

# Santal Folktales as Mirror of Santal Identity

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**Abstract:** Santal folktale is one of the Santal people's oldest and most popular literature. Although the literature did not significantly contribute to world literature, their folktales are rich. This literature is fading due to a lack of practice, globalization, and ignorance of Santals about its importance. On the other hand, Santals are now facing identity crises due to the influence of globalization, modernity, the tyranny of the mainstream people, conflict among themselves, and various other reasons. In this situation of Santals, the study claims that Santal folktales as a mirror of Santal identity. This research aims to understand Santal folktales and define their identity. It analyzes the folktales, the collections of the first missionaries in the land of Santal in India, using the National Folklore theory, the Cultural Functional Theory of Franz Boas and William Bascom, and Vladimir Propp's Theory of Reality and qualitative research method to show their identity from their folktales. The research concluded with the assertion that Santal folktales are elegant literature. They mirror Santals as children of nature because they live nature-dependent lives. They are peace-loving people; their lifestyle is simple, and they live harmoniously with the other creatures. So the study provides a deep understanding of their identity, increases Santals' interest in their literature, and inspires them to preserve ancient literature. Furthermore, this scholarly endeavor also intends to probe further into Santal's literature and its socio-cultural impact on local communities, society, and the world's literature.

**Keywords:** Santals, Santal folktales, Santal identity, Santal identity crisis, Santal tradition, Santal culture, Santals as children of nature.

## Introduction:

Santal folktales are popular literature among Santals. Although it is dying now, once they practiced in every Santal house, it is still very popular literature in many places. They like them because they can come together to share their tales. The tales describe their lives, reality, and history. Therefore, their folktales are a bearer/carrier of their practices, traditions, and culture. The dissertation has discussed the nature of their folktales, the reality of Santals as the tales describe, and their identity in the light of their folktales to define the topic.

*Santals* are a tribal group residing in South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Bhutan. As they spread in many countries and mixed with the people of other cultures and religions, many converted to other religions and adopted new cultures. This situation leads them to an identity crisis. Many young Santals are raising a question about their identity now. They are also engaging in conflicts among themselves in this issue. Different scholars have attempted to solve the identity problem, but there has been no proper solution until now to this debate. However, this research argues that Santal literature, especially folktales, answers the questions of their identity because the folktales preserved their cultures, traditions, and nature. They also described the landscape of their area and reality.

## The Genesis of Santals:

Scholars have different opinions about their origins. According to their creation myth, when Thakur Jiu (Supreme god) 's daughter Chandmuni took a bath in the sea, she made two birds from her body's dirt. She brought them to Thakur Jiu, and he breathed spirit in them. The birds laid two eggs from which two human offspring Philchu Haram and Philchu Budhi, came out. Philchu Haram and Philchu Budhi were the first parents of Santals (Hasdak et al. 20). Santals have twelve clans: Kisku, Mardi, Soren, Hembrom, Tudu, Murmu, Hasdak, Baske, Besra, Chore, Pauria, and Bedeya (Roy 222 & Dey 35). Different people have spelled the word 'Santal' in various ways, such as Santhal, Saontar, Sontal, Satal, and Santal, but the

Santals prefer the last spelling, 'Santal' (Kerketa 26). However, Santals introduce themselves as Hor, which means 'human being' (D. Soren). Even today, they isolate themselves from others by calling themselves 'Hor' or 'Hor Hopon.' They also use 'Kherwar' and some places 'Manjhi' to introduce themselves in India.

Santals are the third largest tribal group in India (Dey 31) and the second-largest tribal group in Bangladesh (Shamsuddoha 206). According to their folklore, their birthplace is Hihiri – Pipiri' (Kerketa 23). However, some scholars have claimed that Santal's origin is outside India. Some scholars said Babylon was their place of birth (Shasuddoha 206). According to Historians, Santals, Oraon, Khloe, and Mundas are descendants of Proto – Australoid. However, they drew national and international attention when they revolted against the British Government in 1855.

### **Santal Literature:**

Like other tribes and nations, Santals pass on their literary heritage through oral tradition. They have rich folklore such as folktales, rhyme, ballads, riddle, dances, and different kinds of songs. Folktales are the most prevalent manifestation of their oral literature. Although some talented writers have been born among the Santals, like Sadhu Ramchand Murmu and Pandit Raghunath Marmu, Santali literature has not been able to stand on its own due to a lack of literary practice. As a result, Santals slowly become strangers to these oral traditions and literature. Some young Santals are coming forward to practice literature, even though their number is significantly less.

