

## **2. Tribal Country :**

The present study site is in the Hili block, on the eastern corner of Dakshin Dinajpur. The whole block is virtually encircled by Bangladesh except on its western boundary. The geographical area of the block is 88.10 km<sup>2</sup> with a total population of 61, 806 (Census records- 1991). The total number of scheduled tribe population in this block is 12095 which mostly comprises of the three communities i.e., Santal, Munda and Oraon. The Block lies between 25°0'10.55" and 26°35'15" North latitudes 87°48'57" and 89°0'30" East longitudes. It is situated only about 15 meters above the sea levels. The shape of the block is more or less trapezoid (Fig. 3.1). The major rivers of the district generally flow from North to South, and are : Punarbhaba, Tangon, Atrai, Jamuna, Ghagra and Chiri. However, only three rivers i.e., Jamuna, Ghagra and Chiri flow through the block under study. The general drainage condition of the area is poor as a result floods and inundation of vast areas is almost a regular feature in the monsoon and post monsoon seasons.

Transport facility of the block is utterly inadequate. Besides there is no railway track in the district and in that consideration it acquired the dubious distinction to be one of the few districts in India where the headquarters is not connected by railway route with other parts of the country. Again there is no major or even minor industry to mention in the district and most of the people specially the tribals directly depend upon agriculture, agricultural-labour, fishing and hunting-gathering from the nearby forests.

### **2.1 About the Tribals**

#### **2.1.1 SANTAL :**

The Santals are described as the largest, most integrated and possibly the most resilient tribe in eastern India (Singh, 1984). They are variously considered as a Dravidian (Reslay, 1891) and pre-Dravidian (Mukherjee, 1962) settled agriculturist tribe. From linguistic point of view they are kolarian as also the Mundas (Reslay, 1891). Their language known as Santali belongs to the Munda family of the languages. Recently many words from Bengali, Hindi and Oriya have been incorporated in Santali.

It is difficult to trace their original abode but basing on folklore, language etc. Most authorities believe that they resided at various places in their sojourn to Chotonagpur plateau.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century they were settled in Chotonagpur plateau and adjoining districts of Midnapur and Singhbhum (Mukherjee, 1962). At present their highest concentration is found in Santal Parganas located in the eastern extremity of Chotonagpur plateau, in the newly created state of Jharkhand. However, due to various reason such as extraction and atrocities of money lenders and zamindars, loss of land, increase in population, need for hard cash, persuasion of labour contractors and many others social factors; a large number of populations of the tribe, like other tribes have dispersed widely to different districts of Bihar, Orissa, Bengal and Assam.

On analysing the ecology of their present day settlements (except those working in towns and cities in various offices as labour) in the Santal parganas and other areas in eastern India, it appears that they have a definite preference for hilly mountainous wooded jungle country with temperate to tropical climate, forested by sal, mahua etc. close to wild life habitats.

It is assumed that the present Hili population of the tribe settled in this area about a country or more ago from their original homeland at Chotonagpur plateau and surroundings.

### **2.1.2 Physical characteristics :**

Physically the Santals are characterized by dark to very dark-brown in complexion; coarse, black, straight and occasionally curly hair; scanty beard and sparse body hair; dolichocephalic and hypsicephalic head form with a high vault; narrow forehead; eyes of medium size and black colour; eye-slit usually straight and rarely oblique; straight prominent and platyrrhine nose with conspicuous depression at the root; large mouth provided with thick and sometimes projecting lips; euryprosopic to mesoprosopic face; and short to medium stature.

Certain physical features of the Santals such as curly, frizzly hair, dark complexion, projecting thick lips, flat nose etc. were taken to be Negroid elements in them by some authorities. However, this has been refuted by most other authorities. Various authorities have described them to different groups such as Austro-Asiatic, Proto-Australoid (Guha, Vedded, Sarkar; in Bhowmik, 1971).

### **2.1.3 Clan Structure :**

The Santals are an endogamous tribe in the sense that they have a common home, traditional housing pattern, distinctive social structures, ritual patterns and traditional power structure. They are divided into twelve patrilineal exogamous clan: Hansda, Murmu, Kisku, Hembrom, Mandi, Soren, Tudu, Baske, Besra, Pauria, Chore and Bedea.

