

FESTIVALS OF THE SANTHAL OF BENGAL AND NATURE: A DISCUSSION

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Article Ref. No.:

18112704N1SNSI

Article History:

Submitted on 27 Nov 2018

Accepted on 02 Mar 2019

Published online on 04 Mar 2019

Keywords:

Bengal, *Santhal*, Environment, Nature, Festival, *Anreo*, *Dasai*, *Saharay*, *Sakrat*, *Baha*

Abstract:

The social unity of *Santhal* in Bengal is very strong and durable. They observe their festivals though there are many difficulties, calamities and troubles in their lives and livelihoods. Though the interest to celebrate the festivals is decreasing now yet they have tried to hold on to their customs, cultures- the main string of social unity through celebrating of their festivals. Nature and environment play an important role in these festivals. It has been tried to enlighten the festivals of these people and how they are related to nature and environment with their present degradation. The major festivals of this ethnic group of people are *Anreo*, *Dasai*, *Saharay*, *Sakrat*, *Baha* and others. All the festivals are celebrated according to needs of nature and environment. But now a day's there is acute crises of nature and environment due to many reasons. The social life of *Santhals* in rural areas has deteriorated due to not caring of nature. Warning signals are there for the upcoming bigger disaster facing our society. But now a days there is a large scale destruction of nature and environment due to many reasons. Global warming has caused increase in the level of temperature and deficiency of rains. West Bengal is not any exception to this. Our Bengal is full of green fields and perennial rivers and ponds with rain-water all over the year. But the temperature has been increasing gradually over the past few decades. The number of days of winter has also come down. Continuous high temperatures are not there except for three months and there is also the scarcity of rains. It is musty hot during the rains. This increase in level of temperature is very harmful for our earth. The green fields, trees, forests, bushes all will dry up if it continues. This calamity will also bring ruin to human beings and wild animals. The *Santhals* of Bengal will break away from their social lives as they once were very much close to nature and forests and this will also lead to greater destruction of society at large.

Most of the educated *Santhals* today, have forgotten their nature and environment related folk-songs. The questions coming to our minds is, will *Santhals* be able to conserve their originality and migration without changing their simple and solitary religious living with rivers and forests, hunting-like the jewels full of life-skills and transferring the

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cultivated lands into gold. The other doubt is how much their culture and life skills will be conserved and how they will remain in their natural habits not only in the districts of Bengal but even in *Santhal Paraganas* (Choudhury, 1987a).

In order to write this paper, I surveyed some *Santhal* villages and came to my know that they are not even celebrating their festivals today as most of the villages have totally negative thoughts about it. Customs and traditional cultures are not found in their festivals even in those villages where they are celebrated. The duration of the festivals has also decreased. They do not unite even at the time of their hunting-forbidden by the Government or due to the lack of jungles as well as scarcity of time. Many people are not engaged in their religious ceremonies and festivals. Of course their transformation into Christianity is a major problem. A huge number of today's *Santhals* have converted into Christianity. They are now far away from their old customs and festivals as they are now converted into Christians (Roy et al., 1982 a). According to *Ganjial Mardi*, a resident of Habibpur Block, Malda "They are enjoying advanced facility in education and in other sides who have taken to Christianity. Their religious faiths are guided by the Missionaries. The conversion of this reformation is done." On the other hand the educated *Santhals* and students can't grip firmly to their own traditions and cultures. They have even forgotten their own customs and cultures as they want to copy cultures of others and traditions at the time of their education at various institutions. Many *Santhals* can't attend their festivals as they are living in other states for the sake of their lives and livelihood.^a

According to Land Reforms Act-14/C Govt. West Bengal, it's not possible to transfer their land to anyone. But being humble, simple and lack of their livelihood, huge areas of their lands have been sold today in the name of others. Naturally they are not interested in celebrating their festivals.^b They have also assimilated festivals of others, thinking those as their own festivals. On the other hand, the increasing idea of Global Village and the competitive imitation of Western culture, the *Santhals* are also engaged in these cursive competition and they have forgotten their own traditions and cultures. I have tried to enlighten the festivals of these people and how they are related to nature and environment with their present degradation.