Chatterji claims Santals have two types of literature: Ancient literature, passed on through the oral tradition, and Modern literature, a work of modern educated Santals (32). However, at present, Santali literature is under threat from inside and outside their community.

### **The Rationale of the Study:**

Santal literature is far behind other literature; it has not contributed to world literature. To transcend this literature, Santals must practice their literature and needed research on it. In the present context, many Santals are now forgetting their folklore; they do not share folktales in the village like before. With this, they are losing many elements of their culture. They group themselves for various reasons, especially their identity. However, this study has neutrally attempted to present their identity according to their folktales. Santal folktales do not discriminate against anyone, do not despise anyone, but unite all. Through this dissertation, Santals will be able to know and understand themselves more. So, the dissertation is significant and timely considering Santal's literature and present context.

### **Literature Reviews:**

The works on Santal folktales and literature are inadequate. It indicates there is a lacking of literature practice among them. The study has categorized the available literature on the following topics:

1. Santal folktales and Santal identity - Researchers Canny, Datta, Raj, Hembrom, Tank, and P. Soren identified Santal cultural and traditional elements in their folktales and myths. These studies confirmed that Santal folktales and folklores reflect different aspects of their lives. Therefore, they are significant in knowing Santal's life.
2. Transformation of Santal Identity – the researchers have specified the unjust oppression, negligence of Governments, conversion to other religions, internal conflicts, and influence of modernism as factors responsible for Santals' present state. The researchers have relied on the survey to ascertain these reasons.
3. Processes of re-defining Santal Identity – a group of researchers have discussed how Santals' religions, traditions, movements, and language re-define their identity. They have identified several issues defining Santal identity as Luguburu Pilgrimage, Baha Festival, Sarna Dharma, and Ol'Chiki language script. Kisku and Santra have presented a unique idea of Santal identity: their houses bear their identity. The researchers revealed that practicing traditions and cultures can define their identity.
4. Santal literature in South Asian Literature – Folklore such as folktales, folksongs, music, poetry, and riddles are predominant in Santal Literature. However, this literature has not much contributed to South Asian literature. The scholarly endeavors prove that the Santal folk literary heritage lacks interest in literary practice because of a lack of financial aid, different language scripts, and internal conflicts. However, Suniti Kumar Chatterji praised the work of missionaries and revealed their contribution to Santal literature. He also mentioned that Tagore appreciated the poetic beauty of Santali songs (34).
5. Santal's Identity and Stress - The identity problem of Santal is not just cultural or social; it is stress. The articles on this subject are rare, but they appeared partially in many articles. Bhowmick and Khan have claimed that converted Santals consider themselves superior to other Santals; Bandyopadhyay and Carrin have noted that Santals attempt to promote their culture; so they hired rituals from different cultures into Santal culture. The claims show the hidden cause of all these may be their psychological pressure.

So it turns out that there is not much work on Santali literature. There are many articles about the Santals but very little about their literature. The reviews also have revealed the problems that the Santals are currently facing. Some articles demonstrate that they have attempted to solve it. However, it is noteworthy that they did not write much about folktales. So this dissertation has attempted to present their identity in the light of their folktales and prove that Santal folktales as a mirror of their identity.

#### **Theoretical Framework:**

The influence of folklore on human life is immense. This fact has led many nations to give importance to folklore studies. Over time, many folklorists have offered various theories for reading folklore. According to the dissertation's nature and its aims and objectives, the researcher has selected the following three theories to analyze Santal folktales:

**National Folklore Theory** - focuses on the distinctive qualities of the folk traditions found within one country. It concentrates on the core of the folklore as this identifies the elements it carries. Dorson, 1963, first discussed the theory.

**The Functional Theory of Franz Boas and William Bascom** - Franz Boas, 'Father of American anthropology,' has introduced this perspective (Lopez 62). He argues that folklore has one to one relation with culture. Therefore, what is present in the people's culture is also in their folklore. William Bascom argues on folklore that - "(1) it may be a mirror to culture, (2) it may validate aspects of culture, (3) it is a means of education, and (4) it works to maintain conformity to accepted patterns of behavior" (Lopez 62).

