

# Bodding and the Santal people: entwined in timelessness

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## Bookends

Reverend Paul Olav Bodding<sup>1</sup> and the Museum of Cultural History, along with the National Library of Norway, Oslo, are like bookends that carefully hold together some aspects of the Santal people's identity—histories, memories, culture, traditions, and narratives that they came in contact with and documented.

The robust bookends just don't support numerous books and manuscripts between them, but also curios—about 1000 ethnographic and more than 4700 archaeological objects of and from the Santal people. The shelf that holds and displays these items is probably 7,500 kilometres long, stretching across from Santal Parganas in Eastern India to Norway, and has been built and curated over 130 years now, by Bodding, his Santal guides, teachers, collaborators and helpers like Sido, Sagram Murmu and other contributors, along with its present caretakers in Oslo.

Yet, neither the bookends nor the shelf are Santal, and that's reflective of the nuanced relationship between Bodding and the Santals.

The Santal legacy in Oslo is also the Bodding legacy. That itself is an oxymoron—that indigenous people of about 10 million in far away Asia and a Norwegian man—share or could share a common heritage of any kind.

Bodding is often honoured by the title the 'Father of Santali Language' and sometimes 'Father of Santali Literature'—an endearment reserved for him by Christian Santals in the mission areas he worked in. His birthday is commemorated as 'Bodding Memorial Day' by community celebrations, organised by and among

Santals who didn't record birthdates until the missionaries and the government introduced this system of chronicling, and calendars; and the majority of whom don't usually celebrate their own birthdays.

How did an outsider become so revered to be given this distinctive status—understandably earmarked for their own kind? How can a non-Santal be called 'Father of Santali Language' or 'Father of Santali Literature'?

### **The ties that bind**

This coronation is a recent—less than a fifty year old undertaking, along with the resurgence of his public memory by a new generation of formally educated Santals, who were finally able to engage with Bodding's written documentation. These Santals also began to assume their own expressions of cultural and literary articulations in tangible forms, both in their individual capacities and organised production.

Not that the Santals of the mission area forgot about the missionaries, or could forget about them. The contrasting European style architecture erected in their regions, from bungalows, hospitals and dispensaries, church buildings, the printing press, and theological seminary are imposing, unmissable signposts of their existence, long after their Saheb<sup>2</sup> inhabitants left. The graves of the pioneer founders of the Santal Mission, Norwegian, Lars Skrefsrud (1840–1910) and the Dane, Hans P. Børresen (1825–1901) also lie in the Benagaria Missionary grounds, within a specially created area, cordoned off by walls, with a small gate and is an iconic landmark remnant of the Sahebs.

But more than that, there were stories told and retold, oral histories passed on and down, like inheritance to the generations of Santals that came after, who imbedded a remembrance of what was, and what the Sahebs brought as a natural part of their

identity. Stories wrapped in affection, admiration and trust for a people they took to them naturally—despite the spiritual conquest, and other subtle and direct cultural and religious impositions, they were treated fairly and kindly and that embodiment was impossible to erase. The pioneer missionaries came into a war tormented Santal Parganas, after the quelling of the Santal rebellion-Hul (1955-57), where thousands of Santals rose in revolt against the Indian mainstream landlords, police, traders, merchants and moneylenders who wreaked havoc in their lands through abuse and exploitation, and who in defence called upon the British, at whose behest they were originally allowed entry into their lands. This quickly escalated into a battle of bows and arrows against bullets. An estimated 30,000 Santals were killed trying to defend their way of life.

Here the pioneer missionaries entered their lands not to wage war, and in that they were different Sahebs from the British, but most importantly they were unlike the Indian mainstream exploiters, which made the Santals open the doors of their villages, homes and hearts to them.

All the Santals coming off the mission tradition assume automatically that the Norwegians and Danes know of them in the same intimate ways they do. Bodding and the Sahebs then transcend being celebrated individuals among Santals and become representative of all things Scandinavian.

Many Santals have shared instances of chance encounters with Norwegians and on excitedly announcing they were Santals, received a blank or quizzing response back, a reaction that both confused and dismayed them.

