

Beyond Binary Thought: Understanding Santhal Cosmology Through Creation Narratives

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Abstract:

This paper critically examines Santhal cosmology as articulated in a Santhal creation narrative featuring Thakur Jiv, the Bongas, Malin Budhi, Has-Hasil, and Pilcu Haram-Pilcu Budhi. Through close textual analysis of the narrative, the study argues that Santhal cosmology presents a relational, animistic ontology that challenges Western metaphysical dualism, particularly Cartesian body-spirit binaries. The narrative encodes ecological interdependence, distributed agency, gendered spiritual authority, and non-anthropocentric emergence. By situating the story within Indigenous epistemology, animism, and comparative cosmology, this paper demonstrates that Santhal creation thought foregrounds ontological continuity between spirit and matter, human and non-human, divine and ecological worlds.

Keywords: Cosmology, Santhals, Creation narrative, Aquatic creatures, Western Dualism.

INTRODUCTION

Cosmology is never merely a speculative account of origins; it is an epistemological framework that organizes how a community understands being, belonging, and ethical responsibility. The structure of the cosmos, as imagined in myth and ritual, informs social relations, ecological practices, and conceptions of the self.

Western intellectual history has largely been shaped by metaphysical dualism. The philosophical system most frequently associated with this division is that of René Descartes, whose formulation of *res cogitans* (thinking substance) and *res extensa* (extended substance) institutionalized a radical distinction between mind and body. In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes asserts, “I am, strictly speaking, only a thinking thing” (Descartes 18). This ontological separation reverberated across modern philosophy, science, and political economy, contributing to anthropocentric and mechanistic conceptions of nature. In contrast, indigenous cosmologies articulate relational ontologies that refuse such binaries. Rather than separating body and spirit, human and non-human, sacred and secular, indigenous thought envisions existence as an interwoven network of reciprocal agencies. The Santhal community, one of the largest Adivasi groups in India, residing primarily in Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, and Bihar, offers a particularly rich articulation of such relational cosmology. Their creation narratives reveal an integrated worldview in which humans, animals, rivers, forests, ancestors, and divine presences participate in a shared ontological field.

Creation narratives function as cosmological charters: they articulate metaphysical assumptions, ethical orientations, and social structures. The Santhal creation narrative analyzed here, centering on Thakur Jiv, the Bongas, and the first ancestors, encodes a worldview fundamentally distinct from Western metaphysical traditions shaped by Cartesian dualism. Where Western thought, since René Descartes institutionalized a separation between *res cogitans* (mind/spirit) and *res extensa* (matter/body), the Santhal cosmology refuses such binary oppositions. Spirit animates clay; animals precede humans; earth is co-

created through aquatic collaboration; feminine spiritual figures are central to creation. The cosmos emerges not through unilateral divine command but through dialogic, ecological participation.

This article pursues five interrelated arguments:

- i. The Santhal narrative articulates a relational ontology rather than substance dualism.
- ii. Creation unfolds through distributed, ecological agency rather than sovereign command.
- iii. Humanity emerges through interspecies continuity rather than divine exceptionalism.
- iv. Feminine spiritual agency is structurally central to cosmogenesis.
- v. The cosmology offers a philosophical alternative to both Genesis-based anthropocentrism and Cartesian metaphysics.

By integrating close textual analysis with theoretical discourse in anthropology and philosophy, this study situates Santhal cosmology as a sophisticated ontological system with contemporary relevance.

DISCUSSION

The Santhal creation narrative, as depicted by Ruby Hembrom in her graphic storybook for children, *We Come from the Geese* (2013), opens with ontological indeterminacy: “In the beginning, there was no visible land. Everything was under water” [1]. Water here is not chaos but a generative matrix. It constitutes primordial potentiality. Within this submerged cosmos, “Thakur Jiv, the Supreme Being was present. As were the Bongas” [3-4], the Subordinate spiritual entities. “And many aquatic animals” [5]. The coexistence of the Supreme Being, subordinate spirits, and aquatic creatures signals relational ontology. Authority is distributed. The Bongas initiate the desire for human creation: “The Bongas asked for Thakur Jiv’s blessings to create human beings” [7]. Thakur Jiv replies, “If it so be desired, we will create them” [8]. The plural pronoun “we” is philosophically significant. Creation is collaborative, not monologic. Unlike the fiat creation of Genesis (“Let there be...”), agency here is consultative and pluralized. As Nurit Bird-David argues in her theorization of animism, Indigenous cosmologies often conceive of personhood as relational rather than atomistic (Bird-David 73).