There is not one opinion about the origin of the *Santhals* among the Historians and Research scholars. There was not enough food security in the hills and jungles for them. Being deprived of food they entered the districts of Bankura and Midnapore (Hembram, 1988a). They started to live in Murshidabad, Birbhum, Purulia, Malda, and Dinajpur, after being pressurized by the *Santhal* Revolt for their livelihood. They have evolved from their centuries' of isolated traditional boundaries when Bihar was captured by the British Govt. and their continuous torture, absorption and new taxation policy was imposed upon them which destroyed their barter policy. The *Santhals* migrated to the boarder of Bengal, Bihar and Bangladesh from 1790 AD (Murmu, 2011). The Zamindars of these areas used them as labours for clearing the jungles and thus their numbers increased. The principal region of *Santhals* in Bhagalpur was then known as *damine koh* later it was named as *Santhal Pargana*. The majority of *Santhals* got settled there. They have made their houses by cleaning the vast jungles of *Santhal Pargana (Damine Koh)*. They produced the gold like corn for others in that place where nobody stepped. They survived fighting with wild animals- tigers, bears and others. They also suffered from their illiteracy, poverty and lack of proper nutrition. They were struggling continuously with nature and thus the nature made them like itself. They are nourished in the lap of nature so their minds are full of simplicity and unfamiliar to cheating, depriving or befooling others and that is against their nature. So the original simplicity and truthfulness are the jewels of their racial features. Some dishonest businessmen bought the rice and mustard at a very cheap rate from the *Santhals* of *Kathikund* of *Dumka* Sub- Division and they sold them at a high rate to Siuri (Roy, 1982 b). This cruel exploitation made them poor and helpless.

The social unity of *Santhal* in Bengal is very strong and durable. They observe their festivals, though there are many difficulties, calamities and troubles in their lives and livelihoods. Though the interest to celebrate the festivals have decreased now yet they have tried to hold onto their customs, cultures- the main string of social unity through celebrating their festivals (Patnaik, 2001). Nature and environment play an important role in these festivals. The major festivals of this ethnic group of people are as follows:

Anreo: There are dark clouds frequently seen in the shining sky at the beginning of the Bengali month of *Ashar*. These dark clouds bring heavy rains. There is water everywhere in the green fields. Then starts cultivation with this huge water. People cultivate their lands with growing saplings. The *Santhals* celebrate their first festival *Anreo* or Ashari worship for the remembrance of cultivation. The Grarit (the protector of the village) goes to every house by the order of *Majhi* (the chief of the village) to inform everyone to assemble in a meeting. They decide all about the festival-date, time, amount of subscription etc. in this meeting. On the very first day of this festival they dedicate pigeons at the place named *Jaher*. They make hotchpotch with the rice collected from every house and the meat of the pigeons. This hotchpotch is distributed on Banyan leaves among every one of all ages. The original programme starts from the next day. They dance together with the rhythm of *Mandal* (a type of drum) wearing new dresses. It is noticed that the nature and environment get fully merged in this festival.^c The rainy atmosphere of *Ashar*, shining sky, dark clouds, *Jaher* place, heavy shower, and banyan leaves are closely related to this occasion. But they do not get this type of atmosphere now for celebration of the festivals due to deforestation, urbanization and global warming. Most of the districts of Bengal are declared as drought- affected by the Govt. in 2006 (UNICEF, 2003). As a result, the *Santhals* can't observe their occasion fully with this type of atmosphere. Nature has become the main reason for not celebrating their happy occasions.

Dasai: This festival is observed in some villages of Bengal during the busy period of cultivation in the months of *Shravana* and *Bhadra*. There are recitations of *Mantra* or divine lines devoted to Bishhori for one or two months of the house of Janguru or Mahan at every night for preparation of the greatest festival of Bengal -*Durga Puja*. They are taught how to get rid of poisonous snake-bite or scorpion. The benefits and utilizations of different trees are also taught for the sake of treatment of some illnesses. The first phase of this occasion ends by reciting *Bishahari* to Goddess *Manasha* (Snake- goddess). In the second phase of this festival they are taught by reciting *Mantra* -how to get rid of headache, stomach ache and pain or other physical ailments, there is *Bonga Dakao* festival performed frequently at this stage when the recitations are continuing.^d *Dasai* (Anench) dance is taught at the house of Janguru for the purpose of *Durga Puja* in these two months. The *Santhal* women dance after decorating their hair with Kash flower with the rhythm of their traditional drum *Mandal*. All the songs for this occasion are nature and environment related. The reciting of mantra ends after worshipping *Belbaram* at *Panchami* of *Durga Puja*. They dance with *Tumdat*, *Tanak*, and *Kartal* from *Shasthi* to *Mahanabami* from one village to another. This festival ends after dedication of the articles of the festival into the rivers or ponds respecting Goddess *Durga*. They observe *Dasai* festival in every village of Bengal where they live. In the 21st century of science and technology though they say there is not any indirect value of this festival but still they think they could achieve the energy to overcome all the obstacles (Troisi, 1979a). They don't show their interest in observing *Dasai* for the scarcity of Aurvedic tress and the opposite reaction of nature and environment.