The clan names are derived from the name of their totems, for example Hansda and Goose, Murmu and Nilgai etc. The clan membership is patrilineal and the woman adopts the clan of her husband but comes back to her father's clan on being widowed or divorced. Each clan is divided into a number of sub-clans. A married is accepted within a clan but the sub-clan must be different. In order to avoid inbreeding each sub-clan has its own passwords which is connected with their original home.

### **2.1.4 Family Structure :**

Although the Santals traditionally lived in extended type of family, the recent trend is towards unit family. The authority in the traditional extended family lies with the senior most male member. As regards division of labour in the family, the adult males are engaged in outdoor works while the females are involved in household works. However, the females render considerable assistance to their husbands in their outdoor jobs. Grown up children also assist their father.

### **2.1.5 Rights and Rituals :**

The life of the Santals is marked by four rites in connection to birth, adulthood, marriage and death. Each of which is observed by elaborate ceremonies. Naming of the newborn child follows a definite pattern where in the names of grand fathers and mothers family are used in definite pattern. Adult males are inducted into the society by a ceremony which is important for him in order to enjoy the rights and privileges and endows him with responsibilities towards the wellbeing of the society.

### **2.1.6 Marriage :**

Santals are monogamous but polygamy is allowed in case the first and or second wife is barren. The brides family are entitled to get a bride price from the groom's family. There are several types of marriages including arranged and love marriages. Marriage of widow or divorced women is also known. Marriages are marked by elaborate ceremonies. Marriages are restricted within the community. However, if bride is from a different community the groom's family has to pay a fine and incur the cost of a feast for the whole

community. Besides the groom's father has to beg forgiveness in village community meeting.

The dead body is cremated in rituals.

### **2.1.7 Property rights :**

Traditionally descent is patrilineal. Right of land goes to community as whole who cleared the forests together. Individual ownership of land is not traditional but is a recent practice among them. All movable and immovable properties are divided equally among the sons on the death of their father. In case the deceased person have no sons, the property will go to his brothers or to some other male relative but never to the daughters. Thus women have no right of inheritance. The widow, however, inherits the property of her husband which in time is divided equally among her sons.

### **2.1.8 Socio-Political Organisations:**

The Santal village council (Panchayat) consisting of several members takes care of the problems of the community. On occasions all other male members are invited to participate in a meeting which takes place at the Manjihasthan, believed to be the abode of the spirit of the original founder of the village. Most decisions are taken by consensus. The village council is headed by a Manjhi or headman who is assisted by Paranik Naeke, the village priest and others. The headman receives rent-free land for his service. All the village officials are customarily related at the time of foundation of a village. Later succession to these positions became hereditary, usually the eldest son succeeds the father to his office.

### **2.1.9 Occupation :**

Most of the Santals are very poor and make living in some of the marginal ecosystems. Main occupation of these people are : daily wage labour, fishing and hunting. Some people depend on agriculture, pigery and poultry. Very few of them are engaged in the private and government services. Besides, few families totally depend on alcohol production and selling. Some families with old non-earning male take up prostitution as a means of life. Besides few are engaged in the brick fields, tea gardens and coal mines away from the study area.

### **2.1.10 Religion :**

The supreme God of the Santals is the Thakur who has created everything and provides all the necessities of life including rains, crops etc. He is regarded as the sun God. Besides, there are many other Gods who reside in the hill forests, river and other places. The Gods are called Bongas. It is believed that the Bongas are very powerful and must be kept satisfied with sacrifices of animals and vegetables from time to time. Every family has a family God, who lives in the family house.

They also believe in evil spirits who are capable causing lot of damage if they are angry. They try to please these spirits by the help of village black magicians through various kinds of sacrifices. Their faith in their Gods and spirits is very strong and is continued to these days unabated.

On analysing the social customs of the Santals including birth, marriage, death etc. it may be said that the Santal religion even if it is different from Hinduism is most close to it than any other religion. Recently they are known to worship Goddess Kali, Durga and Shiva

just like the Hindus. The Christian missionaries are at bays to describe Santal religion different from Hinduism just as any other religion.