**Theory of Folklore and Reality of Vladimir Propp** - The Theory argues:

First, folklore derives from reality, even if that is fantastic images. This truth applies unconditionally to all folklore.

Second, the intention of the creators and performers of folklore is to present real life through such literature.

Third, a folk artist aims to set himself as a representation of reality (Propp 38).

The abovementioned theories prove that folklore relates to people's history, cultures, and reality. They are more effective for this research because they proved a deep relation between folklore and identity.

#### **Conceptual & Methodological Framework:**

This study aims to present Santal folktales as a mirror of Santal's identity. The study utilizes different variables such as independent variable, moderator variable, mediator variable, and dependent variable in this research process. The independent variable is the first missionaries' collections of folktales; they are the primary source of information. The researcher, a Santal, plays an important role in analyzing the tales. Therefore, he serves as a moderator variable. The mediator variable is the books on Santals, articles, and the theory for the current research. The new identity of Santal is the dependent variable. The research uses the Qualitative research methodology.

#### **Research Data:**

The collections are *Santal Folk Tales* (1925, 1929), Vol. I & III by P. O. Bodding, *Folklore of the Santal Parganas* (1924) by P. O. Bodding but translated by Cecil Henry Bompas, *A Chapter of Santal Folklore* (1909) by P. O. Bodding and *Santal Folk Tales* (1891) by A. Campbell. P.O Boding and A. Campbell were missionary in the land of Santals, and Cecil Henry Bompas was a British Civil Servant in India. All of them lived a long time with Santals. They collected many endangered Santal folktales. The study has chosen the collection because of its authenticity and oldest collection.

#### **Selecting Tales:**

The researcher has discovered the following types of tales in the collections of Santal folktales and has examined three tales from each category:

- 1. Adventure Related Tales:**

Santals do not have legends tale like legends stories of many other nations. Here, heroes are simple and ordinary people. They do not have any place in history; they are born in the Santal reality. In these tales, the heroes usually leave their house to search for or conquer something. Their journey is also not long, and the weapons they accompany are simple what Santals use in their daily lives.

## 2. **Animal-Related tales:**

Animal tales are prevalent among Santals, especially Jackal tales. The tales are simple but significant for Santals; they reflect their closeness and harmonious living with animals. Santal's animal tales are different from other animal tales. Here, animals are the character of the tales like any human character. They can speak human language, and at the same time, they retain animal characteristics. It reveals Santals' relation with animals; Bompas wrote, "to people living in the jungle the wild animals are much more than animals to us" (Bompas 317).

## 3. **Bonga Related Tales**

Bonga is a Santali word that means 'spirit' or 'god.' Santals strongly believe in Bonga. They have many tales about Bonga. Santals have different types of Bongas. Professor Sten Konow says, "the worship is still mainly directed towards the old bongas, but we also hear of bhuts and higher gods such as Chado and Thakur" (Santal Folk Tales, Vol. I, XIII). These tales recalled their belief in bongas.

## 4. **Tales related to Life after Death**

The tales reveal that ancestor worship is prevalent among Santal. These folktales have articulated their belief. They believe a dead person becomes Bonga (spirit) after death and live in the netherworld. Therefore, the tales are a reflection of their faith.

## 5. **Married with Animals Related Tales**

There are many tales among Santals about their marriage with animals. However, these tales also indicate their closeness to animals and nature. The research has already discussed animal-related tales, but at this point, the focus is on the marriage relationship of human and non-human animals.

## 6. **Santal Life Related Tales**

The Santals have a special kind of tale that focuses on their lives. They highlight their ethnic characters, traditions, cultures, festivals, rituals, and many aspects of their lives. These tales directly reflect their daily lives, especially their cultures and reality. Every Santal's tales mirror their lives, but Santal's life-related tales have highlighted only Santal's lives.

## 7. **Santal Tales for Entertainment**

Here, the researcher has discussed the entertainment tales of Santals. These types of tales are for enjoyment. Even though the tales are just humor, they still carry many Santal traditions, cultures, and lessons. They reflect their past reality from which the researcher can comprehend Santal's nature as a tribe and characters. All these elements represent their identity.

