



Research Paper

Status of Rural Santal Women in Dumka, Jharkhand: A Sociological Perspective

Dr. Sujit Kumar Soren

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Sido Kanhu Murmu University, Dumka-814101, Jharkhand, India.

ABSTRACT: It has received as Universal approval that the prevalent Social Practices and economic conditions had led to the formation of deformed personality of rural women. In Jharkhand and particularly in the district of Dumka, rural women were identified as the most backward segment of the total population. Social change in the rural areas had been too slow and remained also dependent on government efforts alone. This had now been overwhelmingly accepted that the existence of rural women in such a state of disempowerment was a major hinder once in the process of development, more so in achieving the goal of poverty alleviation programmes. In rural areas there was a constellation of numerous undesirable conditions for work and life. Many attitudes and behavioral patterns were evaluated as disadvantageous or unfavorable from the stand point of the desirability of 'development'. There was a casual relationship among all these conditions, so that they formed a social system. It was therefore, imperative to study the combination of circumstances that had led to this situation and also the remedial measures. To get the better of the situation government took up several measures that could involve the grass root women more actively in economic activities and also in other matters that concerned the rural community. Thus, the rationale of the present study lay in identifying the nature of socio-economic problems affecting the tempo of social transformation of the rural area by showing the range of resistance and co-operation. Keeping in view the socio-economic scenario of the Dumka district analysed in the presented paper, the study of social role of rural Santal women as a means of rural social transformation in the district, assumed importance.

KEYWORDS: Social Development, Social Transformation, Social Empowerment, Social Change and Practices.

Received 10 Mar., 2023; Revised 20 Mar., 2023; Accepted 23 Mar., 2023 © The author(s) 2023.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. INTRODUCTION

The present study would contribute to understand the social structural condition that had shaped the rural Santal women of the district and also the implications in organizing Santal women for change in rural community. This would also manifest how much the work in the case of grass root Santal women, who faced different social and economic conditions and had fewer resources available to build organization and to change their economic condition, was confronted with the multiplicity of interrelated issues.

The socio-economic indicators adumbrated the rural Santal women of below poverty line of Dumka district. Despite the high priority being given in successive plans to the rural development the quality of life in rural areas continued to be much below the desired levels. In this study was formed to be composed of several strata of Santal cultivators, highly differentiated from each other in respect of the size of land owned or cultivated, number of milk cattle possessed, nature and account of capital invested in farming, amount of family, amount of gain or loss from farming business.

Thus, the central thrust of the study was the need of Sociological perspective in studying the role of Santal women in prospect of social change in Dumka through careful investigation and analysis of social phenomenon of the rural district which might be a kind of work, a social engineer could do for bringing about social change.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Although studies exclusively on Santal women were scarce, the vast literature on women and development provided the tools to analyse the social and economic status of tribal women. The tribal women be the landless labouring Families or with marginal farmers' families some of their images were common. In society there were many commonly held beliefs and images which tended to keep things going the way they had always been going. The men in the community of the poor had their ways of keeping women 'in their place' and they also did not feel it proper that the poor should stick together (Thaha. M. & Om Prakash,1989). As regards the tendency of the Santal family living below poverty-line, which remained in a cluster of joint families, was now towards its increasing disintegration. The more this tendency was growing the more the life of its members was weakening and individualistic psychological traits were developing among them. This type of transformation together with the growing pressure of various forces were brining about complex situation in the rural life, which played a decisive role in the socio-cultural life of the rural aggregate. Development of these tendencies in rural family also caucused decline in its economic homogeneity (Gupta. Padmini Sen, 1960). Joint family property tended to be disrupted. All this inevitably resulted in the weakening of the family. The rural family also lost a number of economic functions with the result that the scope of the collective labour of its members narrowed down. Besides there were forces in the society that induced the high ups to keep some other people poor and deprived from equally sharing the freedoms and resources they enjoyed (Mason. K.O., 1984). The long experience of our society testified that people remained divided into castes and classes into those who made decisions and those for whom decisions were made, the powerful and the powerless. These forces were working even now after independence. There were subtle forces (Sharma. B.D.,1982), not always easy to be recognized, operation in the total system, which were being managed by the privileged, who managed things only for themselves and not for the rural poor or deprived, resulting thereby two sets of economic orders – the rich and privileged and the poor and deprived and each one found consolidating itself. The social processes in rural areas tended to be dominated by vicious circle, which implied, of course, a circular constellation of forces tending to act and react upon one another in such a way as to keep the poor in a state of poverty. The notion was that a given effect that happened to exist, acted as the cause leading to a substantially similar effect. In essence the status quo tended to perpetuate itself because of a process of circular causation. This referred to an inextricable interrelationship of cause and effect that operated so as to imprison an economy in its own shortcomings (Krause. walter, 1961).

