

# FESTIVALS AMONG THE SANTALS IN WEST BENGAL: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

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**Abstract:** *The role of festivals of any community from anywhere of the world, is not only to identify the community itself but also it is expected to strengthen the heritage and development of the community with respect to literature and culture and overall position in the society. Besides this, it is a medium to preserve a festival from the dangers of extinction. Traditional Festivals of any community can be compared with that of the dresses where we can wear any dresses of any culture, but at the end of the day we feel the comfort of the dresses of our own culture. In India, Santals are one of the largest tribal community who have kept their heritage and identities almost unchanged which reflects in their different festivals. They celebrate their festivals and rituals throughout the year wearing their traditional dresses. These celebrations are made with tribal songs & dances in the open courtyard of the village as with beating drums of various types. The main community festivals of the Santals are Sohrae or Sarhool (harvest festival) during the month of November– January. This paper mainly concentrates on the different festivals among the Santals of West Bengal and their impact upon their day to day life and the effect of modernization and sanskritization upon their different festivals.*

**Key Words:** Santals, Festivals, Modernization & Sanskritization.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Santals are one of the most dominant tribes in India. They are the third largest tribal community in India after Bhil and Gond tribes. They spread out over a vast area of the country, mainly in the states of West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand and Assam. Some migrated in the neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Nepal. They have been described as the “most integrated and possibly the most resilient tribe in eastern India”. The origin of the Santals has been remained mystery, till date, the mystery is unsolved. Apart from the unsolved mystery of their origin, the other aspects such as their religion, their culture are very rich than that of many other tribes in India. The role of festivals of any community from anywhere of the world, is not only to identify the community itself but also it is expected to strengthen the heritage and development of the community with respect to literature and culture and overall position in the society. Besides this, it is a medium to preserve a festival from the dangers of extinction. Traditional Festivals of any community can be compared with that of the dresses where we can wear any dresses of any culture, but at the end of the day we feel the comfort of the dresses of our own culture. In India, Santals are one of the largest tribal community who have kept their heritage and identities almost unchanged which reflects in their different festivals. They celebrate their festivals and rituals throughout the year wearing their traditional dresses. These celebrations are made with tribal songs & dances in the open courtyard of the village as with beating drums of various types. In spite of various obstacles, Santals are tremendous anxious to retain their tribal identity as various social transformations are making serious damage and causing de-tribalization. Whether it is culture or festivals, there have been infiltrations from various dominant social groups such as Hindus and Christians. On the basis of the cultural classification Santals are in the category under plain agricultural type who are predominantly dependent on plough cultivation (Vidyarthi & Rai, 1976). The general economy of the Santals is agriculture based when few work as industrial labourer and a few are in white colour jobs. In the present Indian society, most of the agricultural tribes do not remain purely isolated from their neighbouring other castes people besides that the santals community have kept their heritage and tribal identity through their different festivals throughout the year. Festival is closely associated with the human culture. To get a relaxation from their monotonous life, man celebrates various festivals in different period which are closely associated to their day to day life. Any festival or ‘parob’ of the Santals is the expression of their believes and maintenance of their own tradition. The Santals are living in different regions all over India. They do not observe all festivals everywhere at a time. But for major festivals there is more or less synchronisation of dates. This study only focuses on the different festivals among the Santals of West Bengal in this era of Globalisation and critically assesses how far the process of modernization and sanskritization affect their different festivals.

**2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:** The objectives of this study are given below:

- To know the different festivals among the Santals of West Bengal and their impact upon their day to day life.
- To know the effect of Modernization and Sanskritization on their own festivals.

### 3. METHODS OF THE STUDY:

The primary data were collected by (1) Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), (2) Participant observation, (3) Focus Group Discussions (FGD) (3) Informal and semi-structured interviews. The researcher covered in-depth interview of 40 villagers from different Santal populated villages of West Bengal whom the researcher would be able to rapport building. A purposive sampling technique has been used to select the villagers. The data collected by interviews were cross- checked with people of diverse strata of the society. At the stage of data analysis, qualitative analysis methods were carried out.

