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## Socio-cultural and Traditional Practices of Santal Tribal Community in West Bengal

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### ABSTRACT

The Santal community is belonged in indigenous group of people, also known as Adibasis. "The Adibasis or tribal population is identified as the indigenous inhabitants of our country. "There are several tribes living all over India and in various parts of the world" (Baskey, 2019). Over two and a half million Santal people reside in West Bengal. Traditional practices and a rich cultural heritage are features of this indigenous community. These are significant parts of the diverse cultural landscape of India. This paper aims to study the distinctive social, cultural rituals and traditional practices of the Santal tribal community

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### Introduction

An Austroasiatic ethnic group from the Indian subcontinent is known as Santal, sometimes spelled Santhal. The biggest ethnic group tribe in India and West Bengal belongs to the Santals. These people also live in Tripura, Jharkhand, Bihar, Assam, and Odisha. As per the constitution of schedule tribe order-1950 C.O.22, there are 40 recognized Schedule tribes in West Bengal ("Tribal development department", 2022). As per Census 2011, the Santal people constitutes 5.8% of the West Bengal's total population and 47.43% of the ST population. (Office of the Registrar general and Census Operation, India, 2011). They are concentrated in different districts, such as Bankura, Purulia, Jhargram, Medinipur, Alipurduar, South Dinajpur, and Jalpaiguri.



## 2.0 Objectives

- To explore the social structure of the Santal indigenous community
- To explore the rich cultural traditions and customs of this community
- To highlight their unique identity and practices
- To promote and preserve the traditional knowledge and practices of the santal community

## 3.0 Methodology

The research was conducted based on a qualitative approach and the researcher's own traditional knowledge and other secondary sources of information. The secondary sources of this article are various journal articles, census reports, webpages, scholarly papers etc.

## 4.0 Social Structure of the Santal Community

Santal society is considered as classless society because there is no class division on the basis of status or occupation. They are divided into different clans. Their society has 12 clans. They are Saren, Murmu, Hansdah, Hembram, Mandi, Tudu, Kisku, Baskey, Besra, Chonre etc. Marriage within the same clan is prohibited. They have a unique administrative system. All Santal village has the same administrative structure as the others. This is also called the village council, which controls the society of the Santals (WSEG,2010). The headman is called Majhi, who is a dignified person in this community(WSEG, 2010). This village council is also called Santali 'Atu More Hor.' 'Atu More Hor' consists of Majhi(Village Headman), Jog Majhi( Deputy Village Headman), Paranik(Assistant of village headman), Goddet( Secretary of Village Headman), Jog Paranik(deputy Paranik), Naike( Village Priest) and Kudam Naike(Assistant Village Priest)(WSEG, 2010). All villagers are members of the village council (WSEG,2010). Majhi presides over any matter related to marriage or divorce at village council meetings, where matters associated with the village are discussed.

Any festival or ceremony, such as marriage, birth rituals, or death rituals, can be conducted without the Majhi taking the initiative. 'Atu More Hor'(village council)has a specific duty on every occasion, such as marriage, death, birth, or any other festival. They also receive an honorarium for their duties. The selection process for the ' Atu More Hor'(village council) is unique. No other person gets a chance to participate in the village council meeting. The same family members can be included in the Santal village council.



## 5.0 Social and Cultural Traditions of the Santal

The Santal society is an Indigenous community with a rich and unique culture. They are always dependent on nature for their survival. Their festivals, dietary practices, and religious beliefs are connected to nature.

### 5.1 Language of the Santal People

This community speaks Santali or Santhali language. Baskey (2019) mentioned that this language belongs to the Austro-Asiatic language family. Before Pandit Raghunath Murmu discovered the written script in 1925, it was only an oral language. According to the census 2011, the Santali (Ol-chiki) language was spoken by 2,512,331 people in West Bengal (“Santal people”, 2025.). It is the mother tongue of all Santal people. The Santali language has its own alphabet, the Ol-Chiki script. This script was constitutionally recognized in 2003. The Santali language is listed on the Eighth schedule of the 92nd Constitutional Amendment Act (“Santals and ol-chiki,” 2022. From that day, the Santal language becomes an official language in India. As a result, a number of West Bengal schools began using Santali as a language and medium.

