

**ISSN** INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

**IJELLH**

**International Journal of English Language,  
Literature in Humanities**

Peer-Reviewed (Refereed/Scholarly), Indexed and Open Access Journal



**Volume 7, Issue 8, August 2019**

[www.ijellh.com](http://www.ijellh.com)

Teresa Tudu

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Avvaiyar Government College for Women

Research Scholar, BHU, Varanasi

Karaikal, Puducherry, India

teresa.tudu@gmail.com

*A Critical Study of Robert Carstairs' Harma's Village: A Novel of Santal Life*

Abstract

Tribal studies in India are largely a product of travelers, traders, administrators and Christian missionaries of the colonial period. Colonial administrators-cum-scholars have produced a good amount of writings on the tribals. These writings include memoirs, novels, ethnographic notes, monographs, administrative reports, census, missionary reports and other informative reports. The primary purpose of these writings was to produce knowledge about these people, so as to enable colonial governance effective. Robert Carstairs was one of those administrators who produced many informative writings pertaining to the place and people among whom he worked. Carstairs worked among Santhals as a Deputy Commissioner of then Santhal Parganas from 1885 to 1898. Among his writings *Harma's Village* is a well-known historical novel on Santhal life.

This paper is a critical reading of Carstairs' novel *Harma's Village* and throws light on the literary portrayal of Santhals and their way of life during the early days of their present settlements. It also focuses on the inconsistencies found in the picturization of certain historical figures and phenomenon, which can alter the perception of people towards them.

Keywords: Santhals, Community, Rebellion, Administration, Historiography.

The extensive study about tribals in India was dominated by the colonial rule and the first users of anthropological knowledge were, of course, the colonial administrators and to a certain extent, the missionaries. Robert Carstairs was a member of the Indian Civil Service (ICS), an elite higher civil service of the British Empire in British India during British rule in the period between 1858 and 1947. It was officially known as Imperial Civil Service in nineteenth century. (Wikipedia). The British Administration depended intensively on the knowledge provided by members of ICS for the carrying on its work. Carstairs landed at Bombay in 1874, after getting the 'best' education and a two years training at home. Carstairs worked among Santhals (one of the largest tribal communities in India) as a Deputy Commissioner of then Santhal Parganas<sup>1</sup> from 1885 to 1898. He was instrumental in enabling Santhals to acquire rights over their land and cultivation. Besides his role as a govt. servant, he closely studied Santhals' life and culture, and gathered knowledge of their history from primary and secondary sources. Hugh McPherson praises him for his contribution in the following words:

No officer of his time had a more complete knowledge of Santal life and manners than had Mr. Carstairs, and he writes with fine sympathy and understanding of the Santal troubles which led to their rising in 1855. The story of the great '*hool*' is a sad one which had many parallels in the history of the Chota Nagpur plateau.

However, his status as a government servant cannot be ignored which bestows some responsibility on his shoulder i.e. overseeing the government activity in the district under his control and gathering data for the British administrators. Robert Carstairs succeeded W B

---

<sup>1</sup> Santhal Parganas consisted of six districts of present Jharkhand – Dumka, Godda, Pakur, Jamtara, Deoghar, and Sahebganj.

Oldham as the Deputy Commissioner of then Santhal Parganas and held office, with short intervals of leave, for thirteen years. This brought him closer than any other officers to his subjects. All the officers including Carstairs were loyal interpreters of the principles of administration.

If Mr. Wood and Mr. Boxwell were the makers of the Settlement and the Santal system, Mr. Oldham and Mr. Carstairs may well be styled “the guardians” of the same. (McPherson)

He published this interesting historical novel *Harma's Village* in 1935, a sympathetic study of the ‘Hool’ (Santhal Rebellion of 1855) and a memoir, *The Little World of an Indian District Officer* in 1912. His other works are, *British Works in India* (1891), *Human Nature in Rural India* (1895) and *A Plea for the Better Local Government of Bengal* (1904).