### 4. DIFFERENT FESTIVALS AMONG THE SANTALS IN WEST BENGAL:

The Santals of West Bengal have different number of festivals celebrated over different seasons and different months throughout the year. The most important of these festivals are *Sohrae, Baha, Magh Sim, Sakrat, Hariar Sim, Erok Sim, Iri-Gundhi, Disom Sendra, Mak' Mode, Pata, Chata, Jatra, Janthar and Karam*. Among these different festivals of the Santals, the chief festival is the *sohrai* or Badna Parab or harvest festival, celebrated in Poush (During the month of November –January), after the chief rice crop of the year has been got in. Besides that all the others festivals of the Santals are closely associated with some agricultural rituals, operations and customs since their age-old traditions from generation to generation. Most of the festivals of an agriculturist community are associated with the agricultural work which falls within their agricultural cycle. The agricultural festivals are very important to the Santals because possibly of the fact that agriculture plays most vital role in the Santal community even in this era of Globalization. The festivals are followed by some customary law and breach of religious rules is looked into by the traditional santals village council. The chief imageless gods and goddesses of the Santals are *Marang Buru, Moreko-Turiko, and Jaher-Era*. They have enormous influence in their most festivals. Dance (enej) and music (sereng) are integral part of the Santal life and their each of festivals. They dance and sing when they are in happy mood as they love it very much and these are always associated with their different festivals and rituals which are always a community affair. Young and old, irrespective of age and sex, participate in such events. Various dances such as Kalasi dance, Danta dance, Rinja dance, Baha dance, Jachur dance, etc. are being performed during different festive occasions. The Santal have different types of songs for different occasions. Devotional songs are sung during religious ceremonies.

Traditionally, the Santal dance is performed with the tune of beating of drums and blowing of the flutes. The musical instruments such as tamak, dhol, bhuang, tumdah, tiriau banam (one stringed fiddle), ghanta (iron bell), and singa (horn trumpet), sarangi are used during dance.

Each festivals of the Santal shows two aspects; the first is the magico- religious aspect which covers the sacrifice and worship to the deity or the sprit and the other is the recreational part which makes entertainment and enjoyment including drinking traditional liquor i.e., rice-beer, dancing and singing etc.

Now we discuss some of the important festivals among the Santals in West Bengal. These are:

- **Sohrae:** The largest, merriest and most important festival of the Santals in West Bengal is *Sohrae*, also called *Bandhna parab*. This is mainly a harvest festival which is celebrated in the month of Pous i.e., during the month of December-January after the winter paddy has been harvested. This festival is considered as the thanks-giving ceremony when the Santals offer thanks to their spirits. During this ceremony relatives and friends are invited and offered with rice-beer and food etc.
- **Baha:** After the *Sohrae* festival, *Baha* is the most important festival among the Santals in West Bengal. This festival is celebrated in the month of Falgun of Bengali calendar i.e., during the month of February-March when the *Sal* i.e., Sarjom (*Shorea robusta*) trees start blooming. In the Santal society *Sal* tree is considered as very sacred tree and there is an important role of different parts of this *Sal* tree in their all religious rituals, customs and as well as in their different festivals. Before this festival the Santals cannot collect *Sal, Mahua, Palas* or other flowers until the festival is not over. A *puja* is held when some sacrifices are made. In the evening all the santals male and female go to the *Jaherthan* where they spend some time by singing and dancing. There after they return with the *Naeke* (Village Priest) who then visits every household in the village and gives a *Sal* flower to the girl of the house who washes his feet. After these ceremonial parts the Santals spend the whole night by singing, dancing and merry making.
- **Sakrat:** This festival celebrates in the last day of the month of Pous i.e., mid of January just after the *Sohrae* festival. This is the third most elaborate ceremony performed by the Santals in West Bengal after *Sohrae* and *Baha*. There is a custom among the Santals in West Bengal to attend this festival must with their family, so to participate in this festival all Santals men who are stay abroad for so many reasons (mainly for occupation)

come to their village home to participate in this festival. This festival so called as get-together festivals of the Santals.

