code movement is not simply a contemporary demand for administrative recognition; it is a direct political mobilisation of the same oral cosmological tradition examined in this section. The demand asks the state to recognise, as a matter of legal and demographic classification, a religious identity whose authority derives entirely from the community's own origin narrative and ritual practice rather than from any prior recognition by a world religion or colonial ethnographic scheme. In this sense the movement enacts, in the register of contemporary electoral and constitutional politics, the same assertion of independent historical and cosmological authority that the *Pilchu Haram–Pilchu Budhi* narrative has always made.

The Sarna code demand has developed in explicit opposition to competing efforts, associated with Hindu nationalist organisations, to characterise Adivasi communities as an integral part of the Hindu fold, and to describe them through the alternative term “*Vanvasi*” (forest dweller) rather than “*Adivasi*” (original inhabitant)—a terminological substitution that came under renewed public scrutiny after Union Home Minister addressed Adivasis as “*Vanvasi*” from a public platform, provoking objection from tribal groups.²⁷ Adivasi organisations have read this substitution as an attempt to dissolve the specifically Indigenous and prior claim to land and identity that the term Adivasi asserts, folding Adivasi communities instead into a generalised Hindu populace defined chiefly by residence rather than by autochthony. Partha Chatterjee's account of the “rule of colonial difference”—the colonial state's practice of governing subject populations through categories of essential cultural difference rather than through the universal categories of citizenship it claimed for itself—offers a useful frame for understanding why this contest over nomenclature has proved so durable.²⁸ Where “*Vanvasi*” folds the Adivasi into an undifferentiated national-religious community defined by shared residence within a Hindu civilisational order, “*Adivasi*” preserves precisely the kind of essential, prior difference that colonial administration first inscribed and that the postcolonial state has never fully relinquished as a category of rule, even as the political valence of that difference has been repeatedly renegotiated by the communities it names. The dispute over nomenclature is, on the account developed in this article, a dispute over historiography: whether Adivasi identity is to be understood as a distinct historical formation with its own origin narrative, cosmology, and political history—as Santhal oral tradition insists—or as a variant expression of a wider Hindu civilisational continuity, as competing classificatory projects propose. That this dispute has become a live and, at points, sharply polarised feature of electoral politics in Jharkhand and neighbouring states confirms the continuing political stakes of the

²⁷ “The Sarna Code Conundrum,” *The Tribune*, 2026, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/comment/the-sarna-code-conundrum/>.

²⁸ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p.56.

historiographical argument this article makes: the question of which account of the past is authoritative is not an antiquarian concern but a present and contested site of identity politics.

Across the material examined in this article, the relationship between Santhal oral tradition and the official record can be characterised through three recurring patterns. The first is silence: the official archive's simple failure to register Santhal self-description, as in the long absence, before 1871 and again after 1951, of any census category capable of recording Sarna religious identity on its own terms. The second is distortion: the translation of Santhal historical experience into categories—"primitive," "criminal," "backward," "*Vanvasi*"—that recast Indigenous identity and agency in terms serving external administrative or political purposes rather than the community's own self-understanding, as in the colonial and postcolonial classificatory continuities discussed in this section. The third, and most significant for this article's argument, is reconstruction: the persistence, within Santhal oral tradition itself, of a coherent alternative historical account—of origin, migration, rebellion, and continuing land claim—that does not depend on the official record for its coherence or its authority, and that has, in the Sarna code movement, become an active instrument of contemporary political mobilisation. It is this third pattern, more than the first two, that licenses the description of Santhal oral tradition as counter-history rather than merely as an object of historical neglect.

Discussion: Toward an Indigenous Historiography

The preceding sections have treated Santhal oral narrative as historical evidence read against and alongside the official archive. It is important, in closing, to register a further and more demanding claim implicit in the article's argument: that Santhal narrative should be read not merely as an alternative data set awaiting comparison with the written record, but as a body of historiographical theory in its own right, one that proposes its own account of how time, land, kinship, and political authority relate to one another. To treat the *Pilchu Haram–Pilchu Budhi* narrative only as raw material for a reconstructed migration chronology, for instance, is to subordinate it to the evidentiary standards of the very archive it exists independently of. A fuller Indigenous historiography, of the kind gestured toward in Ajay Skaria's work on frontier and forest historiography in western India,²⁹ would instead ask what conception of historical authority the narrative itself proposes—one grounded in cosmological sanction and clan genealogy rather than documentary chronology—and would treat that conception as a legitimate alternative to, rather than a deficient approximation of, the historicist model that Chakrabarty identifies as the unmarked norm of the modern historical discipline. Marine Carrin's

29 Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.97.

argument that the Santhal informant and narrator should be read as an intellectual in his or her own right, rather than merely as a repository of custom to be recorded by an external scholar, offers a direct precedent for the theoretical move this article makes.³⁰ It treats the producers of oral narrative as authors of historical and cosmological argument, not as sources whose material becomes theory only once it has passed through the hands of the academic historian. This reorientation carries methodological and ethical implications beyond the Santhal case. Methodologically, it suggests that comparative work on Indigenous historiography in India, and elsewhere, should be conducted collaboratively with the communities whose narrative traditions are under study, rather than through the extraction of oral material as supplementary evidence for externally authored historical arguments—a point consistent with Spivak’s caution regarding the risks of speaking for the subaltern,³¹ and with the broader turn toward community-based and participatory methods in Indigenous studies internationally. Ethically, it suggests that the political demands currently being pressed by Adivasi organisations—for a Sarna religious code, for recognition of Adivasi rather than *Vanvasi* identity, for continued statutory protection of tribal land under tenancy legislation inherited from the colonial period—should be understood not as claims external to historical scholarship but as claims that scholarship on Indigenous historiography has a direct stake in evaluating fairly, given that the classificatory categories scholarship itself has historically supplied to the state have contributed to the very erasures these movements now contest.

There is also a curricular dimension to this argument. Where Santhal and other Adivasi oral traditions are taught at all within Indian school and university history curricula, they typically appear as ethnographic illustration within units on “tribal India” rather than as primary material within the historiography of colonial rebellion, land settlement, or nationalist politics proper. Treating Santhal oral narrative as counter-history in the sense argued here would imply relocating this material from the margins of the curriculum—where it functions as anthropological colour—into the core historiographical units on the very events, such as the Hul of 1855–56, that the oral tradition itself claims to narrate.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Santhal oral tradition—cosmogonic narrative, migration memory, and the commemorative tradition surrounding the Hul of 1855–56—constitutes a body of counter-history that has continuously contested the categories through which colonial and postcolonial archives have rendered the Santhal governable. Where the official record has responded to Santhal historical expe-

30 Marine Carrin, “The Santal as an Intellectual,” in *The Politics of Ethnicity in India, Nepal, and China*, ed. Marine Carrin, Pralay Kanungo, and Gérard Toffin (New Delhi: Primus, 2014), 77–99.

31 Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 271–313.

rience through silence, distortion, or classificatory assimilation, oral tradition has sustained an alternative and internally coherent account of origin, belonging, and political agency. This counter-history is not confined to the past: it has become, in the contemporary Sarna code movement and in the wider contest over Adivasi identity in a politically polarised India, an active instrument of present-day claim-making. Reading Santhal oral narrative as historiographical and theoretical intervention, rather than as folklore ancillary to the written archive, suggests a broader reorientation for the study of Indigenous pasts in India: one in which the oral tradition of a marginalised community is treated as a rival account of history in its own right, entitled to shape, rather than merely supplement, the historical record—and one in which comparable oral traditions among neighbouring Adivasi communities might, in time, be read through the same historiographical lens.

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