The rural poor were unorganized and uneducated on the other hand those with vested interest controlled the social and political systems. The cultural values of society had a harmful impact on the hearts and minds of poor people and this limited their power only to serve the vested interests and not to use their power for self-realisation for becoming men and women they could be.

Supported often by the middle class, those with vested interests sought to control the poor through clever combinations of economic, social, political and psychological methods and maneuvers and tried to keep the strength of the poor divided by promoting the women power weak and separated. The vested interests showed contempt for the poor at every place. This kept the poor demoralised forcing them to think that they were below the rest of the dominant society. This 'breaking of the Spirit' (Prasad. P. Durga, 1995) of a large part of the population was the worst thing witnessed everywhere in the district. A total side-effect of this type of oppression of the poor was that members of the poor and deprived group tried to save themselves and did not try to change the system. At least that was the general situation.

All these affected Santal women most adversely. Men of the poor and deprived saved themselves at the expense of the women. They oppressed and suppressed their women in their community by keeping them down in an attempt to help them to feel big. Thus, by sheer force of vicious custom even the most ignorant and worthless men had been enjoying superiority over women, which they did not deserve and ought not to have. In this background despite the fact that the women and children constituted 75 percent of the total population, 35 percent women were oppressed by their homes while the other 40 percent were tortured by their own life partners (Narayan.G, 1985).

III. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

- (a) To analyse the social status of rural Santal women of below poverty line households.
- (b) To look over the response of the rural Santal women and other social variables influencing the decisions of those below poverty-line.

IV. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study being primarily based on field work conducted over a period of three months (September to November 2022) in 21 villages of the Dumka districts, 50 rural Santal household respondents of below poverty line were selected at random. This included observation, face to face conversation with rural Santal families, women groups, investigation through interview schedule, the elderly people among the villagers, who had the

comparative assessment of the past and the present, heads of the Panchayats, landless agricultural labour, agricultural labourers, daily wage labourers, rural craftsmen and others. These interviews concerned the daily activities of the Santal women, their role in family matters, prior and current attitude of the rural Santal women towards their society.

V. DOMESTIC STATUS OF SANTAL WOMEN.

On top of this the rural Santal women, who were the key actors in the process of family Socialization and its general uplift, were victimized in the name of social norms and associated prejudices. They were accorded an unequal status and were often discriminated even in regard to food distribution and general well-being within the family and their health was considered a low priority. Poor nutrition of rural Santal women had been leading their lives in a state of 'hidden hunger'. Long hours of drudgery work, frequent pregnancies, inadequate or no facilities of health care etc. were all symptoms to the double deprivation. Worst were the conditions of the rural Santal farm women labour who depending on their socio-economic structures, were obliged to carry out the different pressing roles as enumerated below: -

V.1 Pressing Roles of Rural Santal Women

- A. Domestic Role –
 - A.1. Cleaning the house and cattle shed
 - A. 2. Collecting water
 - A. 3. Cooking food.
 - A. 4. Child rearing.
 - A. 5. Collecting vegetables
 - A. 6. Maintaining poultry and Dairy farm
 - A. 7. Collecting Fire wood
 - A. 8. Care of the Aged and handicapped
 - A. 9. Maintaining Kitchen Garden
- B. Agricultural Role –
 - B. 1. Sowing
 - B. 2. Transplanting
 - B. 3. Weeding
 - B. 4. Harvesting
 - B. 5. Winnowing

These rural Santal women belonged to the households of tenant, share croppers, artisans, daily wage labourers and agricultural labourers, who subsisted entirely on hiring themselves for labour work in addition to the burden of domestic works. The 'triple roles' of women – child bearing, child rearing and house management had now turned into multiple roles.