#### **2.1.11 MUNDA :**

The Mundas are considered as one of the largest tribal communities of India, they present an interesting situation for anthropological analysis in space and time (Singh, 1998). They are a large Dravidian tribe of Chotonagpur who are classed on linguistic ground as kolarian, and closely a kin to the Hos and Santals and probably also to the Kandhs (Reslay, 1891). Sachchidananda (1979) on the other hand considered them as to belong to proto-Australoid racial stock from linguistic point of view. The name Munda is of Sanskrit origin. The general name Kol, which is applied to both Mundas and Oraons, is interpreted by Herr Jellinghaus to mean pig killer, but the better opinion seems to be that it is a variant of 'horo' meaning man in Mundari language. However, due to various reasons such as population pressure, atrocities of higher socio-economic classes, loss of land, persuasion of labour contractors and other social factors, many of them could not flourish any longer in their original homeland. They dispersed in small groups to various directions and some of them could successfully established themselves in different parts of the country particularly the east and north-east India, including their present abode at the Hili block, a secluded area relatively free from external influences.

#### **2.1.12 Physical Characteristics :**

The Mundas are dark brownish to black in complexion; with black and occasionally curly hair; large mouth-thick lips, narrow forehead, broad flat nose; sparse body hair and of medium stature. Their eyes are bright with black iris and prominent eye-brows, the zygomatic arches are prominent while the skull is of dolichocephalic type.

#### **2.1.13 Clan Structure :**

The tribe is divided into a number of clans which are exogamous. The numbers of a clan originate from a common ancestor. The clans are mostly known after some animal or plant species some important event, certain locality and even after soil. Authorities differed on the number of clans, for example : thirteen described Reslay 1891; twenty-one by S. C. Roy, 1970; twenty-two in land settlement records; fifty, S. C. Roy, 1912; one hundred and six, Hoffmann, 1950 and one hundred fifty Sachchinanda, 1979. It is apparent from the consistent increase in clan size with time that whatever have been the original number of clans, the clan members multiplied in number and in time divided and subdivided themselves to present day distinct clans.

#### **2.1.14 Occupation :**

Most Mundas do not have their own agricultural land. Thus there are a few cultivators while the bulk are agricultural labourer. Few are engaged wholly or partially in traditional occupations such as fishing, hunting and rearing livestock including piggery and poultry, which most often turns out to be less and less rewarding because of unscientific methods of rearing. Besides, some are engaged in jobs in the government offices, brickfields, coal mines, tea gardens, factories, transport, alcohol preparation in far and near localities. Some families in absence of earning males have even taken up prostitution as means of life.

#### **2.1.15 Religion :**

Sing-Bonga is the supreme God/ deity of the Mundas. He is worship before every religious functions. It is believed that he created human beings to enjoy the fruits of his creation. He also created the other Bongas or deities and also the spirits. The village God i.e.,

hatu bongako help the Mundas in agricultural operations, hunting excursions and day to day activities. The house gods, Orabongako are worshiped by the head of the family and it is believed that if these Gods are annoyed they can create lot of troubles for the family. So these Gods must be kept happy with sacrifice of red hen. There are several house Gods all of whom is to be kept happy for family happiness. Besides, there are many nature Gods such as Burubonga, Ikirbonga, Nagabonga, Chandibonga, Birbonga etc. These Gods exert beneficial as well as harmful effects on the people.

In sum the religious belief of the Mundas appears to be a admixture of their original faith and Hinduism. It is a common observation that minor cultures somehow imbibe and incorporate elements of adjacent dominant culture.

#### **2.1.16 Festivals :**

The life of the Mundas are invigorated with a host of festivals throughout the year. The festivals usually corresponds to agricultural or social activities and always include episodes of drinking and dancing of the male and the female members. Thus during January, February and March we get Mage, Phagur Purnima (Holi), Sarhul (ba) the corresponding dance and music is called Jadur. In April, May, June we get Honba jatra and Batauli which corresponds to agricultural operations such as manuring, ploughing, sowing the Kharip paddy and sowing of summer paddy. The corresponding dance and music is called Japir, and wed in the summer paddy. In July, August, September there is Karam bhado (bhado acadoshi), jomnwa, ende (bhado purnima), dasai (Hindu Dussehra), these are associated within the Kharip paddy, harvesting the Fora and Gondhi. The corresponding dance and music is called Karam. In October, November, December we get Soharai (Hindu Diwali), Colour Singbonga (Khaiihan Puja), Sukunburu jatra (Hasda area), Hiburur or Poos mela (Punch Pargonas). The corresponding agricultural harvesting and threshing along with dance and music activity is called Japi. Besides there are other social events such as marriages, births, naming etc. which are also accompanied by drinking, dancing and singing.