Saharay: The biggest festival of *Santhals* of Bengal is *Saharay*. The date of this festival is decided by the village chief when the paddy corns have been completely

gathered in every house, then women clean every corner of their houses and paint the walls with white coloured soil brought from river. The householders invite their relatives and the nearest ones after cleaning of their houses have been completed. All children are very much excited as the days to the festival come closer. The central focus of this festival is cow or bull (Roy, 1982c). On the very first day of this festival Majhi sacrifices pigeons or hens to make Khichuri for all. The Majhi returns from the place with his companions while beating *Mandal* (drums) and Dugdugi and they sing songs devoted to the cows from one house to another.

On the second day of this festival they welcome their relatives and nearest ones. All the invitees come with Haria (a type of drink). They dance and sing on the roads starting this day. The most significant day of the festival is the third day. At the dawn of this very day they tie their cows and buffaloes out of their cowsheds. After that they apply some oil and vermilion on their horns and heads and tie chains on their necks made of breads and rupee notes. They decorate their doors with some arts by mixing some flour with water and by cutting some pieces of flowers of silk-cotton tree. After that there is a competition to snatch the breads and notes of rupees from the necks of cows and buffaloes that are tied at the other side of the village with beating sounds of drums, tambours, and cymbals (Mukherjee, 1939a). There are two important events on the fourth day. The Grarit takes every man for hunting after beating of Tamak at the dawn of the fifth day. After returning from hunting, they try to aim with an arrow on a pole of banana tree and take the winner to the auntie's house on their shoulders and then go to the houses of other important persons. Celebrations of *Saharay* end with singing of the following song (Hembram, 1988b)

*"Sahrae chalet kanad
Toubuch Toubuch Baha Darai Kanad
Tou O Dhoul Chetante."*

The *Santhals* of Bengal wait anxiously for this festival throughout the year. This festival unites them firmly with all their relatives with full of happiness and it makes their society stronger. This festival is also not distant from nature and environment. Drinks are made of Mahua fruits; paddy, rivers, soil, silk-cotton flowers, hunting, nature related songs, pigeons, and hens, all are so close to nature and environment with this *Saharay* festivals.^e But Mahua fruits, rivers, soils, silk-cotton flowers are not so readily available today and there are no jungles left for their hunting. So, this festival has lost its fervour from its earlier state. The members of this society can't celebrate this festival fully with great enjoyment at present.

Sakrat: The *Santhals* observe the *Sakraton* Pous Sankranti. The winter is called as Rabang by them. Chilling sensations of nature are felt with the blowing of chilly North wind. Threshing of the corns is over with the sweet sunlight. After gathering of the corns, the result of their hard works, they eagerly wait for *Sakrat*. The roughness of the winter can't engulf the fields entirely. The fields are decorated anew with wintry vegetables. Burn the khejur ros (date-juice) to make date molasses from the dawn and it's scent signals the farewell to pous. A bazaar is held there around some villages. New dresses and earthen pots are sold in the bazaar. The women of course buy the earthen pots to make Pithe (a kind of cake). The girls make flour from the wetted rice in the husking pedal with the rhythm of their body and feet (Roy, 1982d). They make the pithe from this rice dust. But they make the dust of some sunned rice in the mortar and pestle not in the husking pedal because they dedicate the pithe made from this sunned rice dust to the Marang Buru and to their dead ancestors. The pithe making continues at every house from morning till night (Troisi, 1979b). The different names of these pithe are Dumru, Jil, Sakan, Bede, Letho, and Chhar.