### 5.2 Food Habits and Drinks

The Santal village people’s eating habits are entirely dependent on surrounding forest and nature. They collect various items from forests. Their traditional staple food is watered rice (Dah madi/Dah mari). They consume veg and non-veg food like pumpkin (kahanda), brinjal (Bengarh), fish (Haku), meat (Zil), crab (Katkom) etc. “Handia” (rice beer) is a very popular traditional drink (Alcohol) among the Santals (“Santal people”, 2025). Handia is made traditionally by the Santali women from the fermented rice (Rice with plant medicine) in a clay handi. It is the traditional ritual to serve the handia to their guests in any festivals and occasions. Also people uses special alcohol made from the mahua flower. Currently, the impact of modernization is evident, as the new generations do not like their traditional popular drink, ‘Handia.’

### 5.3 Traditional Attire of the Santal Community

They have a unique traditional attire. The women of Santal community wear sarees in a unique way. During the festival, they wear checked sarees and dhotis (Panchi saree and Panchi Dhoti), and in any rituals, men wear dhotis and women wear white sarees with a red border. Tattooing on one’s own body among women was a tradition in Santal society.



## 5.4 Marriage Systems and Rituals

The Santal community's marriage custom and rituals are distinct and traditional. The marriage system is called 'Bapla.' This society has a taboo that nobody can marry within the same clan. According to their custom 'Hansda' clan never marry with 'Murmu' and 'Tudu' with 'Besra' and vice-versa(WSEG, 2010). These customs are becoming disappeared from the society due to modernization. Many Santali writer has mentioned different types of marriage system in their book. Some are as follows:

### I. Raibar Bapla:

This marriage is very popular in Santal society. The selection process of bride and groom made by their parents(WSEG, 2010). In this marriage, the matchmaker( Raibar) plays important role to reach information to the parents of bride and groom. Now-a-days, it becomes very easy to communicate to both houses. It is a tradition in this society that the bride's brother gets a bull from the groom's house.

### II. Sanga Bapla:

This marriage system is also familiar as widow marriage. Sindurdan does not directly happen. Dimbu (Tulsi) flower is coated with the vermilion and it is placed in the bride's hair.

### III. Kudam Bapla:

This marriage occurs when an unmarried girl becomes pregnant by a young man. The village council puts pressure on the young man to marry the girl. The groom applies sindur standing each one's opposite direction.

### IV. Kiring Jawaë:

When the love marriage couple is belonged to same clan, the boy's father gives marry the girl to another man. The Majhi(Village Headman) arranges the girl's marriage with other boy of far village but the boy's father provides the marriage expenditure. Kiring jawae, or groom purchase, is a very unusual marriage system in the Santal community.

### V. Ghardi jawae Bapla:

This type of marriage is preferred by the bride's father, who has no son but only a daughter or who has a minor son and a grown-up daughter. After marriage, the bridegroom stays at the father-in-law's house and helps him with agricultural work. In some cases, the girl's father provides land to the bridegroom.



## **VI. Tunki Dipil Bapla:**

This type of marriage is performed for those who do not have sufficient money to bear a regular or arranged marriage (Murmu, 2010). The bride brings a bamboo basket (Tunki) on her head to the boy's house. In the presence of family members and the village council (Atu More Hor), the groom applies sindur on the bride's head.

## **VII. Itut Bapla:**

This type of marriage occurs when a young boy forcefully captures a girl. This rarely occurs in Santal society.

## **8. Nirbolok Bapla:**

This marriage system is same as Itut (Capture) bapla. Here, the girl enters boy's house without any permission to marry him. She enters with a pot of rice beer and wants to stay there. The family members of the boy follow a method in which red pepper is thrown on the fire. If she does not escape by inhaling smoke, she can stay with the boy and his family members. However, this marriage system is no longer present in Santali society.

## **5.5 Judicial System and Divorce**

The judiciary system is traditionally well-organized. This system manages and provides solutions to problems within the community. They do everything in their power to resolve conflicts within the community. The Majhi (village headman) is in charge of the judicial, executive, and other functions of society. In the article ("Santhal tribes," 2025) it is stated that "Manjhi is helped by others like Jagmangjhi, Jagparanik, Naike, and Gudit, who work in different fields in diverse". The Santal community follows its own divorce procedure.

Both men and women can claim divorce. The various grounds for divorce from the men's side are sterility, the wife not obeying her husband, and the wife living in her father's house. From the women's side, the grounds are insufficient food and clothing and the husband being a drunkard.