#### **2.1.17 Marriage :**

The Mundas do not have any system of preferred marriages. A person can marry into any clan other than his own. All clans are considered equal in status. There is no fancy for contracting marriage alliances between particular clans. Marriage is considered obligatory for the Munda. Even spirits and deities are supposed to have consorts. Even though pre-marital sex is permitted the Mundas accept the restrictions in the married state as it gives both men and women a higher status than otherwise. Marriage is not regarded as an affair between two persons but between two groups of kin. The relationship is emphasized at different rituals and occasions by exchange of gifts of foods and clothes.

#### **2.1.18 ORAON :**

The Oraons are considered as a Dravidian agricultural tribe as the Santals and Mundas but differ from them linguistically. They belong to be the Dravidian language family rather than Austro-Asiatic language as the Santals and the Mundas (Reslay, 1891; Sachchinanda 1979). Authorities differ as to their original home but long back the majority of the tribe settled in the Chotonagpur plateau driving the Mundas away from the area. The Oraons of the Hili block claim to have settled here over a century back from their original home at the Chotonagpur plateau. In this block, they reside along with the Santals and Mundas.

### **2.1.19 Physical Characteristics :**

They are dark brown to black in complexion with coarse jet black hairs, projecting jaws, thick lips, narrow forehead and broad flat nose. The eyes are bright with no obliquity in the opening of the eye-lids and without any sign of mongoloid features.

### **2.1.20 Clan Structure :**

The tribe is divided into several clans which are exogamous in nature. However, a son is allowed to marry a girl of his mothers clan. There is some in built arrangement to prohibit in breeding. For example, any Oraon would admit that he cannot marry his maternal aunt or his first cousins on the mother's side, though he is not sure how far these prohibitions go in descending line. Marrying younger brothers widow or elder sister of his deceased wife is prohibited. On the other hand, marriage with elder brothers widow or deceased wife's younger sister is permissible. Marriages among the first cousins belonging to the same clan (gotra) of the Oraons are prohibited. In present day Oraon community marriages are prohibited among blood relatives upto three generations (Das, 2000). On the whole the prohibition structure is rather complicated but it shows definite inclination towards exogamy as in the Santals and Mundas.

### **2.1.21 Occupation :**

Daily wage labour and fishing are the two main sources of livelihood for the Oraons. Agriculture is practiced by only a few Oraons who own land and is far from being even a secondary occupation. Hunting at present is mostly ritualistic and is observed during some festivals. Only a few of them are employed in the private and government services. A least number of people are involved in rearing cattle, goats, ducks, hens, pigeons etc. Some families earn some money by selling dried cow-dung as fuel. Some people collect forest materials for their own consumption and sell the rest of the material in the market. Few of them are involved in the brickfields, coalmines and construction works out side of the study area.

### **2.1.22 Religion :**

The concept of religion of the Oraons appears to be a synthetic one which include ingredients from the neighbouring tribes, particularly the Mundas as also from the Hindu community. They believe in a supreme deity/ God i.e., Dharmi or Dharmesh which is perfectly pure, perpetually beneficent and the creator of the world. His beneficent will mercy is essential for their well-being and survival. But if a person or a family or a village plunges under misfortune due to the spell of a evil spirit (as believed by them, the supreme God does not interfere and keeps himself aloof in the matter. Thus they are actually compelled to please the evil spirits rather than the supreme God, through the village Ojha/ magic man. Under the circumstances they tend to develop strong faith in spirits and magic-cult. Thus they believe that all animate and inanimate objects can fall under the influence of spirits who must be kept happy for peace and prosperity.

### **2.1.23 Festivals :**

As in the case of other tribes, the calendar year of the Oraons is dotted with a various Pujas/ Festivals. The utility of the festivals in the life of the tribal people is enormous. The festivals provide them with opportunities to start life anew, to rejuvenate their spirits and to set new targets for brighter future. All their festivals involve lot of drinking, dancing, singing and merry-making. Of all the festivals, "Dal" puja i.e., worship of a branch is the most important. This festivals spans over three to four days and falls in the month of Vадra (September). On the third day morning the members of the community go the forest singing and dancing on their way and return in the evening with a freshly cut branch of a Karma



A Santal damsel looking over to their cultivable land.  
An irrigation pond is seen in the background.