The householders offer their first made pithe to the Marang Buru and their ancestors with deep regards. They also offer some fried rice and pressed rice with watery portion of Haria as per their old customs. The utterance of worshipping Mantra by the householders resembles to the Mantra of *Saharay* festival (Karmakar, 2011a). They wear new dresses after bathing in rivers or in the nearest ponds on the Pous Sankranti. Respect for the elders and congratulations among the same aged persons continue throughout the day, their traditional customs of catching and eating the fishes are also carried on like the past. They believe that the fishes gain long life at this time. So, there is a custom that they have followed from their ancestors to catch, keep and eat fishes. This day is also considered as a lucky day for learning the archery (Choudhury, 1987b). Instucted by the Majhi, the Garet fixes the poles of Keyra (the stems of Banana tree) or Pipi (the stems of the Papaya tree) at a specific distance in the open field. The villagers bring the Majhi on their shoulders with the beating of Dhamsha, *Mandal* then decides place of the earth to shoot the arrow at first from East to the North and then to the West keeping the Sun and the Earth as witnesses he shoots with an arrow respecting the ground. The villagers also gather with archery and arrows to take part in this aiming game. Taking permission from the Majhi, the Garet worships Veta Bindha (Murmu, 2011b). The Medra, Bonga, Marang Buru, and Jaher all are worshipped together as their hunting Gods. The pressed rice, molasses, chhar, tanghari and cow-dung are needed for this worship. The pithe are made round shaped without overturning them on the earthen frying pan. They believe they will not get success at the archery aiming festival if they made the pithe without these rules. Even they will not be able to shoot at the time of hunting festival of wild animals and birds. Garet places some pithe after putting some guri (cow dung) on Veta Bindha at the time of worship. The specialty of this worship is that only Garet has the permission to worship during the festival (Murmu, 2011b). He can't get this opportunity at other festivals throughout the year. After completing the worship they stand in a line with their archery and arrows. Majhi shoots the first arrow at Veta Bindha. By this shoot, Majhi introduces archery aiming game. Men of all ages from eight to eighty participate in this festival. All the participants continue their shooting of arrows. They get at least three chances to win at their aim. Majhi declares the successful arrow-shooter as a winner. As a result, the Majhi ties a new towel/ napkin as turban at the head of the winner as his reward and honour. The arrow-pierced portion of Veta Bindha is given to the winner and the rest part is left there as per old custom. Now the winner bows his head before everyone to show his respect. People take the Majhi and winner on their shoulders with beating of Dhamsha and *Mandal* to the Majhi's house then the women wash their feet (Barai, 2015). The women of course impute oil with turmeric at their feet before washing. The Majhi, Garet and the best winner drink Haria there.

If the participants do not succeed the women try this game from the next day. Majhiburi (the wife of Majhi) leads the women messaging through the wife of the Garet. They shoot with an arrow in a lined way. The men are now the spectators. The successful woman is declared and considered as a winner who can pierce with the arrow. The rest of customs are followed as did the men. They chop the portion of Veta Bindha and distribute it among everybody mixed with fried rice. The fried rice is distributed from the Majhi's house (Barai, 2015). In the evening of the winter they enjoy singing and dancing intoxicated with Haria with the rhythm of Dhamsha, *Mandal* and flute. They bid goodbye to this festival with great happiness and enjoyment. There is again a touch of nature and environment in this *Sakrat* festival. But in many of the *Santhal* villages this festival is not celebrated fully. Some villages have stopped totally celebrating this festival. There is hardly a *Mandal* in many villages. The use of archery, arrows have also reduced. They use power-tractor while cultivating instead of cows.^f So major part of this festival- the cows/bulls are absent now. Thus, they have gradually become reluctant due to lack of natural resources.

