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### Focus on Indigenous Literature

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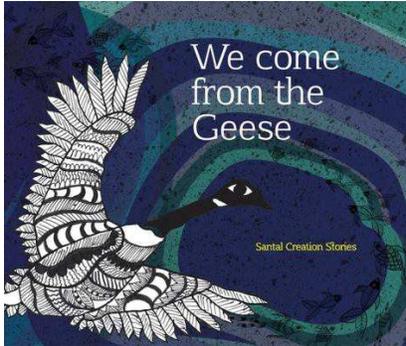
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## Book reviews

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### Santal Creation Stories



**We come from the Geese:** *Santal Creation Stories*

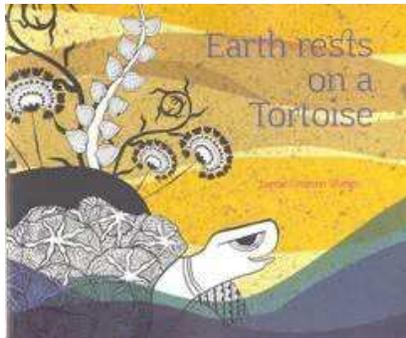
Text by Ruby Hembrom

Illustrations by Boski Jain

Published by Adivaani, 2013

ISBN: 978-81-925541-1-2

32 pages; 90 INR.



**Earth rests on a Tortoise:** *Santal Creation Stories*

Text by Ruby Hembrom

Illustrations by Boski Jain

Published by Adivaani, 2013

ISBN: 978-81-925541-3-6

32 pages; 90 INR

*Review by Jayeeta Ghorai*  
*University of Leeds*

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Like children curious about, ‘Where do I come from?’ nascent civilisations all over the world have been preoccupied with the question of human origin. All peoples have their own intrinsic theories about how the world as they know it and human life on earth came to be. With time, written traditions and organised religions have overshadowed the oral narratives prevalent among many indigenous groups. In India, various orally transmitted stories about creation are getting pushed to oblivion as the languages they are transferred through are spoken by lesser number of people with the passing days. Children of indigenous origin are being taught employability-enhancing linguistic skills, being indoctrinated into formally organised education systems and assimilated into mainstream faiths with larger following, in order to aid their future sustenance. The habit of storytelling is losing its relevance in social structures, through infrequent tribal gatherings, and is getting restricted within individual families, as a legacy passed down through the generations, at risk of being lost forever.

Adivaani has stepped in to address the void of these missing traditions by publishing a series on Santal creation stories, with two books printed and a third in the

offing. In a tiny, easy-to-miss foreword, the publisher explains that each tale was ‘written to rescue one of the many oral stories of the Santal people. [Their] version is adapted from that of Rev. A Campbell’s “Santal Traditions”, published in Indian Evangelical Review in 1892, and described by Rev. Dr. Timotheas Hembrom in his book, *The Santals*, 1996.’

Erudite earlier works like the aforementioned A. Campbell anthology, Cecil Henry Bompas’ *Folklore of Santal Parganas* (now digitised by Project Gutenberg) Verrier Elwin’s *Myths of Middle India*, *Folk Tales of Mahakoshal*, *The Fisher-Girl and the Crab*, *The Tribal Myths of Orissa*, among other notable titles from similar scholastic canon, being out of print, their circulation is limited within library shelves and purely academic interest groups. The urgent need to document some of these stories for wider knowledge transmission was met in a welcome endeavour. The short accounts covering thirty-two pages each, written in easy English, filled with drawings and affordably priced, have children as their primary target readership. Children are the desired receptors to the carrying forward of all traditional knowledge, and the books fulfil that purpose amply. But the books would also prove insightful to anyone who is interested in learning about the Santal traditional thought on cosmology.

*We come from Geese*, the first book in the series, gives the Santal account of how the first humans originated. The second part, *Earth rests on a Tortoise*, describes the planet’s origin and how land was raised from the water.

But why in English? As the writer of the stories Ruby Hembrom, one of Adivaani’s small publishing team of three, and a Santal herself, explains her aim, English as a world language, and one of the main languages through which literacy is being disseminated among present day Santal offspring, ensures wider reach. Not only were these stories important to document in a written language, to save them from ultimate oblivion, that language had to be one accessible to both the modern generation of Santals as well as non-Santal populations within India and the world at large. The overarching need was to place this historiography of cosmology among other world traditions.

The English narrative is cleverly entwined with Santal words in transliteration, with a glossary at the end of each book. The names of the essentially Santal figures from the original stories were retained; so a reader gets acquainted with Ṭḥakur Jiv (the Supreme Being in Santal folk lore), Pilcu Haram (the first man), Pilcu Buḍhi (the first woman), Hās (the gander), Hāsıl (the goose) and Kāçhim Kūḗr (the tortoise prince). Simultaneously, the names of the natural elements that appear in the tales and play a role in larger Santal culture or are exclusive to their inhabited locales, were mentioned in original, with a further explanation of the cultural significance included in the glossary. In the stories one comes across Johar, the traditional Santal greeting, Boḅgas, Gidrā, Sirom grass, Karam Tree and Sole Hako. One gets instantly transported to an essentially Santal world, unadulterated by the passage of time, via the conduit of easily comprehensible English.

The books are pictorial, with full pages dedicated to visual representations, to appeal to early-age readers. The narrative is contained in short sentences, no more than

one per page. The nearly graphic novel layout would fire a child's imagination. Artist Boski Jain has risen to the challenge of making quintessentially 'inexplicable and formless' notions easy to grasp for young readers without losing authenticity among the original Santal 'owners' of the stories. She incorporates tribal symbols like the tortoise, fish, and flower and leaf patterns with large chunks of her creative acumen, to fill gaps where no original design existed. For instance, concepts like Ṭḥakur Jiv or Boṅgas had no reliable preceding representation in the otherwise rich artistic tradition of the Santal. The line drawings and black-and-white illustrations retain the wonderful charm of ethnic tribal artistic legacy.

One can hope these books would find coveted place as bed time stories of children across geographies. Not only is indigenous folk lore at a risk of getting lost today, but the ritual of storytelling and the excellent habit of reading, popular till a few decades ago, is seeing a sad decline in this age of easily accessible multimedia-driven childhood entertainment. Like J. K. Rowling brought a fresh surge with her modern mythmaking, it is time the age old tales from indigenous quarters found a stronger voice.

*[Adivaani books are available through online portal of Earthcare Books. For further queries, write to [info@adivaani.org](mailto:info@adivaani.org) or visit their website, <http://adivaani.org>]*

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