## **6.0 Religious beliefs and worship**

The Santal community primarily believes in animism. They worship nature, such as forests, rivers, and mountains. They have separate religions, called 'Sari' and 'Sarna,' but are recognized by the Constitution



of India. This community worships different 'Bongas' (Gods and Goddesses). Chakraborty(2019) mentioned that their holy place for worship is called Jaher Than or sacred groves. (Chakraborty, 2019) mentioned that “Sacred Groves are surrounded by trees and shrubs that are varied in nature”(pp. 51). “The Santal people or any people from other societies never cut any branches of the trees situated in sacred groves”(Chakraborty,2019). Several religious occasion take place in sacred groves.

Like some Hindu rituals, various animals like goat , hen or pork are sacrificed to the god and they eat the flesh of sacrificed animal. Some important Bongas(Gods and Goddesses) are as follows: Marang Buru(Great Mountain), Jaher Ayo, and More ko Turuiko( means 'five to six' persons).

### 7.0 Festivals and Rituals

The Santal community has different cultural festivals and rituals. Their festivals are associated with agriculture activities.They celebrate various festivals, including:

**Baha (flower festival)**–It is celebrated in the Santal community during February–March, marking the flowering of plants and sal trees. It is also known as Salui puja in Bengali.

Sohrai is a popular festival in the Santal community. According to the author's traditional rituals, it is also known as the cattle festival (Dangri khuntao), which is celebrated during the harvest season in West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Odisha.

**Karam-** The Karam tree is worshipped as a symbol of fertility, and its branches are planted in the ground, accompanied by traditional prayers and songs.

**Disom Sendra(Hunting Festival)**–Hunting is a part of their traditional practices. It is celebrated every year on Baishakhi Purnima. The festival has faced criticism and protests from environmentalists because of its association with animal hunting. They use their traditional weapon ‘Bow and Arrow’, ‘Sacrificial Axe’, ‘Knife’ during hunting.

According to Author’s cultural tradition, Other significant Santals festivals are Dashain, Sakrat(Makar Sankranti), Mah More, Rundo, Maghsim etc. They use traditional musical instruments like ‘Tamak’, ‘Tamdah’, ‘Regra’, ‘Banam’ and ‘tirio’ with traditional dances in different festival and occasions.

### 8.0 Creative Arts and Crafts of Santal Society:

Santal people have natural skills in creative arts and crafts. Their beautiful painting is seen on mud wall, house gates and doors. They collected various colours from mud, stones and plants for painting. Some



have unique skills in making musical instrument, mats and baskets. The main themes of this art are weddings, dancing, nature, daily activities and birds, and animals. They decorate walls during festivals, occasions and traditional rituals. These paintings play the role of visual narrative which tries to preserve their cultural heritage and traditions. Their arts and crafts reflect a close relationship with nature.

## 9.0 Conclusion:

Tribal cultures is a great contributor to increase diversity and heritage of India. The arts, customs, rituals, music, and traditional practices of the Santal community contribute to the diverse cultural landscape of India. Even they are deprived from different advantage of education, health and also land. Despite these challenges, the Santal people have shown remarkable resilience, actively working to preserve their unique identity and traditions. Their efforts to promote cultural awareness and advocate for their rights continue to enrich India's social fabric. In spite of all these challenges, they fought against British colonialism to save their existence. That was India's first revolution, also known as the Santal Hul, against British colonialism. After that, various movements, protests, and rallies play an important role in protecting their culture, language, and rights. Since independence, the government of India has tried to raise the socio-economic standards of the Santal community. These efforts have included initiatives aimed at improving education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. As a result, the Santal community has increasingly become more empowered to preserve their traditions while actively participating in the broader socio-economic landscape of India. The Indian government has taken numerous initiatives for the development of education, health, and socio-economic empowerment of the tribal community. Although the Santal community is facing challenges in preserving their cultural heritage during rapid urbanization and modernization. The Ol-Chiki script will play the crucial role in preserving santal culture and will empowerment of the young generation. As the younger members of the Santal community embrace the Ol-Chiki script, they are more likely to connect with their roots and pass on traditional knowledge to future generations. This cultural revival can foster a renewed sense of identity and pride, enabling the community to navigate the complexities of modern society while honoring their heritage. Nowadays, Santal people get appointed to jobs within their own country as well as in foreign countries. As a part of the Santal community, the author is extremely proud of the President of India, Smt. Droupadi Murmu, who is the first tribal woman president of India. This pride reflects not only a personal connection to cultural identity but also highlights the significance of representation in leadership roles. The author's admiration for President Murmu underscores the potential for positive change and inspiration within the Santal community and beyond.



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