Baha: *Baha* festival is one of the most remarkable festivals of *Santhals* of Bengal. This festival is celebrated on *Dol Purnima* (the festival of colours). This festival welcomes the new leaves and flowers of trees. This *Baha* festival is observed at the place named *Jaher*. The *Jaher* is a fixed place in the corner of the village, where a shed is made near the root of a tree and used for worshipping their Gods.^g They worship *Marang Buru* and Lord Shiva. The *Jaher Era*, *Modeku Turaiku*- Gods are also worshipped there as the supportive Gods. After serving the food offering to deity, they are involved in singing and dancing with their hair bun decorated with flowers. These songs of the dances are also nature and environment related as below:

“*Hesa; Maachatere*
Jagonsaitudedoyraagekan?
Bade maa Lover re,
JagonsaigutrutdoySanheda?
De chang Aachuren
Jagonsaituderaagekan
Disamchangbiluram
Jagonsaigutrutdoy Sanheda.”^h

Meaning: On the top of Peepal tree/ Why bird Tude sings? /On the bending branches of/ Banyana tree / Why Gutrang takes breath? / Tune sings because-/ The season changes./ Gutrang breathes because- / The Nature turns.

Making of the flute called *Sakoa* of the horns of buffaloes the men beat the *Mandal* with the rhythm of the flute. Having covered the singing and dancing, an important person called *Naiki* takes their men while beating the *Mandal* and singing to give bouquet of flowers to every housewife as a gift. *Naiki* and their men get *Haria* with lots of dishes from the housewives in return. Thus *Baha* ends on that day. Next day, the colours, abir (red powders) are played from the morning. This *Baha* festival gets over after bathing in the afternoon (Murmu, 2011c). Through the celebration of *Baha* festival the *Santhals* are inspired to make their minds as simple and innocent as the flowers. They also awaken their lives with colourful imaginations with playing of colours. Apart from this the *Santhals* of Bengal celebrate their other small festivals sometimes for enjoyment and sometimes for holding onto their traditions. Sometimes they celebrate *Hul* (revolt) festival. In the word *Baha*, there is a touch of nature and environment. But they are disoriented from celebrating this festival due to the economic insolvency and the wrath of the queen nature (Murmu, 2011c).

The other important festivals observed by the *Santhals* of Bengal are as follows:

- **Bandna** is another most important festival of *Santhals*. This is a harvest festival which takes place after the reaping of winter paddy. There is no fixed date for it but the village headman fixes the day on which the festivals have to commence. On the first day, sacrifices are made to *Jaher* at the place of worship which is out of the village. A few fowls and an egg are offered in sacrifice. Cattles are washed and made to walk over the place of worship. If one of them tramples on the sacrificial egg, it is considered as an auspicious omen for its owner, then for three days a continuous fun of festivity commences in which everyone joins irrespective of age. The elders indulge in heavy drinking while the young men and girls amuse themselves as young folk will. The whole period is one of the unrestrained abandonment and all restrictions are thrown off. On the last day, a feast is arranged in which the whole village participates.ⁱ
- **Erok Sim** is celebrated in the month of Ashar (June-July) on sowing of rice seeds in the field. The *Naiki* sacrifices the fowls to the *Jaherbongas* and the *Manjhi Bonga* invoking each one to make the earth fertile. (Mukherjee, 1939b)
- **Hariar Sim** is celebrated in the month of Shraban (July-August). It is the time when the paddy seeds start sprouting. The *Naiki* sacrifices fowls to the village

Bongas, namely Maran Buru, Jaher Era, Gosae Era, MorekoTuruiko, Pargana Bonga, Manjihi Bonga and Sima Bonga for a luxuriant growth of paddy (Troisi, 1979c).

- **Iri-Gundli Nawai** is celebrated in the month of Bhador (Sept.-Oct.). The first fruits of the millet and gundli are offered to the Bongas. The Kudam Naiki along with the fruits of the millet offers sacrifices of goat or ram to the Pargana Bonga to protect their crops from rats or other pestilence (Troisi, 1979c).
- **Janthar** is celebrated in the month of Agrahon (Nov-Dec.). The first fruit of winter rice crop offering is made in this festival. The Kudam offers Naiki sacrifice of goat or ram to the Pargana Bonga along with the first ears of paddy to protect them from stomach disease, to multiply the paddy and also to protect their grains from harm (Mukherjee, 1939c).
- **Magh Sim** is celebrated in the month of Magh (Jan- Feb), when the Sauri (thatching grass) is being cut. Fowls are sacrificed by Naiki to the village Bongas, invoking them to multiply their sauri crop (Karmakar, 2011b).