- **Erok Sim:** It is the first agricultural festivals of the Santal in West Bengal connected with the sowing of paddy in *Asar* i.e., during the month of June-July. The *Naeke* (Village Priest) sacrifices the fowls to the *Jaher Era*, *Gosai Era*, *Maran Buru*, and *Manjhi Haram*, invoking each one of them to make the earth fertile.
- **Hariar Sim:** Hariar Sim is celebrated in the month of *Bhadra* i.e., during the month of August-September when the village spirits are worshipped with the sacrifice of fowl for a bumper crop. After the festival, the villagers began to transplantation of paddy seedlings.
- **Iri-Gundhi Nawai:** This festival is celebrated also in the month of *Bhadra* i.e., during the month of August-September when the millet crops are offered to various deities and spirits. There is a strong totemism among the Santals that they do not taste millets unless these are first offered to the spirits.
- **Janthar:** This festival is held in the month of *Agrahayan* i.e., during the month of November-December when all the fields shine with the brown seeds of ripened paddy. Nobody can take this rice before this festival and it is strictly tabooed among the Santals. On this festival day at early morning some paddy is taken from the paddy field to *Jaherthan* to offer to the *Pargana Bonga* and *Orak Bonga*.
- **Magh Sim:** Magh Sim is celebrated in the month of *Magh* i.e., during the month of January-February when the Santals are required to mow the thatching grass. This festival indicates the end of the Santal year when all of officials of the traditional Santal Village Council i.e., *Manjhi Haram*, *Jog Manjhi*, *Jog Pramanik*, *Gorait*, *Naike* etc. resigns from their post and after a week, all take back to their respective post.
- **Karam:** This festival is celebrated in the month of *Aswin* i.e., during the month of September-October. During this festival they pray for wealth and progeny and to get rid of the evil spirits. The head of the household offers rice beer and other articles to *Manjhi Haram* and *Maran Buru* and all those present there are given rice-beer. By singing and dancing they worship their deities whole the day.
- **Mak More:** This is generally celebrated after an interval of five years. On a fixed day, the Santals, in order to fulfil the vow, offers a sacrifice of white goat to *Moreko-Turiko*. *Moreko* is propitiated to ward off unknown evils in the shape of drought, poor harvest, epidemics etc. In Kolkata the festival is held every year on the full moon day of *Baisakh* (April-May), in the district Paschim Medinipur, Purulia, Birbhum and Bankura it is celebrated during the month of *Baisakh-Jaistha* (May-June).
- **Jom Sim:** This festival is usually celebrated in the full-moon day of *Falgun* (February-March) or *Baisakh* (April-May). It is the festival through which the Santals offer their homage to the Sun god or *Sin Bonga*. It is a two days programme. In the first day the clan members purify themselves and offer puja to the *Bongas* and thus this first day is known as *Um Narak* or purificatory ceremony. The second day's festival is known as *Sardi* when the clan members offer fowl to the *Bongas*.
- **Pata:** This is a festival which reflects the effects of Hinduization on the Santals' festivals. This is practically a Hindu festival in which the Hindus worship *Mahadev* and *Parvati* but where the Santals worship their *Pata Bonga*. This festival is celebrated by the Santals in the month of *Baisakh* i.e., during the month of April-May. It is also seen that this festival corresponds to *Charak Puja* of the Hindus adopted by the Santals by living with them.
- **Jatra:** This festival is performed by the individual house-hold in the month of *Magh* i.e., during the month of January-February in the Santals' religious place called as *Jaherthan* where the *Jatra Bongas* are worshiped.
- **Chata:** This *Chata* or Umbrella festival of the Santals is held in the month of *Bhadra* (August-September) where the *Chata Bongas* are propitiated. On this day after the puja rice-beer is served to the present members followed by traditional singing and dancing. This festival is also borrowed from the neighbouring Hindus of Chhotanagpur plateau.
- **Dasae Parab:** The Santals of West Bengal especially performs this festival during the *Durga Puja* of the Hindus. This is mainly a mournful festival of the Santal when they are mourned for the killing of *Asur* by Durga goddess of the Hindus.
- **Disom Sendra:** This is an annual hunting festival of the Santals which generally held during the month of February-March though there is no fixed date; this is organised at different places on different dates. The whole programme is of three days.

