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Baha bonga and flower of *Shorea robusta* (Sal) a cultural significance of conservation

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ABSTRACT

Baha bonga is one of the most important festivals among Santal community. Baha bonga is celebrated in the month of March where new flowers or leaves arise. Baha bonga takes place in the Jahera. Jahera is a sacred grove where all the deities and ancestors reside. Hence, people don't pluck or cut down the trees grown there. Therefore, at the time of Baha bonga they worship the Shorea robusta tree and use the forest after the festival. They believe that the new leaves and flowers which arise after the summer season are blessing from God. So, after worshipping them, they use the resources from forest. Keeping this in view an attempt has been made to document the interconnection of S. robusta and Baha bonga and a conservation aspect behind it.

INTRODUCTION

Conservation of native tree is more important than the plantation. There are a number of conservation approaches interlinked with our cultures. Throughout India it can be observed that the plant species is related to a particular ritual and

cultural activities like *Rhynchostylis retusa* (Koopul phul) flower is related to festival of Bihar of Assam; *Butea monosperma* (Palash) is related to Holi festival. *Bauhinia vahlii* (Siali) lata is linked with lord Krishna. *Nelumbo nucifera* (Lotus) is

linked with Goddess Laxmi. *Calotropis gigantea* (Arakha) and *Datura stramonium* (Datura) are related to Lord Shiva. *Erythrina indica* stem is used to cook holy food during new year eve in Meitei community of Manipur. The leaves of mango are used in almost all rituals of Hindu. The above belief encourages the local people to conserve those species linked with their deities. Similarly, among tribal community they have their own ritual which is based on nature and conservation. Baha bonga is such an important ritual related to conservation of *S. robusta* tree and its associated species celebrated by Santal tribe. Baha bonga is derived from baha means “flower” bonga means “god”. Baha bonga is known as the flower festival in the month of March during spring season time. They celebrate the festival for five days. Baha bonga festival is celebrated at Jahera (Figure 1). Jahera is a common place of worshipping of sal tree which is located in the village outskirts (Figure 2). Jahera is a sacred grove comprising of *S. robusta* (Sal) and associated species within which their deities are believed to be residing. It is strictly followed that no plucking or using of leaves, bark, wood, flower inside the Jahera. During the festival of Baha bonga

the Sal tree is mainly worshipped and the flower is used at that time. The Baha bonga is celebrated by dancing (Aneh – Santhali language) throughout the village area and specially the girl will put sal flower in their hair as a blessing from God and ancestors (Figure 3; Figure 4). During Baha bonga festival that is after the growth of new leaves or flowers they worship their deities and after that they will collect the flowers and leaves of *S. robusta* and *Madhuca longifolia*. It is like they are taking blessing from God and ancestors for providing them such resources from forest and fulfilling their livelihood needs. Therefore, from the above scenario it is concluded that tribal communities are the protectors of forest areas because they worship the nature and it is a way of conservation act. Keeping this in view, an attempt has been made to document the information about the interconnection of Sal and Santal community.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was carried out in the year 2019-21. A series of semi -structured questionnaire was conducted with tribal communities. For further authentication cross question was conducted (Kumar 2015; Sen et al. 2020; Figure 2).



Figure 1: Musical instruments and tribals getting ready for dance



Figure 2: Survey work near Jahera



Figure 3: Worshipping Sal tree inside Jahera



Figure 4: Flower of *Shorea robusta* (Sal)

CONSERVATION ASPECTS

The above discussion on rituals of Baha bonga clearly indicates that all the mythological activities during this ritual are for the conservation of Sal tree and associated species like peacock, barking deer, different types of orchids and wild edible plants. Therefore, documentation of such rituals is needed for making the conservation strategies with the communities.

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