On his maiden trip to Norway, a Santal activist, believed that he'd be issued a visa solely basis his Santal name, which he presumed would be instantly recognisable and

he'd be welcomed exclusively or especially because of this—the long, long, Santal-Scandinavian association. There is this naïve expectation of mutuality of the Santals from their Sahebs and Saheb-land. And when that shared history and memory is not reciprocated they feel betrayed and cheated. This is a tragicomic flavour to this retelling. This is a very complex and layered reality to negotiate around—one where a Santal's and Norwegian's natural familiarity and affiliation is not universal truth. The possibility of this association is truly limited possibly to the Santal Lutherans and the Norwegian Lutherans, and that too of a much older generation, especially in the case of those in Norway. And this the Santal must learn.

Yet, despite the disappointment of realising the Norwegians they meet outside of the Mission areas don't know them back, their venerating of the Saheb and Bodding did not and does not cease. This is not simply because of the Santals recognising the expanse and magnitude of Bodding's work and contributions, but also the magnanimity of the Santals in extending their welcome, hospitality, love, respect and gratitude when they first arrived to their lands, right up to now, when they've dutifully memorialised him in order to immortalise him and all he stood for—including all Scandinavians, regardless of whether they know them or not.

Would Bodding still be Bodding—the decorated persona he is without the Santals?

### **A documented treasure**

Bodding improved upon the adaptation of the Roman script for the Santali language that he first learnt and mastered. And this mastery of language and script in Bodding's hands ushered in an era of writing and tangible documentation that for us now in the hindsight surpasses what a human can do in their lifetimes. He was without doubt an exceptional ethnographer and linguist, but Bodding's incredible Santali Grammar was

created because we were a people with a well-developed and rich language; Bodding's Santal Medicine was possible because we were a people with a deep and intimate understanding and knowledge of healing, plant and forest life.<sup>3</sup>

Bodding could easily have been a tape-recorder, typesetter and a printing press all rolled in one. But we were the memory, bearers and storytellers of the Santal panorama we now see before us. What was impressive about his documentation production was that he was able to take what was organic and breathing and turn it into a form that was tangible, which can be a challenge as it is in many ways limiting.

Santals did not need to document their knowledge and knowledge systems, literature, scholarship or culture because we were living documents ourselves.<sup>4</sup>

This huge landscape of living cultures was a goldmine for ethnographers and ethnologists and Bodding capitalised on it and laid it out in a treasure box—where we were and are the treasure.

And a century later he's set us out on a treasure hunt, as we scavenge through the long shelf, for clues to unravel the mysteries of self.

The Bodding Symposium in November 2015 allowed us a glimpse of our reflections on the shelf. An exclusive viewing of the Bodding (Santal) Collections at the Museum of Cultural History and his manuscripts at the National Library of Norway was organised. It was the first time that everyday Santals from India and Bangladesh were to come face to face with artefacts of their people from a century ago.

Walking into the sterile, air-conditioned storage room we were ambushed by a visual spectacle of items on racks and table display cases—triggering a game of recognition and familiarity. Once the chatter of the name and utility, wonder of artistry,

expressions like ‘this still exists’ and ‘I don’t recognise this’ faded, discussion turned to matters of shared legacy, custodianship, repatriation and future management.

This conversation was inevitable as several Santals—elders, scholars, activists, those involved with advocacy and literary groups and youngsters—put on us the responsibility of assessing and negotiating the possibility of the ‘physical return’ of the Bodding collections. The Norwegian hosts and keepers of this heritage placed this question as a topmost priority on their agenda as well.

We soon realised that this great expectation of ‘physical repatriation’ that people back home hoped would come through, is actually a non-question. Santals—as individuals and organisations—are not ready yet to receive these materials; even though both the Library and Museum were open to repatriation. We do not have the infrastructure, resources and manpower to move or sustain this transfer. Our tangible heritage is very well taken care of in Oslo (even if the artefacts are not on display). This was a huge reality check for us.

Then with both organisations undertaking digitization and working towards putting the collections up in the public domain, we are as close as ever to them.

Most of the 2015 symposium participants saw ‘replication’ of the items in Bodding’s collection as a possibility; these really needn’t travel back from Oslo. Even though the historic and emotional connect can only come from Bodding’s original—now century old—collection, but a recreation of a memory bank through replication and in association with the online catalogue could be the best solution for us, just now. All in all, being there was a process of thinking and re-thinking material culture, repatriation and misplaced nationality.