Time disposition to different domestic works of the farm women was difficult to measure and as such very little was known about their actual condition. Besides their contribution to agricultural production and animal husbandry, they had to spend more than 10 hours per day on household chores as shown below: -

Sl. No.	Work	Landless Agricultural Labour	Small & Marginal Farmer	Average Farmer	Land Holder Farmer
01	Work in the Field/Farm	8.0	2.0	-	-
02	Work for cattle	-	1.0	2.0	1.0
03	Sweeping & cleaning	1.5	1.5	1.5	2.0
04	Drawing Fetching water	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.0
05	Washing clothes	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.0
06	Cooking & serving	2.0	2.0	1.0	4.0
07	Collecting Fuel & Making dung cakes	2.5	2.0	1.0	-
08	Repair and maintenance of house	.5	1.0	2.0	1.0
09	Caring for children & looking after household chores	.5	2.0	2.0	3.0
10	Marketing Food	-	3.0	2.0	3.0

Table-1: Work – Time distribution of Rural Women (In Hrs. Per day)

Sources: Based on Individual Interview.

Table-1. showed that the rural Santal women, apart from their low-paid work, had to spend almost 10 to 12 hours per day on household chores like food preparation, cleaning and maintenance of house, caring for children and fetching water etc., besides their contribution to agriculture production animal husbandry and other related activities of the household.

In view of the accentuation of rural poverty, maintenance of family with inelastic resources was more difficult and that was why the men of the countryside expected their women to pursue economic activities in

addition to domestic chores sometimes to supplement the family's income or even to substitute the main income. In endemic areas of poverty, the female for running the family had increased tremendously. Thus, entry of Santal women in the rural economy had been a forced one increasing their responsibilities of tending their families and the farms.

VI. ECONOMIC STATUS OF SANTAL WOMEN.

The Santal women had, therefore, to bear dual duties of home management and earning money for sustaining their families and there they had to work at least 7 hours in the field. While required to earn they could not avail of the opportunities for better employment due to lack of education and training in skills. As per estimation, in the rural areas, Santal women were not employed in any remunerative work for 247 days in a year and they remained in need of gainful employment. In interviews such type of rural Santal women expressed that performing their household work they had seven hours of free time/day and their employment period could be effectively utilized for other economic activities.

The Santal women though contributing significantly to economic life of the family were largely excluded from decision – making on economic issues and this was the greatest indicator of Santal women's status in the rural poor households. Their participation in decision – making as shown in the table – would obviously explain their control over household resources.

Sl. No.	Particulars	Decision Take by			
		Husband	Wife	Husband + wife	Others
01	Food	08	53	19	20
02	Clothing	17	20	55	08
03	Health	30	15	40	15
04	Education	32	16	25	27
05	Purchase of Farm equipments	45	-	30	25
06	Purchase of Animals	46	-	28	26
07	Saving and investment	59	07	12	22

Table-2: Participation of Santal women in Decision – Making Activities (in %)

Source: Based on Individual Interview.

The number of decisions with regard to the items as shown in the table-2 and the importance attached to each of them might vary from one household to another. It was, however, observed that the cases of decision – making in most of the rural Santal households were solved on the pattern as indicated in the above table and this showed that the decisions related to procurement of food materials and cooking food, were generally taken by the housewives (53%) but in about 19 percent families the decisions in this regard were taken jointly by husband and wife also. As regards clothing the decisions were taken jointly in majority of the families (55%). But in case of children education the decision of husband was 32% where as the joint decision was to the extent of 25 percent. As far as the purchase of farm equipments and animals were concerned majority decisions (45% and 46%) were taken by the husband alone. The decisions regarding the amount to be saved and the saved money to be invested were taken largely by husbands (59%).

The data analysis suggested that the involvement of rural Santal women in the decision-making process assumed less important. But where their role of physical responsibility was greater, they had the choice to take decisions. These rural Santal women with a streak of individuality suffered from the painful feeling that they were forced to depend on others in their lives. They were perceptibly behind men. Interviews confirmed that income of such rural Santal women, when employed and paid in cash, was viewed as part of the real income. One of the underlying assumptions was that a woman was acquired as a property by her husband and in-laws at marriage and that bound labour in the family was her duty. Even her income from outside the family should not be in her control.