## 5. TRENDS OF CHANGE AND EFFECT OF MODERNIZATION AND SANSKRITIZATION ON THE SANTALS' FESTIVALS:

In 1952, M.N. Srinivas stressed that the Coorgs from South India were trying to meliorate their status in the caste system by adopting Hindu values of purity. The adoption of a vegetarian diet and the worship of the higher Hindu

gods were included in these new practices. Moreover, the Coorgs requested Brahmans to perform their religious duties. M.N. Srinivas introduced the concept of sanskritization to name the process by which a low caste tries to reform its practices in order to claim a higher status in the hierarchy of castes. The first hint of sanskritization in Santal society was the Sapha har movement initiated by Bhagrit Manjhi in 1868, which tried to adopt some of the Hindu values. Some Santals put on the sacred thread and a fraction of them claimed the status of kshatrya while others med to reform their diet, becoming vegetarians. It is true that the Santals come in close contact with their neighbouring Hindus for a long time; the Santals have borrowed a large number of cultural traits and ideas which imbibed in their festivals. According to Datta Majumder there is a great influence of the Hinduism in the traditional religion of the Santals. He has pointed out that the Santals have adopted many Hindu deities like *Rama*, *Parvati*, and *Kali* etc. and given place in their pantheon of *Bongas* or Spirits. According *Troisi*, due to their contact with the Hindus for centuries ‘various aspects of the Santal life – material, social, economic, linguistic and religious-have been affected by Hindu culture.’ Hindu festivals like *Chata Parab*, *Pata*, and *Jatra* are of mainly Hindu origin which imbibed by the Santals as their own festivals. At present, attitude towards their own rituals is found to be changing in the present generation than their ancestors. They find traditional celebration to be ancient practice and are not getting attracted towards them. They do celebrate the festivals in their own manner with their friends and relatives.

Their attitude towards other caste rituals as the study depicts is a phenomenon of interest, well acceptance and adoption of the same as well. The youth of Santal community now a day’s goes to celebrate *Saraswati puja*, *Viswakarma puja*, *Holi*, *Durga puja*, and *Diwali* celebration, etc. along with their traditional rituals. Modernization has led the Santal youths to celebrate like birthday, marriage day, Valentine’s Day, etc in and outsides of theirs’ friends.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS:

Traditionally the Santals are the part of the peasant society and have regular interactions with their neighbouring Hindus. By cultural contact of their neighbouring Hindus, the Santal society has accepted inflow of certain socio-cultural elements from their neighbours and thus their culture and festivals have already undergone certain changes and in this context modernization processes also plays a pivotal role for this changing scenario in the different festivals and day to day life of the Santal community especially among the Santal youths with great extent of degrees. But beside some commonness, the social and cultural consciousness of the Santals have kept their heritage and identities almost unchanged. Datta Majumder has also pointed it. “But the adoption of few Hindu deities and festivals has not changed the basic character of the Santal religion and their different festivals throughout the year, which has been retained practically intact (*Datta Mjumder, 1956*).

In conclusion it may be stated that the Santals in spite of various obstacles and their long interaction with Hindus and various other modern forces, they have been able to retain their own tribal identity and entity unaffected to a great extent in their culture, festivals ,and their customs.

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