



Research Paper

Changing society of the Santhal tribe in Bankura district of West Bengal

Latika Besra

Ph.D Scholar

P.G. Department of History
Sambalpur University

Abstract

Santals are the predominant tribe in India and also in different states like Odisha, Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Assam. It is the third-largest tribe in India. Santals are the primitive tribe has settled in a well-organized manner with farming as their primary source of income. They are more concentrated in the village and have observed all of the village judicial's rituals and rules, as well as some blind belief practices. On the other side, some educated people have their own outlook towards the outside world, having the knowledge to differentiate between right and wrong, which directs people's thoughts and society towards a new dimension.

Key words-Family, Culture, Awareness, Change, Elite class influence.

Received 05 Feb., 2023; Revised 13 Feb., 2023; Accepted 15 Feb., 2023 © The author(s) 2023.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. Introduction

The Santhal tribe is one of the largest tribes in India, mostly found in West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Assam. In West Bengal, we found about 40 kinds of tribes, and the Santals are mostly found in Bankura, Purulia, and Medinipur districts. In Bankura district, they are mostly found in Ranibandh, Sarenga, Raipur, and Chhatna blocks. Santal belongs to Proto- Austroloid group speak Austric language as they are called as aboriginal and now these aboriginal are known as Scheduled tribe, Adivasi. They called themselves "Hor," which means "human being," and identified as the Kherwar community; this title is not new in use, as it was used by their forefathers.¹ There are various theories about the origin of the word Santal, such as Skrefus Rud's theory that the word Santal was derived from the modified word "Saontar." In ancient times, one part of Medinipur district was known as "Sawant" or "Samantabhumi," and according to linguist Suniti Kumar Chottopadhyay, the word "Santal" has been derived from the Sanskrit word "Samantapal," which means "protector of borders." Later, this word was transformed to "Samanta-Aal," then "Saontal," and finally "Santal."² But there is no evidence to prove that they were working as the protectors of borders.

As other tribe Santals lived in the forest by clearing it and turn it into agriculture land and settled there beyond the connection of other world. The tribals and non-tribal people of the land began to suffer during the arrival of the British in India, particularly when they captured Bengal and obtained the right of Diwani in 1765 by Robert Clive, and the Santals suffered greatly. The outcome of the exploitation by the Britishers against Santals was 'Hul' rebellion in 1855 which was led by two brothers i.e. Sidhu and Kanhu and as a result of the revolt was consider of land for the Santal, create market to sell the forest product and safeguard of them. That was the first measure was taken by the Britishers for the development of the Santals.³

Changes in the social life of the Santhals may be classified under the following heading.

Changing pattern of family.

Changing attitude towards fair and festivals

Changing in aesthetic life.

Reform initiative against witchcraft.

Family:

Family is the base of any village, more or less family system of any village are same. People choose their family formation according to their needs. The traditional family system of Santhal family has gone through the various changes, now a days they have formed different type of family. Like - Nuclear family: this type of family generally include husband, wife and children.

Pyramidal family: this type of family include at least one or two member from senior citizen and two from next generation.

Extended family: this type of family generally indicate joint family system which number is reducing now a days.⁴

Marriage system:

Though they are very attached to their tradition, various changes in the marriage system can be seen as a result of acculturation. For example, there are two forms of marriage that are prevalent in their society: one is by the Raibar (marriage maker), which is very common, and the other is by the couple getting married by themselves. Their marriage system is called "Bapla," and in their society, different kinds of marriage are prevalent, like *itutbapla*, *nirbalokbapla*, *kiringjawaebapla*, *kudumbapla*, *sangabapla*, and *bariyat atebapla*, but marriages like *itutbapla*, *sangabapla*, and *nirbalokbapla* are no longer practiced.⁵

Although they do not have a dowry system, they are changing their marriage rituals; under the influence of Hindus, they are now giving household items to their daughters, and changes can be seen in the celebration as well as the entertainment at the marriage party. The practise of court marriage is not known in this community. Educated and employed Santals are no longer willing to indulge in the elaborate rituals of the traditional marriage practises in their society. In their traditional marriage, the boy's side held a party for the villagers, relatives, and friends where the new bridegroom received gifts from them, but after being influenced by the Bengali marriage system, some financially stable Santals stopped following this ritual and did "Badhani" as a formality and held a reception party like Bengali people.

