

GOLDEN ERA OF SANTHAL TRIBE IN INDIA NOW, SAY COMMUNITY LEADERS

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The Santhal community is in the spotlight after the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) nominated one of its leaders, Droupadi Murmu, for the election to the highest Constitutional post of India.

With chances bright for Ms. Murmu to become the first tribal person to become the President, community members appear to be on cloud nine. Santhal is the third largest Scheduled Tribe community in the country after Gond and Bhil.

The Santhal population is mostly distributed in Odisha, Jharkhand and West Bengal. Ms. Murmu's home district, Mayurbhanj, has one of the largest concentrations of the tribe. In Odisha, Santhals are found in Keonjhar and Balasore, other than in Mayurbhanj district.

According to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute (SCSTRTI), Bhubaneswar, the word Santhal is derived from two words: *santha* meaning calm and peaceful and *ala* meaning man.

The institute says that in the past, the Santhals had led a nomadic life. Gradually, they came to settle down on the Chhotanagpur plateau. Towards the end of the 18th century, they migrated to the Santhal Parganas of Bihar and then they came to Odisha. Community leaders say it is a golden era now for Santhals in the country. If elected, Ms. Murmu will become the first tribal woman President of India. Hemant Soren, a Santhal, is the Chief Minister of Jharkhand. Girish Chandra Murmu, the first Lieutenant-Governor of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir, is now Comptroller and Auditor-General of India.

Mayurbhanj MP Bishweswar Tudu, a Santhal, is the Union Minister of State for Tribal Affairs and Jal Shakti.

"Their literacy rate is very high compared with that of other tribes in Odisha. If one sees in terms of prosperity in the community, its members playing key roles in national and international spheres, Santhals have few parallel," SCSTRTI Director A.B. Ota said.

Santhals speak Santhali which has its own script called Ol Chiki invented by Pundit Raghunath Murmu. Santhali in the Ol Chiki script has been included in the Eighth Schedule to the Constitution. Ol-Chiki is the medium of instruction in many schools across the State. Santhal is a subject for postgraduate study.

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