In all the above festivals there are crying needs of nature and environment for celebrating their festivals. But nowadays there are acute crises of nature and environment due to many reasons. Global warming causes the increase in level of temperature and the shortage of rains. West Bengal is not the exception to this. Our Bengal is riched with green and fills the rivers, the ponds with rain-water all over the year. But it seems-that the temperature is increased gradually from the past few decades. The number of the days of winter is also decreased. So there is not hot temperature except three months and the scarcity of rains. There is musty hot during the rains. This increasing level of temperature is very much harmful for our earth. The green fields, trees, forests, bushes all are dried up if it is continued. This calamity will also rain upon human being and wild animals. The *Santhals* of Bengal will break their social lives that were once very much mixed with nature and forests and this also leads to great destruction of a greater society (Statistical Abstract, 2005).

They have many other nature dependent matters apart from their festivals which help to keep binding their society. The *Sagun Chili* or the idea of a pot filled with water on a festive occasion which signifies the weal and woe of the beginning of any work. They consider the place as unlucky if the water of the pot dries up. There will not be any progress in life, The Durba grass (a kind of grass) is very favourite and innocent symbol for them. They believe that the earth is fit for living and is being tightened up by this durba grass. They also believe that there is a soul in every single element of nature. Empowered by energy of those-souls the trees, the rivers, the hills and mountains are alive. The *Santhals* society has been worshipping trees, rivers, hills, and mountains from ancient times, even their clan has been coined from those trees and flowers.

The *Santhals* are in majority among the tribes of West Bengal (Uttaran Samoyiki, 2005). Their economic condition is miserable. They have been left behind in the field of education. Cultivation is their main occupation. They face the challenges for their living by cultivation and depending on the vagaries of nature. Their script of language makes their problem worse. Though their economic condition is under development now because of central and the state government's many projects. Yet this is not good enough as expected.

This community is also lagging behind in celebrating their traditional festivals as they have fallen into the vicious circle of globalization, global warming, and urbanization. The environment plays a leading role in their lives as in case of others. So, the intimate relations of all are needed to sustain the nature and environment (Chattopadhyaya, 2007). In that way this group can integrate themselves with the society in a strong manner. They can upgrade their economic conditions to march forward, Festivals are for humans and not the other way round.. Festivals enlarge socialization. The unity, affection and enjoyment are developed by the festivals. So, we should take care of nature and

environment for our happiness. The social life of *Santhals* in rural areas has deteriorated due to havoc of nature created by humans. This is an advance warning for the upcoming bigger disaster for our society at large. In the context of changing scenario of the *Santhal* community in Bengal it is very important phenomenon of the time. Ecological features of *Santhals* have changed. They are forced to evolve themselves with the recurrent modification to their livelihood. But they are not in a position to cope with the problem of changing environment of their situation as they are simple people unaware of modern way of life. They face many problems which stop them from continuing their earlier peaceful life. Poverty, illiteracy and unemployment are major problems in this regard. Nature and environment are now not in favour of the *Santhal* community. They are not able to organize their traditional festivals due to the imbalance of the nature and environment. Globalization and global warming have taken a greater toll and play a vital role to disturb the *Santhals* of Bengal as well as North Bengal. Their culture, traditions are getting disturbed by these changes in environment and disturbance of nature.

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ENDNOTES

- ^a Interview with Ganjal Mardi-Age -63-Parulia, Malda-date-3/7/2009.
- ^b Interview with Shyam Soren-Age -83-Dalla, Malda-date-3/7/2009.
- ^c Interview with Togius Hembram-Age -58- Buniadpur, Dakshin Dinajpur-date-13/5/2010.
- ^d Interview with Boro Kisku-Age -35-Itahar, Uttar Dinajpur -date-17/8/2010.
- ^e Interview with Sanjila Mardi, Age-48-Maynaguri, Jalpaiguri, date-13/9/2011.
- ^f Interview with Rupali Kisku, Age-35-Sarai Dighi, Uttar Dinajpur, date-08/11/2011.
- ^g Interview with Hopna Mardi, Age-52-Harirampur, Dakshin Dinajpur, date-12/11/2011.
- ^h Interview with ChorkaHembram, Age-48-Choughati, Malda, date-17/02/2013.
- ⁱ Interview with Taro Kisku, Age-53-Islampur, Uttar Dinajpur, date-14/05/2013.