Carstairs’ historical novel ‘Harma’s Village’ which has Santhal Rebellion of 1855 as its central theme, is basically about the Santhals, and their response to this historical phenomenon – Santhal Rebellion. It deals with Santhals’ way of life during the early days in their present settlements. Although, the novel is primarily concerned with the Santhal Rebellion of 1855, it has approached that historical past from a particular vantage point. It reaches out to the incident exclusively from one particular direction where our protagonist Harma Manjhi has been located. All the characters and places are not all together disconnected from the protagonist but he is actively moving through the locations and establishing connection with everything and everyone mentioned in the novel. The novel gives sufficient account of the simple and humble life of Santhals, their establishments, livelihood, and their co-existence with their neighbouring tribes such as Paharias. But it majorly documents the Santhal rebellion: its cause and the beginning; the oppressive non-tribals, the role of British administrators, the rebellion itself and the aftermath of rebellion. The narration ultimately leads us towards discovering a hero who is a creator as well as savior. He creates a space for his people and as

a guardian looks after them. In their moments of weakness and need he turns up as a guide and a perpetual support. His deeds include the cause of all (his people), firstly because he is the head of the village, secondly it is the Santhal culture which instills a sense of togetherness and unity in every member of the community. In the novel Carstairs has successfully portrayed that unity and communal life of Santhals. For the protagonist Harma, his village Pipra was more than a village, it was a family for him where the well-being of each and every member is his prime concern especially during the time of rebellion he tactfully safeguarded them from starvation. Author's depiction of country life is truly admirable. He has observed every minute detail of tribal life and their everyday activity in the face of rough and tough nature. Their struggle with nature such as heavy rain, flood, and their life in impenetrable forests have been skillfully depicted.

The Santhals are known to be habitual migrants, not sticking to one particular place. In the words of Carstairs- "They spread like the bees, sending their swarms to create a new village." It is this theme of migration and the co-existence with the Paharias with which the novel 'Harma's Village' begins. Harma, the protagonist of the novel and a historical character of Santhal rebellion creates his own village with the help of his friend Lokhon and others and names it 'Pipra'. The novel provides us an elaborative picture of Santhals' life in Damin-i-koh<sup>2</sup> when they first settled there. It gives glimpses of many aspects of the lives of Santhals. 'Manjhi Than' and 'Jaher Than', are the two compulsory aspects of Santhal villages. In 'Manjhi Than', a saal wood is placed upright. This used to be in front of village headman's house where village meetings take place and which is also the abode of the dead ancestors. 'Jaher than' is the worshiping place of Santhals, usually in the outskirts of the village.

---

<sup>2</sup> Damin-i-Koh was the name given to forested hilly areas of Rajmahal hills broadly in the areas of present Sahebganj, Pakur, and Godda districts in Jharkhand. (wikipedia)

The novel contains the description of another important historical figure of 'Hool' - Sam Pargana. From the role of Sam Pargana and Harma Manjhi in their community, one can easily understand the nature of their village administration which ensures justice and peace in the society. Carstairs has further pointed out the democratic nature of Santhals' administrative system. Every year the members of village council willingly retire from their posts and take up again only if no one else claims to be. Every villagers' opinion is considered in decision making of any kind. Besides being simple and peace loving people, Santhals are also very industrious. They clear jungles, make their houses and cultivate lands with great effort. Harma and his teams created an entire village and agricultural farms by their own. They fit in every kind of physical labour and therefore they were first choice of the employers of the rail road constructions.

Merry making as we find in the novel is another important feature of Santhal life. Singing and dancing are the major enjoyment among Santhals. They also take up other actions for merry making. Boys use to tend the cattle where they spend playful time in the fields playing with arrows and Bow, and spend musical hours in their flutes. In the evening, at home they hear stories and jokes from their grandparents and play riddles. Boys practice on their instruments 'Tumdak' and 'Tamak' whereas girls learn to sing and dance. Weekly market, marriages and festival celebrations, and village fairs provides boys and girls opportunities to enjoy the company of each other.

The novel can also be read as the response and participation of a particular village and its extraordinary headman, to the Santhal rebellion of 1855. The Santhals take pride in the Santhal Rebellion of 1855 when thousands of Santhals under the leadership of Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu stood against the oppression and fought against the mighty British soldiers. Hundreds of Santhals sacrificed their lives and thousands were displaced from their homes, as the rebellion was crushed with inhuman brutality by the company officials. Carstairs has

elaborately dealt with the immediate cause of rebellion which allows us to comprehend the chaotic situation during the rebellion and characteristics of the oppressive Dikus (non-tribal Hindus) and suffering Santhals. The novel has also discussed briefly the legend related to supernatural vision experienced by Sidhu and Kanhu, the main leaders of Santhal rebellion. The vision that inspired them to take up arms against their oppressors. The description of the historical battles of Pealapur and Sangrampur between Santhal rebels and British soldiers is lively as if author has himself witnessed those battles. It was aggressive in nature. The loots and murders prevailed the land during the rebellion. One can also find the cunningness in fighters of both the sides. Santhals chose forests and hill to hide and fight. Britishers adopted deceptive methods to trap them. Kanhu was caught only when he was betrayed by one of his own, a Santhal.