When involved in production, actual sales and monetary transactions were often conducted by men, who were more mobile and familiar with markets and negotiation. That was why participation of men was relatively easier than that of women. Thus, the men utilized the sale proceeds as they liked. The gendering of social relations contributed to a women's inability to reap the full reward of her labour. The field work showed that women workers survived in extremely adverse and formidable work conditions. Moreover, high fertility rate increased their domestic responsibilities. Pregnancy and lactation and the care of small children reduced the eligibility of women for regular participation in work outside the home and thus reduced the duration and efficiency of work, which happened to take up gainful employment. They were actually pushed to marginal position in community gathering. Their world view remained confined to a closed village life and their interaction mostly limited to womenfolk of their own kind. They often stuck to the house picking up the work in the vicinity of their houses and accepting whatever wage was given. The percentage of young unmarried girls as domestic workers, many under the age of ten, who were initiated mainly as a help to the mother had increased sharply.

These rural Santal women were often termed as invisible workers though they constituted one – third of labour force. It was mainly due to unpaid economic activities. It could roughly be estimated on the basis of field work that the value of unpaid household works might constitute 25-35 percent of the total gross product of the district. Santal women engaged in agricultural/construction labour activities came either from landless or marginal land holder families and their contribution was of considerable extent. The largest concentration of the female labour force was in agricultural sector and that too, to perform the more labour – intensive and lower – productive work in agriculture/construction. The majorities of Santal women from socially depressed families not only extensively participated in degrading jobs but were tied down to a never-ending cycle of work and activity.

Men in such rural families exercised almost absolute power over women members. It was they who distributed the work of the peasant household among the members on lines of sex and age differences and trained the youngsters for future agricultural work and social life. All initiative and final authority were vested in male member. The female members were completely submerged and they had no scope of developing decision-making capacity. Consequent upon their economic states getting depressed, their general status as automatically pushed further behind. Their problems often varied according to strata even within a region.

VII. HEALTH STATUS OF SANTAL WOMEN

In such a situation, children who constituted the potential human capital could neither grow properly nor be protected from day-to-day exploitation. Many of the major health issues of rural Santal women and children emanated from severe malnutrition. Malnutrition affected adversely expectant and lactating mothers and children.

Over 80 percent of the deliveries took place at homes which were not safe. The mean age of marriage of Santal girls in rural areas was much less than 18 years. This sapped the physical vitality and thus diminished the economic efficiency. Health of the female, in the family, who was the key provider of health services for the family, affected the economic situation of the family. Rural Santal women were estimated to spend her reproductive years in pregnancies and lactation.

VIII. SANATAL GIRL CHILD IN RURAL AREAS

The Santal girl child of the below poverty line household experienced discrimination throughout her life. Family structures and social values functioned in such a way that girls grow up looking upon themselves as inferior and subservient, entitled to much less of everything than sons. Malnutrition in young girls triggered a vicious cycle of under nutrition, which spanned into adulthood and thus they failed to reach their full growth potential. It was said that absolute poverty and the gradual feminisation of poverty were the most daunting of our challenges (Friedlander, W.A.,1963).

At the age when children bubbled with the sheer of joy of being alive, thousands of small girls struggled to survive the burden of poverty, over work and ill-health in the district as unseen labours. Girls who were forced to labour endured and entire childhood of extremely poor health with their physical and emotional well-being at a constant three-fold risk due to their living conditions, the work they must do and the fact that they were female. She toiled in the organized sector and at homes as domestic workers. Majority of the women and girls who generally worked from 5 am to 10 pm as domestic workers.

IX. SANTAL WOMEN AND CHILDREN

The Santal women living in remote tribal villages of the Dumka district generally remained outside the purview of modern medical facilities and thus they preferably followed their own tradition, superstitions and their own way of child rearing practices. They did not pay adequate attention to their health, sanitations, surroundings nutrition and social behavior to get a better bio-psycho-social status in the society. They had firm belief in their own methods despite the drawbacks.

The last two decades or so had seen severe environmental degradation and this in objective term had meant depletion in the tree cover and a general decline in the availability of per capital biomass. The imbalance in the eco-system had particularly adverse effect on the health of women in tribal areas. The development programmers somehow seemed to be robbing tribal women of their rights to basic necessities such as fuel, fodder, water, forest and other natural resources on the one hand and on the other hand their traditional knowledge and practices concerning the use and preservation of forest produce (such as wood, medicine, minor forest produce) and other resources were being destroyed. This had led to an increase in their work load.