Changes in festivals

The Santhals celebrate their festivals with agricultural activity because work is God for them and provides them with food to survive. That is why on every occasion of agriculture they perform worship and a festival, and the place where they perform their festivals and ceremonies is called *Jaherthan* (the sacred Holy Grove). In every festival, they worship their gods and goddesses, which is called "Bonga," and offer sacrifices to please them. Their supreme deity is *Marang Buru*, which means "big hill," who is their protector. They follow the *Sari* religion, which means truth. Their first agricultural festival is *Erok Sim*, which is celebrated for sowing paddy seeds. In this festival, their priests offer fowl to each of their gods, like *Jaher Era*, *Marang Buru*, *Gosain Era*, *Pargana Bonga*, *Bhare Bonga*, and *Sima Bonga* at the *Jaherthan*. The next day, each household sacrificed fowl in honour of *Abge Bonga*, *Orak Bonga*, and *Marang Buru*. It is observed when winter paddy sowing begins.⁶ Another festival that they celebrate is *Hariar Sim*, which is for the germination of seeds. They celebrate *Karam Parab*, and the aim of this festival is to gain wealth, progeny, and ward off evil spirits through the worship of the *Karam* tree. The *Janthar* festival is observed in the month of November. It is observed by offering the first harvest of paddy to the *Janthar* God because they believe the first grain of harvest is sacred. *Sohrae*, or *harvest festival*, is the *Santhal's largest village festival*. It is a post-harvest ceremony, and on this occasion they worship cattle, which is known as the *Bandna* festival. The *Magh Sim* festival is observed prior to the reaping of thatched grass. *Baha'i* festival is observed in the months of February and March, and in every house, girls wash the feet of the priest and receive blessings from him by getting flowers of *sal*, and from that day on, they start using new *sal* leaves.⁷ Another one is *Mak-more*, which is observed in the months of May and June.

They still celebrate festivals like *Sohrae*, *Baha*, *Mak More*, and *Karam*, but there isn't as much gathering as there used to be. There are various reasons behind their changing thoughts about their festivals. Nature no longer holds the same place in their lives as it once did, as their perception of it has shifted. Now people are not totally dependent on agriculture; they are engaged in labour work, working in factories, and educated Santhal people are getting involved in banking services, teaching professions, administrative professions, and medical services. These festivals now seem insignificant to them because they reside in town for their jobs and do not have time to celebrate. In agriculture, income became uncertain because sometimes heavy rains and less rain affected production, forcing farmers to choose another source of income. But in villages, that tradition is still alive, and people celebrate all festivals with more or less enjoyment as they are also busy earning their livelihood.

Transformation in song and dance:

Santals are fond of dance and music; without dance and song, their festival is incomplete. Their music and dance are attuned to nature and associated with popular custom and tradition. "They are extremely disciplined people who sing song and dance and try to enjoy life, not people who are in the stock exchange and seek at each other and call that civilization," Pandit Nehru once said.⁸ They perform dances to various songs, such as the *Dang* song, the *Lagre* song, the *Pataparab* song, the *Golwari* song, the *Harget* song, the *Sendra* song, the *Dasai* song, the *Sohrae* song, the *Karam* song, and the *Baha* song. In early times, they played their traditional

instruments like *Buan, Sogoe, Banam* (fiddle), *Dhak, Tirio* (flute), *Tamak* (kettle drum), and *Tumdak*.⁹ They used these traditional instruments to sing songs and dance at festivals, but they never used them in musical albums.

Now they are influenced by modern Hindi and Bengali music. Modern Santhali songs emerged in the music world of the Santhal in the 1980s.¹⁰ In those songs, traditional music is absent, and they are mostly meant for amusement, far from the traditional Santhali spirit. As a result of the popularity of this type of song, their tradition is on the way out. The popularity of their musical instruments is also lagging. People are attracted to modern song and dance rather than traditional ones.

Another important change that has been seen in the music world of the Santhal is the rise of professional groups of musicians and dancers who generally perform on a contract basis during festivals and are hired by private agencies. These groups are also invited by the government as well as NGOs to perform in cultural programmes. They are also making films in their own language as a result of the influence of modern films, which will aid in the development and spread of their language. With the improvement of communication and contact with the outside world and the introduction of theater, they feel reluctant to exhibit their songs and dances in public.