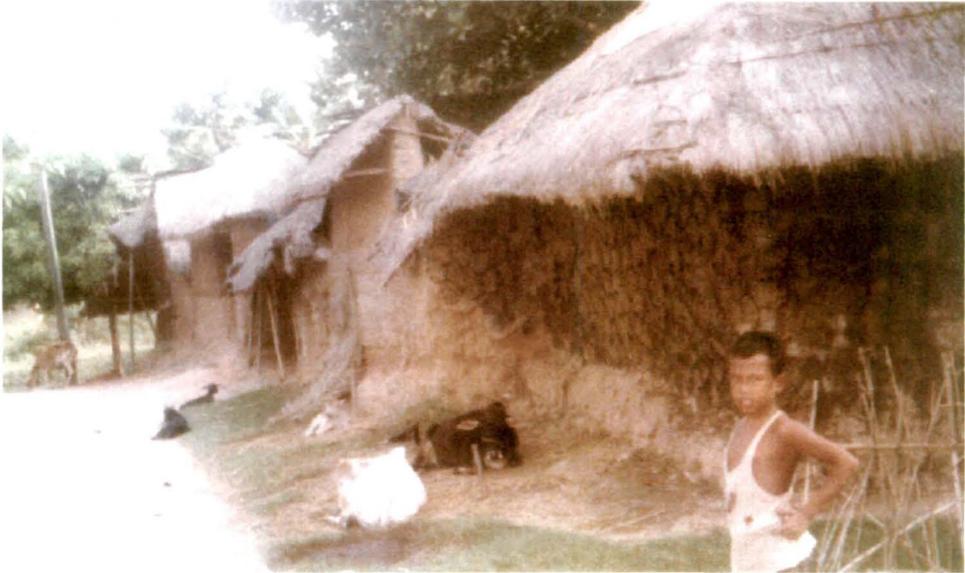
A young Santal labour posing for the snap.



A Munda mother with her child near a bamboo grove.



An Oraon mother with her infant.



An oraon kid posing proudly in front of the gate of their hut. A few goats resting in the foreground.



Several thatched house of a Munda family.



A Santal mother with her grown up daughter in front of their hut.



Some Tribal children.



An Oraon family taking dinner in the light of burning fire wood.



A Santal house wife is cooking on an indigenous earthen oven (Chulli).



A Santal girl repairing an indigenous oven.



An Oraon lady is cooking on an earthen oven (Chulli).



A Munda woman is cooking on an earthen oven (Chulli).



Plucking of cowdung cakes after drying by an Oraon child.



A munda housewife preparing a papaw for cooking.



An Oraon elderly lady preparing food for her domestic pig.



An Oraon young man preparing a fishing net.



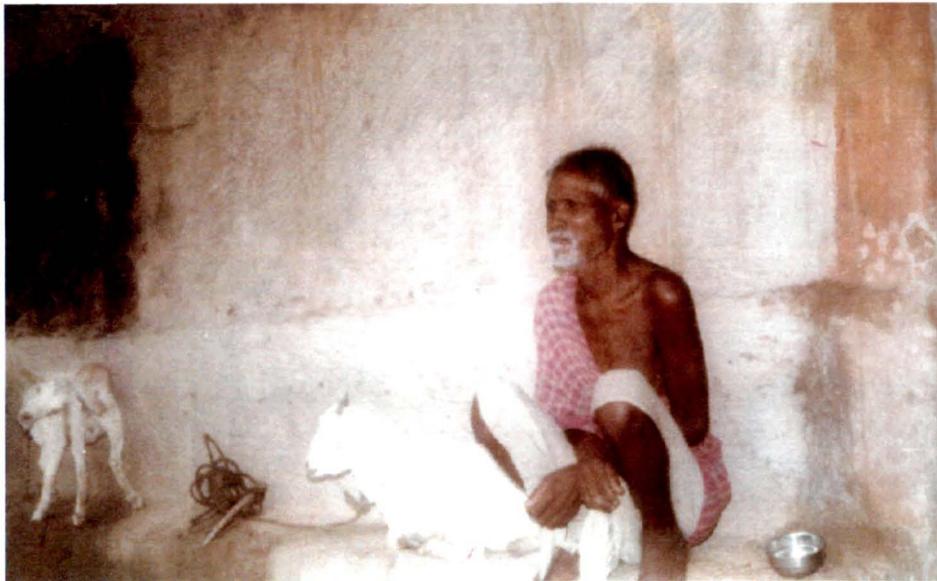
An Oraon mother with her children.



A tribal couple making a bamboo basket.



A Munda lady cleaning the dishes near a pond.



An Oraon old man sitting on the ledge of his hut along with goats.



A munda old women feeding a pig.