But being there also produced a personal experience for me—an inexplicable feeling of reverence for a presence I felt in that space. I was interacting with an aura that brought alive the intangible relevance of those objects. Those shelves were commemorations of my people and their lifeways—telling stories of a civilisation that has stood the test of time. That descendants of that same civilisation and culture, bore witness to a historiography on shelves, was surreal.<sup>5</sup>

### **Breathing life into the shelf**

Now, 5 years on, the 2020 launch of the new website by the Museum of Cultural History, showcasing the Santal ethnographic collection and Bodding's documentation of the objects are an interface for Santals to re-engage with their past and reconcile with their present. This website is a time machine of sorts that also diminishes the distance of a century long expanse of time. A way for us to reunite with the material we helped produce or that emerged from us, and a window to use it ourselves.

But documents of civilisation are at the same time the foundation of erasure, a realisation of loss, a longing for that which was, and mourning for that which is irretrievable.

Can the materials on the shelf help us learn about our antiquities, fill in the gaps in knowledge and identity, and make sense of it, and ourselves. The shelf is an invitation to reclaiming our stories and knowledges to accompany the Santal living culture today. Reclaiming them in a way we can engage with them, revise them, build on them, should be the ground to a new era for the Bodding collection. In this way, a new breed of storytelling will emerge, disseminating our histories and cultures anew. It is astonishing to think that Bodding had collaborators back then and will continue to

have them through our new engagements and presentations, if, when and how we choose to do so.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps we want to build new and more shelves, perhaps we want to rearrange the items, perhaps we just want to absorb the wonder of them.

### **Whose legacy?**

Is the Bodding legacy a Santal Christian, Lutheran one alone? It unfortunately seems so and the non-Christian Santals don't know of or relate to him in the same ways as the mission Christians. A non-Christian Santal Medical Doctor is not aware of Bodding's *Studies in Santal medicine and connected folklore*. It is not necessary that every Santal medical student or medical professional care for it, but know it, I think they must. This is contextual learning and one that is homegrown, from within our traditional knowledge systems—which sadly, at this point is the intellectual privilege of only one kind of Santal.

It is time for the Lutheran Santals to release Bodding to the rest of their fellow-Santals. Bodding the religious and Bodding the secular are not a contradiction, but his exceptional heritage. Bodding's bequest is for every Santal who has as much right over the shelf as those from the mission areas.

That has to be the task of Christian Santals today—to share him selflessly, and truly make his treasury a communal memory and tradition for everyone.

Bodding is reminiscent of a time when we were still secure and still in control of our lifeways, still living closest to the ways of our ancestors and where government imposed development justified displacement, extractivism, police and armed forces atrocities and state sponsored violence and crimes were near absent.

Bodding represents nostalgia for Santals.



The Santals made Bodding—recognised and acknowledged his brilliance and human ingenuity and elevated his status. Also, perhaps they inspired and unearthed his genius. He didn't make the Santals; he made the Santals visible. Bodding gave us an existence in material culture, in perceptible forms. Bodding and the Santals gave each other a life and afterlife in orality, text and objects. We are entwined in timelessness.

## Notes

1. Rev. Paul Olaf Bodding (1865-1938), a Norwegian Missionary of The Santal (Home) Mission lived and worked among the Santals of Eastern India from 1890 until 1934.

A scholar, linguist, ethnographer, oral historian and collector, he produced materials—both religious and secular—that are humanly unmatched.

2. Saheb denotes the white man—certainly a foreigner.

3. Ruby Hembrom (2017). 'The Santals and the Bodding Paradox' in Norsk Tidsskrift For Misjonsvitenskap no. 3/2017, Årgang: 71, Norway: Egede Institute, p. 51.

A version of this paper was first presented at the The Bodding Symposium 2015: Belief, Scholarship and Cultural heritage: Paul Olav Bodding and the Making of a Scandinavian-Santal Legacy, held in Oslo, Norway on the 3–5 November, 2015.

4. Ibid.

5. Ruby Hembrom (2017). 'Afterword: Indigenous Contemporaries' in Another INDIA: Explorations & Expressions of Indigenous South Asia. Cambridge: Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge.

6. Op. cit. Ruby Hembrom (2017). 'The Santals and the Bodding Paradox'.

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