

Socio-Economic and Cultural Issues of the Santals of West Bengal

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Abstract:

The Santals constitute one of the largest indigenous communities in India, with a significant population in the state of West Bengal. Despite constitutional safeguards and developmental initiatives, the Santals continue to face multiple socio-economic and cultural challenges. This paper examines the major socio-economic conditions, cultural practices, and contemporary issues affecting the Santal community in West Bengal. Using secondary sources such as census data, government reports, and existing literature, the study highlights issues related to education, livelihood, health, land alienation, and cultural transformation. The paper also emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive development policies to ensure inclusive growth and preservation of Santal identity.

Keywords:

Santals, West Bengal, socio-economic conditions, culture, tribal studies, indigenous communities.

Introduction:

The Santals are one of the prominent tribal communities of eastern India, mainly residing in West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha, and Bihar. In West Bengal, they are concentrated in districts such as Birbhum, Bankura, Purulia, Paschim Medinipur, and Jhargram. Traditionally dependent on agriculture, forest resources, and manual labor, the Santals have a rich cultural heritage, including distinct language (Santali), social institutions, festivals, music, and dance. However, modernization, economic marginalization, and social exclusion have significantly impacted their traditional way of life. Researching the Santal community in West Bengal involves exploring the intersection of an ancient, nature-centric culture with the pressures of modern economic marginalization. Below is an overview of the key socio-economic and cultural issues, structured as a framework for an academic research paper.

Literature Review

The city life of the Santals in Adivasi Will Not Dance is depicted as a crisis for their tribal identity (Marandi, 2). Their migration to cities resulted in social injustice, exploitation, and discrimination. Their tradition and identity witnessed a kind of threat in the city. The Santals in the crowd of the mainstream and globalisation risked their cultural history, religion, and language. They faced sexual violence, poverty, and atrocities. The challenges of socio-cultural and economic issues by the hegemonic forces changed their understanding of traditional life and practices. The Santals remained deprived of some constitutional privileges (Roy, 6). They are oppressed by the corporate capitalist who made them miserable and dispossessed from their inhabited places. The marginalised Santal community was uprooted and overpowered by

mainstream society. Subalternity of the Santals amidst the urban and elite sections created discrimination. Immense poverty made a female character in the book Adivasi will not Dance vulnerable to being sexually exploited by a police officer.

The impact of modernisation encountered by the Santals threatened their identity for survival (Nilofer, 89). The capitalist power led them to displacement of their lands and impoverishment. The damaging conditions of modernisation collapsed their livelihood and Indigenous identity. They struggled to cope after losing lands and natural resources. The book Adibasi will not Dance elucidated the exploitation of the mining companies. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar in the book tried to empower the tribal women in the context of characterisation (Ghosh & Challa, 2). He asserted voices for the marginalised tribal women in Adibasi Will Not Dance. He represented the contemporary socio-economic condition of the Santhal community. His dynamic storytelling technique expressed the indigenous identity of the Santals realistically. He portrayed the submerged voices of the tribal woman character through Talamai Tudu. The book explored the miserable conditions of tribals in Jharkhand (Khan, 2022). The indigenous Santal culture is depicted through unresolved problems of poverty, displacement, and discrimination. With the rapid growth of industrialisation and urbanisation the lives of the Santal community have been affected immensely. The control over the natural resources by the capitalist government and private agencies resulted in deforestation and displacement of the Adivasi people. The corporate exploitation of both the land and tribals increased in the name of development. Hansda's ethnographic understanding of the Santal tribe encourages him to be a representative of his community (Ghosh, 2022). His vision marked an impact on the literary field to find out the plight of the Santals in Jharkhand. His experimentation with this book Adivasi Will Not Dance recognised him as an innovative writer. His works incorporated the study of Santal's religion, black magic, and child abuse. The capitalistic economic system has been seen as a cultural and traditional change of the Santals (Lulekar, 2022). They were alienated from their land and some converted to Christianity. They lost traditional occupations to the emergence of industrialisation and urbanisation. They protested against corporate exploitation but in opposite they got beaten up. The material exploitations of the mining companies have driven them to poverty and hunger. The Adivasis's assertion at the national and international level has some historical and representational issues (Rycroft, 2014). A new form of resistance emerged from the abuse of their lands and cultural rights. Their Indigenous rights in the context of postcolonial India are denied by the state and civil society. The re-assertion of Adivasi identities or rights is an important contemporary discourse. Adivasi as 'Indigenous and Tribal peoples' emphasizes a scope in both regional and international forums. The Santal women suffer more marginalisation than men within their community (Kumar. T & Padmanabhan, 2020). The Santal women are harassed and assaulted by the upper-class 'diku.' They experience also inequality and social exclusion around their existing group. The Santals in Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's novel Adibasi will not Dance portrayed realistically. The book depicted how they struggled with poverty, unemployment, landlessness, and gender inequality. They remained insecure about their ethnic identity because of capitalistic oppression. The government agencies illegally encroached lands of the Santals and displaced them from their lands.