### 8. **Witchcraft Tales**

Witchcraft's belief in Santal is strong. Santals were always frightened of witches. There was a time when they considered any untimely death and incurable illness a witch's work. Therefore, there are many witchcraft tales among them. Most of the stories are from their experience. However, these tales are reflections of the witchcraft of Santal society.

### 9. **Women related tales**

Santal families are patriarchal families; men are the head of the family. The first son will take responsibility for the family and his mother if the husband dies. Some tales have reflected women's treatment in the Santal society. Bodding wrote about the Santal woman's treatment that "she is always somebody's 'property' first her father's, later on, her husband's or his family's, as a widow she belongs to her son's" (222).

#### **Research Questions:**

The dissertation answers the following questions to define its topic 'Santal folktales as a mirror of Santal Identity':

1. What are the characters of the Santal folktales?
2. What kinds of realities are found in the Santal folktales?
3. How do Santal folktales mirror Santal's identity?

#### **Objectives of the Research:**

Since there is no significant research on Santal literature, this study aims to examine the folktales more closely and present their identity to the world through the research results. The dissertation's objectives are:

1. Understand Santal folktales;
2. Identify the characteristics of Santals in their folktales;
3. Present the identity of Santals in the light of their folktales.

#### **Characteristics of Santal folktales:**

The dissertation analyzed twenty-seven tales to answer the first research question, 'what are the characters of the Santal folktales?' It has given the common characteristics of Santal tales in the tables.

<b>Deployment of folklore poetics</b>	<b>Concept</b>
Setting	Village settings
Point of view	3rd person's point of view
Characters	Santals, non-Santals, animals, and Bonga (spirits).
Poetic Nature of Santal tales	Use of Songs in the tales

The study has uncovered that the settings of the Santal folktales are almost the same as a village or rural setting. Most of the events occurred in the jungle or outside the locality, but human characters were from the village. The other character of the Santal folktale is that all the folktales are in the third-person points of view. It has highlighted their tale-telling practice among them. The study also observed that the tales have various characters besides Santals, like non-Santals, animals, and spirits. The exception of the Santal tales is that the role of humans, animals, and spirits are equal in the tales. They mirror Santals' harmoniously living nature. Santal folktales are poetic because of the use of songs in tales.

### Realities of Santals:

Propp stated, "Folklore, like any other art, derives from reality" (Propp38). So, the dissertation considers Santal folktales have presented Santals' realities. Here, the word 'reality' means Santals' daily activities, practices, traditions, culture, customs, and whatever they do in their daily life. These realities mirror Santals' identity because they reveal Santals' nature and identity. The dissertation has summarized the following realities of Santals from their folktales:

Concept	Narrations
Agricultural works	Plowing land, goatherd, cowherd, fishing
Hunting	Birds, buffaloes, and tiger
Believe in Bongas	Chando, Isor, Moreko Turuiko, god, female Bongas, house Bonga, demon, dead souls, and witches' husbands.
Witchcraft believe	Witches eat people with the help of Bonga; dance at night; society punishes and even kills witches.
Believe in Fate	The characters accept their helplessness as their fate;
Dispute Settlement	Takes place in several tales.
Singing Songs	Characters sing to convey messages.
Dances	Characters dance on different occasions.
Rituals of the dead	Cremation, bath after the cremation,
Slavery life	Characters work under Zamindar and others
Marriage with others	Marriage with Raja (King) 's Son/Bongas/Animals
Fighting with others	Fighting with animals/Raja
Use of traditional things	Use traditional things, like plows, bow-arrow, dram, stick, pai, paila, pawa, flute, garland, axe, and winnowing fan.
Animals in the tales	Animals in the tale, tiger, jackal, night-jar, parrot, crow, buffaloes, cows, birds, monkey, and goats
Non-Santal characters	Dome, Mahali, Zamindar, Oilman, Rajas,

Women's treatments	Less intelligence, nothing can be said to them, dependent on men, lazy, and witches.
Traditions	Washing feet, family relations, ancestor worship, first fruit offerings, Karam puja, Jaher Than, sending tree branches to spread news, Mohua tree, dispute settlements, the practice of Ojha, marriage, the world view of death
Dependent on the forest/nature	Place for goat herding and cultivation, collecting food, grasses,
Family	Father is the head of the family; he takes all decisions
Nature as a tribe	Brave nation, community living, harmonious living, agricultural people, hunter race, and negligence towards women.