The act of forming human bodies is delegated to Malin Budhi, described as a female Bonga, an invisible, inexplicable spiritual being believed to be the Lady of Garden, to form two human beings. “She formed the bodies from clay and foam. She then put the figures out to dry” (*We Come from the Geese* [9-10]). Matter precedes life. The body is earth-derived, materially continuous with landscape. Yet creation is not linear. Sin Sodom, the Day Horse, “trampled over them” [11]. Destruction interrupts divine intention. Malin Budhi remakes the figures and requests animation. Thakur Jiv instructs: “Go, bring the gift of life for humans which is above the cross beam” [16]. The spatial localization of ‘life’ is cosmologically intriguing: vitality is materially situated. However, Malin Budhi, being short, mistakenly retrieves: “the gift of life for birds which was above the door” [18]. The result, “The gift of life for birds turned the clay figures into geese; Has [Male goose] and Hasil [female goose], and they flew away” [20]. Here, the ontological boundary between species is permeable. Human bodies animated with avian life become birds. Life-force is transferable, not species-exclusive. Philippe Descola’s concept of ‘animism’ describes such ontologies in which interiority (spirit) is shared across beings, while physicality varies (Descola 129). The Santhal narrative thus rejects species hierarchy. Humanity is contingent, not predestined.

Has and Hasil later complain, “You have given us life, but no place to rest. Everything is under water” (*Earth rests on a Tortoise* [3]). Human ancestors are the first birds. They precede terrestrial formation. The earth is created in response to its ecological needs. Humans do not inherit a ready-made dominion; they await habitat construction. This challenges the anthropocentric model in Genesis 1:26, where humans are granted ‘dominion’. Instead, the Santhal myth situates humans within ecological dependency.

To prepare a resting place, Thakur Jiv enlists aquatic creatures: “He instructed Sole Hako [prawn], Katkom [crab], Lendet’ Kuar [Earthworm] and Tayan [Alligator] to raise the earth above the water” [7]. Repeated failure marks the process: “Sole Hako... failed” [9], “Katkom... failed” [10], “Tayan... was unsuccessful” [11]. Finally, the earthworm attempts: “He put his head underwater, swallowed soil, and carried it to the surface. But when he placed it on the surface it immediately sank” [13-14]. Creation here is experimental. It involves persistence and collective problem-solving. The decisive solution invokes Kachim Kuar: “Within the waters resides Kachim Kuar [the Tortoise Prince]... If his feet are fastened firmly to four corners, earth could be raised on his back” [16-17]. “Lendet’ Kuar raised the earth on Kachim Kuar’s back and it did not sink” [20]. Earth rests on another being’s body. This is ontological interdependence rendered cosmographically. As Tim Ingold suggests, Indigenous worldviews often conceptualize the environment not as an inert background but as “a domain of entanglement” (Ingold 13). The stability of the Earth depends upon non-human support. Humanity’s dwelling place rests upon animal cooperation.

After Earth’s formation: “Thakur Jiv then caused a Karam tree... and Sirom grass... to spring up. Next, he covered the whole earth with all kinds of vegetation” (*Earth rests on a Tortoise* [22-23]). Ecology precedes humanity. Soil becomes “firm and stable” through vegetation. The Karam tree, central in Santhal ritual practice, anchors cosmology in lived ecological ethics. Only after ecological stabilization do Has and Hasil: “lay eggs and breed” [25] in “[a] place called EARTH, resting on a tortoise’s back” [27]. Hasil lays eggs: “Hasil laid two eggs in the Sirom grass” (*We come from the Geese* [22]). Twice they are eaten. On the third attempt: “Jaher era... guarded them until they hatched” [25]. From these eggs emerge: “...Pilcu Haram and Pilcu Budhi. The first Santal beings” [26]. The first humans, Pilcu Haram and Pilcu Budhi, are born through avian reproduction, protected by another female Bonga, Jaher Era. Female spiritual agency is indispensable at three levels:

- Malin Budhi forms bodies.
- Jaher Era guards eggs.
- Hasil generates life.

This challenges patriarchal cosmogonies centred exclusively on male creative authority. Descartes’ metaphysics posited a radical ontological divide between mind and body (Descartes 54). In contrast, Santhal cosmology demonstrates:

- i. Spirit animates matter without ontological rupture.
- ii. Life-force is transferable across species.
- iii. Earth, animals, spirits, and humans co-produce reality.
- iv. Creation is iterative and contingent.

There is no strict separation between sacred and material realms. Clay bodies and spiritual life are mutually constitutive. As Graham Harvey notes, animistic traditions understand the world as a “community of persons, only some of whom are human” (Harvey 11).

The narrative encodes ecological humility. Humans are not masters of the earth; they depend on tortoise, earthworm, vegetation, and spirits. In an era of ecological crisis, such cosmologies offer alternative ontological frameworks that resist extractive anthropocentrism. Santhal cosmology thus constitutes not merely mythic narrative but philosophical resource – a relational model of coexistence.

CONCLUSION

The Santhal creation narrative articulates an Indigenous cosmology grounded in relational ontology, ecological co-creation, distributed agency, and spiritual immanence. By quoting the narrative directly, this study has demonstrated how:

- Humans emerge through avian ancestry.
- Earth exists through aquatic collaboration.
- Spirit circulates materially.
- Feminine forces are central to creation.

In contrast to Western body-spirit binaries, Santhal cosmology dissolves dualism into interdependence. Being is relational, not atomistic. Humanity is ecological, not exceptional. The world is sustained through cooperation, not domination. Such cosmological thought offers a powerful philosophical alternative to dualistic metaphysics and anthropocentric modernity.

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