Objective of the study :-

- To study the socio-economic profile of the Santals of West Bengal, with reference to income, occupation, landholding, education, and living conditions.
- To examine the traditional livelihood patterns of the Santals and assess the impact of modernization, migration, and changing economic structures on their economy.
- To assess the health and nutritional conditions of Santals and their relationship with socio-economic factors and access to healthcare services.
- To explore the cultural practices, beliefs, language, and social institutions of the Santals and the changes occurring due to external influences.
- To examine issues of cultural identity, language preservation, and religious change among the Santals in West Bengal.
- To identify forms of social exclusion, discrimination, and marginalization experienced by the Santals in economic, social, and political spheres.

Socio-Economic Conditions of the Santals:-

Livelihood and Employment-

Agriculture remains the primary source of livelihood for most Santal households. However, land fragmentation, lack of irrigation, and low agricultural productivity have forced many Santals to work as daily wage laborers. Seasonal migration to urban and semi-urban areas is common, exposing them to job insecurity and exploitation.

Education-

Although government initiatives have improved school enrollment, dropout rates among Santal children remain high. Poverty, language barriers, lack of educational infrastructure, and limited parental awareness hinder educational attainment. The gap between tribal and non-tribal literacy rates continues to be significant.

Health and Living Conditions-

Limited access to healthcare facilities, malnutrition, poor sanitation, and lack of clean drinking water adversely affect the health status of the Santal community. Traditional healing practices are still prevalent, but inadequate integration with modern healthcare systems limits effective treatment.

Socio-Economic Challenges:-

The Santals are the largest tribal (Scheduled Tribe) community in West Bengal, making up over 50% of the state's ST population. Despite this, they remain among the most marginalized groups. Agrarian Crisis & Land Alienation: Traditionally a forest-dwelling and agrarian community, many Santals have transitioned from landowners to landless agricultural laborers. Fragmented landholdings and lack of irrigation in districts like Purulia, Bankura, and Birbhum lead to subsistence-level farming.

Labor Migration:

Due to seasonal food shortages and lack of local employment, there is a high rate of migration to brick kilns, tea gardens, and urban construction sites. This migration often leads to exploitation, unregulated wages, and a breakdown of the traditional family structure.

Educational Barriers:

While literacy rates are rising, there is a significant "attainment gap." Most students drop out after primary school due to economic pressure or language barriers (though the recognition of Ol Chiki script has helped). **Health & Infrastructure:** Research indicates a continued reliance on traditional medicine (and sometimes exorcism/Ojha) due to the lack of accessible primary healthcare and clean drinking water in remote "Tola" (hamlets).

Cultural Dynamics & Erosion:

Santal culture is distinct for its egalitarian structure and deep ecological connection, but it is currently in a state of "cultural transformation."

Religious Identity (Sari vs. Sarna):

There is a growing movement demanding a distinct "Sarna" or "Sari" religion code in the Census to distinguish their animistic beliefs from mainstream Hinduism or Christianity. **The "Tribal Elite" vs. The Masses:** A socio-political divide has emerged between the "Santal Elite" (those in government jobs/teaching) and the rural masses. The elite often lead cultural revival movements, while the rural poor struggle for basic survival.

Impact of Modernization:

Traditional Bapla (marriage) rituals are being simplified or influenced by Hindu customs (e.g., the introduction of dowry-like gift-giving).

Music & Dance:

The rise of professional troupes performing on a contract basis is replacing the communal, spontaneous dancing associated with festivals like Sohrae and Baha.

Language:

The Santali language is a core pillar of their identity. The struggle for its inclusion in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution was a major cultural victory, yet younger urban generations are increasingly shifting toward Bengali or Hindi.

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.

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 medicin) 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.'

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.

Cultural Aspects of the Santal Community:**Language and Identity-**

Santali, written in the Ol Chiki script, is a vital marker of Santal identity. While recognition of Santali as a scheduled language has strengthened cultural pride, its use in formal education and administration remains limited in West Bengal.

Social Institutions and Festivals-

Santal society is organized around traditional institutions such as the Majhi-Paragana system, which regulates social life and dispute resolution. Festivals like Sohrai, Baha, and Karam play a crucial role in reinforcing community bonds and cultural continuity.

Impact of Modernization-

Urbanization, mass media, and religious conversions have led to changes in traditional customs and values. Younger generations often face a cultural dilemma between preserving traditional practices and adapting to mainstream society.

Contemporary Issues and Challenges:

The Santals of West Bengal face persistent issues such as land alienation, displacement due to development projects, and inadequate implementation of welfare schemes. Despite legal protections under the Fifth Schedule and various tribal development programs, benefits often fail to reach the grassroots level. Cultural marginalization and socio-economic inequality continue to limit their overall development.

Conclusion:

The study reveals that the socio-economic and cultural issues of the Santals in West Bengal are deeply interconnected. While development initiatives have brought some improvements,

significant gaps remain in education, healthcare, livelihood security, and cultural preservation. Inclusive and participatory development approaches, along with respect for indigenous knowledge and traditions, are essential for improving the living conditions of the Santal community while safeguarding their cultural identity. 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.

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