Rise of Santal Elite class:

Santals have their own judicial system and a village headman named Majhi who oversees all rules and regulations in order to keep the village peaceful and orderly. However, over time, some educated and career-minded individuals have begun to live in the town or near the town area and have actually settled there because they have jobs in the town and their number is slowly increasing. Their attitude towards life is not so different from the other people in the town. Nobody can tell them apart based on their behaviour and way of life. In many places, like in Bankura district, there are many Santals who have settled in town because of their jobs. They have made their own society and observe every festival together. This is similar to community harmony because Santhal people come from different villages but live in the same place and have formed friendly relationships with people from their own community as well as non-tribal people. It indicates that they are gradually moving towards the mainstream of society, which is dominated by non-tribal people.

Though people are in good financial condition, there is no different class in the Santal social stratification; nobody identifies as upper or lower class, as do other non-tribal people who define themselves by class.¹¹ There are certain circumstances that have forced them or provided them with a choice of life, as we know that agriculture has been the primary occupation of the Santal from the time of their origin, but now the situation is changing according to the outside forces and their thoughts regarding occupation. When India gained independence and the constitution was drafted, some provisions were made for the upliftment and encouragement of tribals. The government is aware of the ignorance of the tribals and has therefore made the provision of reservations for their financial and educational upliftment, where they can get the facility of education, and has also made them aware of the job facilities that will make their financial condition strong for their better future, and slowly, the Santals are also following this provision. In the article, 335 describes the particular percentage of appointments of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in services under the Central Government and State Government, whose main aim is to bring them into the main stream of administration because development cannot progress by leaving weaker groups behind but by keeping them with them and making them strong in education, financially, and socially. Professor N.K. Bose has stated, "In every part of India and in every community, changes are taking place in the occupation by which the individuals make their living. It would be useful for everyone who undertakes sample surveys to find out how many of the earning members of the community in question are taking up either caste-based occupations or non-caste occupations".¹²

Among the Santals who are aware of the benefits of education and a well-maintained life, they are trying to serve in any group like the army, police, panchayat, block office, bank, medical, and education departments. Despite their small number, these people are well settled. Those who are less aware or have not found a better option are also working as laborers, conductors, and helpers in buses or as drivers. Some have their own businesses, such as a betel shop, mobile repair shop, medical store, clothing store, grocery store, tiffin shop, and a few sell tiffin on a handcart in the morning and evening. Mostly, this group of people is found in their society because a larger population of them is still struggling for a better life with good financial conditions and a good education.

Reforms against blind belief:

Blind belief existed as an integral part of their religious belief in the past. This belief stemmed from their reverence for their gods, which blinded them to Ojha's orders to follow his orders, sometimes suspects had to pay the charged amount, and sometimes people were killed on his advice. In the past, people were ignorant and superstitious, which led them to adopt beliefs in *ojha, janguru*, and witchcraft. This *ojha* took advantage of their ignorance, and it became a source of income for them because they took money for the identification of the witch and a meeting held in the village with all the villagers to decide the punishment. With the help of educated

people's awareness, the situation is slowly changing. Education and awareness brought an end to this blind belief and educated Santal people became aware of the truth behind this blind belief. The government has also taken steps to spread awareness about this blind belief. In a study conducted by the Liberal Association of Movements of the People (LAMP), many people were charged with witchcraft.¹³ There have been murders for witchcraft in the post-independence period, but the situation is changing due to public awareness, though this superstition still exists in rural areas. People composed songs and staged dramas to create awareness among people against superstition. A campaign against witchcraft was organised in Bankura district during 1980. Some of the organisations taking steps to raise public awareness were the SurukujTillaSusarSamiti, LAMP, GraminUnnayanSanstha, Digi MigiTillaGaonta, GraminUnnayanSanstha, and RangmeetyChhatna.¹⁴ It was reported that LAMP at BankuraZillaAdiasiMahilaSamiti jointly organised a state convention on the „Awareness of Science and Impact of Witchcraft Systems“ among the adivasis on September 28 and 29, 1988, at Pratapbagan in Bankura.¹⁵ This convention drew 300 people, and the District Magistrate of Bankura sent a memorandum signed by 214 tribals to the honourable Prime Minister of India, requesting remedial action against witchcraft.¹⁶

Script:

Linguistically, the Santals are classified as Mundari languages, with their dialect belonging to the Austric speech family's Austro-Asian group. Prior to the introduction of the Ol-chiki script, the Santali people expressed their emotions through regional language. The effort was made by Pandit Raghunath Murmu, who had taken initiative to create the Santali script, which was accepted by the whole Santal community in 1920. He also wrote three books in Ol-Chiki script: Biduchestan, KherwalBir, and Bakhen. To demonstrate this effort, a Santali organisation called Adivasi Kalyan Association published a periodical called SagenSakam in Ol-Chiki.²⁰ To get recognition of the Ol-chiki script, there were several groups formed by the Santal people, like *AbwaGaonta*, the Santali Literature and Cultural Society, and ASECA (Adivasi Socio-Educational and Cultural Association). Later, disagreements arose between groups such as *AbwaGaonta*, which preferred Bengali script to express the Santali language, and the Santali Literature and Cultural Society, which preferred Roman script to express the Santali language, with only ASECA standing alone in support of the Ol-chiki script. ASECA had held a meeting for language recognition, which was supported by the states of West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Assam. Delegates from these states had attended the meeting to voice their demand from the government.

As a result, the government of West Bengal had already recognised Ol-Chiki as a script for writing the "Santali" language in 1979.¹⁷

Finally, on December 23, 2003, the Santali language was recognised in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution, bringing the language agitation to a close with a huge victory.¹⁸

II. Conclusion:

The Santals' social structure and every sphere of life have changed, though it took a long time for changes to occur, whether in a less or more drastic manner, regarding their profession, festivals, script, belief system, and identity. They are attempting to live a well-mannered life with their own identity with the assistance of government provision and outside sources such as education, migration, acculturation, and awareness. With the emergence of educated Santhal people, their attitude towards their profession and life is changing. Though they value agriculture, with the passage of time and the need for government services, many others work in the private sector or as labourers to support their families. They are fond of dance and music, and in today's time, everyone tends towards modern Santhali song. In every festival, they sing traditional songs because that is their root. Though we can see that in town also, they have made their own Santali society where they observe festivals like *Sohrae*, *Baha*, *Mak*, and *more*. This is a good sign of cultural value, because although they do not know more, they are in touch with their culture, and it shows that changes are occurring with their cultural value. *Modern song, video song, and film are also spreading Santal language and culture around the world, giving them a sense of identity in society, state, and nation.* With the spread of modernity and education, they became aware of blind belief and superstitions. So we can say that Santal society is going through a changing process, which is really a good sign towards their upgradation.

References:

- [1]. Hembram. Parimal, 2014, *KherwarthekeJharkhandi*, in S.K. Das (Ed) *Adivasi JagatPrabandhaSamuha*, Howrah, Adivasi SahityaPrakashani. P-6
- [2]. Baske. D, 1987, *Pahcimbanger Adivasi Samaj*, Kolkata, BaskePublicaiton. P-186.
- [3]. Panda.H. 2017, *History of India*, New Delhi, Kalyanipublsihers.
- [4]. Chattophyay, Pradip. 2014, *Redefining tribal identity, The Changing Identity of the Santals in South West Bengal*, New Delhi, Primus Books. P.132
- [5]. Hembrom, T,1996, *The Santhal- Anthropological Theological Reflection on Santhali and Biblical Tradition*, Culcutta, Punthipustak.
- [6]. Chottopadhyay,p.Op,cit. p.136
- [7]. Ibid. p.137

- [8]. Mukherjee, C. 1943, *The Santals*, Calcutta, The Indian Research Institute.
- [9]. Chattopadhyay, P. Op.cit. p. 138
- [10]. Ibid. p. 140
- [11]. Ganguly. K., 2015, *Rise of Santal Bhadrak and Disintegration of Traditional Santal Society*, in (Ed) Dr. Rumki Sarkar, *Socio Economic Environment of the Tribes of India with Special Reference to the Santals*, Calcutta, Foundation of Practising Geographers. p.220
- [12]. Chottopadhyay, P. Op.cit. P-144
- [13]. Ibid. p- 141
- [14]. Ibid. 142
- [15]. Ibid.
- [16]. Ibid.
- [17]. Hembram, P, 2017, *Sanbidhanik Sikritir dabite Saotali Bhasa Andoloner Itihas*, howrah, Adivasi Sahitya Prakashani.
- [18]. Ganguly, K. Op.cit. 153