The dissertation has introduced the realities discovered in the selected folktales. The left column is the concepts (the reality), and the right column is what the tales have demonstrated. Those practices and traditions still exist in the Santal society. They are still an agricultural tribe and go hunting occasionally. As the tales mention, they still have their traditions, cultures, society, and family. The researcher, as a Santal, has grown up in this environment. Therefore, the dissertation confirms that the folktales have presented realities of Santals are real, and they mirror their identity.

**Identity of Santals:**

The dissertation has discussed the theory of Propp on the reality of the people above. Theory of Boas says 'folklore is autobiography of people' and Bascom states that folklore "may be a mirror of culture" (Lopez 62), and national folklore theory shows the elements of culture are there in the folklore of the people. The dissertation has summarized the realities and found the following identity of Santals:

The Theory of Bascom/National Folklore theory/Prop	Concepts
	Hunter race
	Agricultural people
	Bonga (spirit) believers
	Witchcraft believers
	Fate believers
	Believe in the life after death



	Traditionalists
	Strong sense of justice
	Harmonic living people/animals/spirits
	Patrilineal society
	Negligence of women
	Hard-working women
	Brave nation
	Community living people
	Fun-loving people
	Dependent on Nature
	Music and dance-loving people
	Hostile attitude towards non-tribal people
	Superstitions
	Ungrateful attitude
	Peace-loving people

The theory of Boas and Bascom has declared what is in the culture; they are in their folklore also. The theory has made it easier to find their identity from the folktales of a nation because what will be in the folktales about their culture is their identity. The dissertation searched the cultural elements and traditions of Santals in their tales and discovered their identity mentioned above. Therefore, they are not attributed but the authentic identity of Santals. However, some identities are not new because other scholars have discussed them earlier. The new thing is that this is the first time a dissertation defends Santals' identity in the light of their folktales.

The dissertation has pointed out that people have some misconceptions about Santals' identity; in some cases, Santals also have a misconception about them or accepted those concepts as their identity. The following basic identities emerge from their folktales through this study:

1. Santals as children of nature- this is not a new identity, but the dissertation has first proved through Santal folktales. The tales have shown that Santals are dependent on nature in everything. They cultivate the lands for their food and go hunting in the forest. They also go to the forest to collect their needs if they need anything for their daily living. The tales have ascertained that Santals have good relations with animals and spirits; animals and spirits play an important role as humans in the tales. All this evidence proves that Santals are children of nature.

2. Santals as jungle/forest dwellers- Some people know Santals as jungle or forest dwellers. Some scholars also agree with the claim. However, this study has confirmed that they are not forest dwellers. The research has not encountered anywhere in the tales mentioned that Santal people live in the jungle. Most of the time, their villages are near the jungle. Since they depended on nature in many areas, they went to the jungle now and then but did not live there. So it is not appropriate to call them forest or jungle dwellers.
3. Santals as hunting people or hunter race- There is a common assumption among people that Santals are a hunter-gatherer because they go hunting, and all the time, they use bows and arrows. Santals also claim to be so. However, the research found that the tales have never mentioned they are living on hunting. The tales show Santals go hunting occasionally. Therefore, this study does not agree with the Santals' identity as a hunter race.
4. Santals are harmonious living people- the study discovered that Santal people are harmonious-living people. They not only live in the community, but they also have harmonious relationships with nature, animals, and spirits. This character of Santals is unique. In their tales, animals, and spirits characters also speak human language. There are many spirit and animal characters in the tales. The tales also show Santals married to animals or spirits.
5. Santals as Brave Nation- Santals are known to be a brave nation because they fought with the British during undivided India and Pakistan during Bangladesh's liberation war. However, this dissertation argues that the Santals are a brave nation because they fought with wild animals and Rajas (kings). Sometimes they also battle with spirits. However, they are not scared of anybody. So they are a brave nation.
6. Women's treatment- the tales show that Santal society has always neglected women. In most of the tales, fathers are the head of the family. Women's place in the family and society is not equal to men. Some tales have presented women as weak and unintelligent. Men do most of the work, but women are lazy and dependent on men. However, women are dangerous witches; men are afraid of them. The tales show that Santal men's attitudes towards women are negative.
7. Elegant folktales - the latest new finding and remark on the Santal folktales are that they are elegant folktales. Their folktales are such that people can share them with everybody and together. The dissertation examined many of their tales but did not find anything immoral, such as sex, rape, or murder. Therefore, the study claims Santal folktales are elegant folktales.