Santal women and children of remote villages of Dumka district had traditionally depending on minor forest produce as a source of food, fodder and medicinal herbs. Although there were no studies available in Dumka district about the time taken by Santal women in collection fire wood and fodder, my own experience and studies revealed that the amount of time spent in collection of fire wood and fodder was around four to five hours a day. Santal women of the hilly areas of the district had to make trips of distant areas for the bare survival

necessities such as fuel, water and wood. In fact, that had become to major daily activity during the lean season. The energy lost in these activities was considerable. It was women and children who were mostly engaged in these activities. It was found that around 35 percent loss of energy was owing to drudgery to this kind.

Poor health conditions were thus intimately linked with almost every aspect of life in all the Blocks of the district. A large part of the population might be diseased of at least lacking in normal vigour thus less able to work effectively. Generally speaking, the widespread poverty was detrimental to health conditions.

Sanitation conditions were generally inferior and constituted a major health problem that affected the children most. Ponds, springs and streams, which supplied water to rural homes, were vulnerable to contamination. Safe water was much scarcer as it had been estimated. Disposing of human excreta was perhaps the gravest sanitation problem. Public hygiene was a problem among the rural natives. The rapidly accentuating village surveys showed an astonishing lack of interest in local health conditions and their social and economic consequences. The main cause of this was, of course, poverty and in particular low productivity land in agriculture. Health conditions were, of course, positively correlated with income and levels of living anywhere.

Thus, women's health status affected their productivity and thereby their roles in the society particularly in the context of poverty where women's work was essential for family survival. On the whole the overwhelming reality of the situation of tremendous powerlessness and lack of opportunities for creative self-expression contributed in no small way to the extent of mental health problems among women.

The differentials in health as between income levels of Santal women had not been studied. As such my remarks in this context in the study were founded on general induction from personal observation and conjectural thinking.

Majority of the rural Santal women of below poverty line households in the district were made old before their time by the harshness and inequalities starting from their childhood. Actually, the health and other social needs of rural Santal women had not yet been adequately studied. The low priority accorded to their needs deeply reflected in women's poor nutrition, reproduction, ill-health, dangerous working conditions, and violence.

The productivity gaps of the Santal women of below poverty line households were much wider than that of the poor Santal men. Santal women lived in rural areas and they made one third of labour force and 27 percent of them lived below poverty line, which were usually illiterate, poor, deprived, exploited, unorganized, economically helpless, politically weak and socially demoralized. The poorer the family the greater was the dependence on women's economic productivity.

Actually, women's earnings had a positive correlation with children's health, nutrition levels and education. Increase in women's income transfused more directly to better health and nutrition for children. Improving women's productivity, income and quality of life, therefore, implied a multidimensional contribution to over – all growth and development. In reality women was at the centre stage of all development efforts and this had been largely realized that women held the key to sustainable development.

X. CONCLUSION

The ground realities as regards the social and economic status of Santal women of below poverty line households of rural area as depicted in the foregoing pages, despite the honour and reverence accorded to them as deities in religion and mythology, told a different tale. Actually, when we viewed the situation impartially, we must admit that a woman who created and sustained a home and through whose heads children grew up to be strong was a creator second only to the almighty. But what we found was really alarming. All through the stages of human civilization, women had been accorded lower social status, lesser degree of freedom and opportunity and were victimized in the name of social norms and the associated prejudices. They had always been relegated to the background with nobody to take into account their experience in the journey of life. The rural Santal women's acceptance of her inferior status was more real as it was unconscious.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Thaha, M. & Prakash, Om, Integrated Rural Development in India, National Institute of Rural Development, Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1989.
- [2]. Gupta, Padmini Sen. Women workers in India, Asia Publishing House, New Delhi, 1960.
- [3]. Mason, K. O. The status of women: A Review of its Relationship to Fertility and Mortality, Rockefeller Foundation, 1984.
- [4]. Sharma, B. D. The web of poverty, jointly published by North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong and Prachi Prakashan, New Delhi, 1982.
- [5]. Krause, Walter. Economic Development, Wads worth Publishing Company, San Francisco, 1961.
- [6]. Prasad, Durga. Women and child Health, Kurushetra August, 1995.
- [7]. Narayan, G. Role of women in Economy and Society, Mainstream, Nev. 2' 1985.
- [8]. Friedlander, W.A. Introduction on Social welfare, Prentice- Hall of India Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1963.