The novelist also points out deficiency in the method adopted by the rebels to fight against British soldiers when he writes that they were not properly trained and their weapons - battle-axe, bows and arrows, were primitive. Further, the novelist questions the leadership also. He does not have a very positive opinion of the leaders of Santhal rebellion.

The Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) headed by Ranajit Guha has been appropriately vocal to question the absence of subaltern in the historiography both British and India. Subaltern studies points towards certain inconsistencies in Tribal studies carried out from the upper caste perspective. The identity or positionalities of the tribals have also been complicated or problematized. Here, in this novel also, in Carstairs' picturization of Santhal world we find certain inconsistencies. In the Santhal Rebellion of 1855, Santhals from many parts of Jharkhand (including parts of Bihar and West Bengal) took part. The novel, however, does not provide adequate details to picturize the actual vastness of the rebellion as it has approached that historical event from one particular direction and it talks about the response of people of one particular region. Santhal rebellion, though started in a particular region was not confined

to one region only as people in other parts also rebelled and followed the leaders without even knowing them.

The Character sketch of Sidhu and Kanhu is very distinct from the historical accounts of the historians of Santhal rebellion. In the eyes of Santhals, they were great leaders and brave martyrs. They have acquired the status of gods among their tribesmen. But the author sees them as mere rulers who projects themselves as king and are intoxicated with power. They loved to live in kingly style adorned with nice cloths and throne. They treated themselves as above from the ordinary people and admired their buttering. Sidhu is portrayed as someone who lacks his own conscience and imitates Kanhu's ideas. He is jealous of Kanhu who gives orders and behaves as if he is the only king often neglecting him. The legend related to Sidhu and Kanhu's encounter with supernatural power is also different from the historical records. And most importantly, the mass gathering of around 10,000 Santhals on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1855 at Bhognadih before the rebellion is altogether missing in the novel. (Sinha, 1983; Sinha, 1991)

The novel concludes with the message that Santhal rebellion of 1855 brought transition in Santhals' life where after much sacrifices they entered into new establishment and now they will be benefitted by the special care of the Britishers whose poor administration had led to the emergence of rebellion. However, a critical reading of the novel forces us to assume that author has written his own preferential account of Santhals' history. Being an administrator he viewed their history from the legal perspective. For his convenience of writing he might have knowingly missed or altered some facts of Santhal History. He believed that Santhals' welfare and upliftment can be achieved only under the British govt. rule who allows them to follow their way of life. He had this faith that rebellion will only destroy them and he was partially right when more than 30,000 Santhals were killed during the rebellion. (Sinha, 1991)

## References

- Carstairs, Robert. *Harma's Village: A Novel of Santal Life*. Pokhuria: The Santal Mission Press, 1935.
- . *The Little World of an Indian District Officer*. London: MacMillan and Co, 1912.
- “Damin-i-koh”. Wikipedia. <https://en.m.wikipedia.org> August 18, 2019.
- Guha, Ranajit. “The Prose of Counter-Insurgencies.” Selected Subaltern Studies. Eds. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.
- Hugh McPherson, Foreword, *Harma's Village*. Quoted from his ‘Final Report on Survey and Settlement Operations, Santal Parganas, 1898-1907’.
- “Indian Civil Service (British India)”. Wikipedia. <https://en.m.wikipedia.org> July 20, 2019.
- Sinha, Ajoy Kumar. “Santhal Insurrection of 1855 AD: Its Causes and Results with Special Reference to the Contributions of Sidhu-Kanhoo Brothers to it.” Bulletin of Bihar Tribal Welfare Research Institute, Vol. XXV. Ranchi: Bihar Tribal Welfare Research Institute, 1983.
- Sinha, S.P. “Tribal Leadership in Bihar: Genesis and Development.” *Tribal Leadership in Bihar*. Ed. Dr. S.P. Sinha. Ranchi: Bihar Tribal Welfare Research Institute, 1991.