### **Limitations of the Research:**

The dissertation encountered the following challenges in fulfilling the research project:

**Lack of information-** the information available about the Santali literature is significantly scarce. The primary sources of information in existing studies are also unimpressive and lacking because Santals forget their tales, traditions, and cultures. Before starting the research project, the researcher examined possible field informants, but most said they did not

remember any tales correctly. The young generations of Santals have no experience in tale-telling practice. They forget their cultures also.

**Shortage of books and articles**– Santals literature is not developed. They have only a limited number of books and articles; their research is also insufficient. Santal researchers are limited in numbers. However, non-Santal researchers have done some research on them. Some of those researches are good, but some used Santali vocabulary wrongly in the data, so sometimes they give wrong information about Santals, especially in the case of names. The scholarly bibliography on Santals is still disappointingly nil.

**Global Pandemic**- with the world's current situation, continuing the research indeed meets a lot of hindrances and challenges. Because of the Pandemic, schools, colleges, universities, and libraries are closed now. Limited numbers of books are available in India; the researcher is facing difficulty in getting them.

**Linguistic barriers**- Santals are divided into different groups because of their religion and language. They have two major language scripts: Roman and Ol'Chiki scripts for writings. The researcher is only familiar with the Roman script. So he could not use the information written by other scripts. He used only writings in Roman script and English.

#### **Conclusion:**

The study has confirmed Santal folktales as a mirror of Santal's identity. They reflect Santal's identity in the following ways:–

First, Santal folktales mirror their customs, culture, and traditions. Every tale comprises some or other customs and cultures. They have also reflected many Santals' practices, rituals, and traditions. So, by reading folktales, one can know what kind of festivals the Santal used to have and what kind of people they were. Therefore, Santal folktales can be called a mirror of their identity.

Secondly, Santal folktales also mirror their realities. The tales presented their agricultural dependency, slavery life, superstitions, and belief in witchcraft and Bongas (spirits). The folktales displayed Santals living a life of hardship; however, they also loved to sing and dance. Therefore, this study argues that Santals are an agriculture-dependent and cultural-minded nation.

Third, Santal folktales show Santals' dependency on nature. Although they were not born in the jungle or forest dwellers, they roamed in the jungle from a young age. The tales show they collected many necessary things from the jungle, and their livelihood depended on agriculture. All their Bongas (spirits/gods) also live in nature. They are always dependent on nature, even in their joy and sorrow. So nature is like their mother. Their lives are also easy, simple, and pure, like nature. So the bottom line of the study is that Santals are children of nature.

Fourth, the study also observed that Santal folktales are elegant, and everybody can share them with everybody. There are no bad words in them. So the study concludes that Santals as a nation are civilized, elegant, and polite.

Santal folktales mirror their culture, traditions, customs, beliefs, realities, and nature. So their folktales are very helpful in knowing and understanding Santals. Since they have no proper historical record of their lives history, the folktales can serve as a book of information. So the data obtained from this study justifies the claim of Santal folktales as a mirror of Santal identity.

### **Recommendations for the Future Research:**

There are many open areas for future research. As the number of research on Santal literature is limited, any research will significantly contribute to it. The dissertation suggests the following topics for future research:-

**Classification of Santal Literature** - Santal folktales have not yet been divided according to literary genres. This study has divided the tales according to their character. So, future research can divide them according to the literary genres.

**Santal-Animal-Spirit Relationship**- many Santals do not know the reason behind this relationship. The study has highlighted this relation but not the causes. So the future researcher can discover the hidden causes and enrich Santal literature and culture.

**Relations with Santal History**- Some characters in tales have similarities with historical characters. It indicates that there is much history hidden in it. So, more studies are necessary for this area. This research will benefit both Santal literature and history.

Doing this research will benefit the Santal literature and the nation. It will inspire them to know more about literature, history, customs, culture, traditions, and identity. More research topics will emerge from this research, but those mentioned above are full of importance.

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## Curriculum Vitae



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