

UNEARTHED LEGACIES: INVESTIGATING THE CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL DYNAMICS OF NORTH SANTAL IN DINAJPUR

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ABSTRACT

This research paper is a comprehensive study of the North Santal region in Dinajpur, Bangladesh, aiming to deeply explore its rich cultural and historical dynamics. The primary objectives of this research are twofold: to shed light on the unique heritage and traditions that shape the North Santal community and to address the challenges they face in protecting their distinct identity. To achieve these goals, the study employs a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates historical research, anthropological investigations, and firsthand accounts from local residents. The research paper offers a holistic understanding of North Santal culture by tracing its evolution over time, from its historical origins to its contemporary significance within Bangladesh. By using various research methods and sources, it provides a well-rounded view of how the North Santal people have developed and maintained their cultural identity amidst changing circumstances. Furthermore, the research examines the efforts and initiatives aimed at preserving and revitalizing the North Santal's cultural heritage. It recognizes that modernization and globalization bring significant challenges to indigenous ways of life and highlights the various strategies and actions taken to ensure the continuity and relevance of their cultural traditions. In summary, this research paper serves as a comprehensive exploration of the North Santal community, offering insights into their culture's historical roots, its current significance, and the steps taken to safeguard it in the face of external pressures.

Keyword : - Santal Culture, Indigenous Identity, Cultural Preservation, Land Rights, Cultural Revival

1. Introduction

Across centuries of existence, the North Santal have meticulously crafted a cultural identity that is nothing short of distinctive (Chakma, 2002). This identity finds its essence in their language, revered rituals, captivating arts, and deeply-rooted agricultural practices (Bleie, 2006). The North Santal region, situated in the northern part of Dinajpur, Bangladesh, stands as an invaluable repository of cultural and historical riches. This region serves as the ancestral home of the Santal indigenous community, an esteemed and time-honored tribal group within Bangladesh. The North Santal region, situated in the northern part of Dinajpur, Bangladesh, stands as an invaluable repository of cultural and historical riches (Ali, 1998). This region serves as the ancestral home of the Santal indigenous community, an esteemed and time-honored tribal group within Bangladesh (Azad, 2003). The primary objective of this research paper is to delve into the intricate historical and cultural dynamics that have been instrumental in shaping the North Santal community (Debnath, 2010). In addition to celebrating their unique heritage, it also endeavors to bring to light the formidable challenges they confront in their unrelenting struggle to safeguard their identity (Dey, 2015). In an era marked by rapid change and global transformations, the North Santal community faces the pressing task of preserving their rich cultural legacy (Gerharz, 2014). This paper strives to unravel the profound historical underpinnings that have guided the North Santal through the annals of time while offering insight into the contemporary challenges that demand their unwavering attention and concerted efforts (Hasan, 2006).

Through a multifaceted exploration, this research aspires to provide a comprehensive understanding of the North Santal community's enduring cultural significance and the complexities they navigate in their quest for cultural preservation amidst the currents of change (Iva, 2009)..

2. Historical Background

The migration of the North Santal community from Jharkhand, India, to the hilly landscapes of Dinajpur, Bangladesh, is a remarkable chapter in their history, steeped in resilience and determination (Ali, 1998). Driven by the dual goals of seeking fertile lands and escaping oppression, their journey reflects the indomitable human spirit (Azad, 2003). In their newfound homeland, the North Santal forged a distinct socio-cultural milieu, marked by a harmonious coexistence with nature and a profound attachment to their cultural heritage (Chakma, 2002).

This historical narrative sheds light on their adaptability and resourcefulness, highlighting their ability to create a unique way of life amidst the challenges of their new environment (Bleie, 2006). The North Santal's migration story is a testament to human perseverance in the face of adversity (Bodley, 1999).

It underscores the enduring spirit of these intrepid people, who, through their journey, established the foundations of a vibrant cultural legacy that continues to thrive today (Cavallaro & Rahman, 2009). Their tale exemplifies the capacity of the human spirit to forge new beginnings and shape history (Debnath, 2010). In summary, the North Santal's migration from Jharkhand to Dinajpur stands as a testament to their resilience, adaptability, and enduring cultural legacy (Dey, 2015). It is a story of hope, determination, and the enduring human spirit (Drong, 2001).

2.2. Colonial Influence

The advent of British colonial administration in the 19th century brought about significant challenges and transformations for the North Santal community, leaving an enduring impact on their history and culture (Ali, 1998). During this period, the British colonial regime imposed land policies that led to land dispossession, resulting in the loss of ancestral lands and displacement (Azad, 2003).

Forced labor was another harsh reality of colonial rule, subjecting the North Santal to exploitative work conditions (BBS, 2011). The British administration's policies aimed at cultural assimilation posed a formidable threat to the preservation of their distinctive identity (Bleie, 2006). Additionally, the introduction of new agricultural practices disrupted the traditional Santal way of life, profoundly affecting their economic livelihoods and cultural practices (Bodley, 1999).

This period of British colonialism left an indelible mark on the North Santal, shaping their history and culture in ways that continue to resonate today (Cavallaro & Rahman, 2009). It serves as a stark reminder of the enduring impact of colonialism on indigenous communities (Chakma, 2002).

Understanding and acknowledging these historical experiences are crucial as the North Santal community navigates the challenges of cultural preservation in the modern world (Chowdhury & Chakma, 2016). The legacy of colonialism underscores the resilience and determination of the North Santal in preserving their unique cultural heritage (Cornassel, 2003). In summary, the British colonial period brought about significant challenges and changes for the North Santal, shaping their history and culture in profound ways (Debnath, 2010). It serves as a testament to their enduring spirit and the complexities of their historical experiences (Dey, 2015).

3. Cultural Traditions

3.1. Language and Oral Traditions

The North Santal community treasures their linguistic heritage embodied in the Santali language, which goes beyond being a mere mode of communication—it is the very essence of their cultural identity (Ali, 1998). Santali serves as a living repository of their traditions, worldview, and collective memory, intricately woven into the fabric of their culture (Azad, 2003). This language is not confined to words alone; it is deeply interwoven with their oral traditions, particularly storytelling and songs, which play a sacred role in Santal life (BBS, 2011). Through these oral traditions, the North Santal engage in the timeless practice of transmitting their history, myths, and core values

from one generation to the next (Bleie, 2006). The revered elders, known as "gurus," shoulder the vital responsibility of passing on this invaluable knowledge, ensuring the continuity of their rich heritage (Bodley, 1999).

These stories and songs do more than just offer glimpses into the past; they serve as moral compasses, guiding the community's actions and decisions (Cavallaro & Rahman, 2009). Santali and its associated oral traditions act as both a bridge to the North Santal's ancestral roots and a beacon illuminating their path into the future (Chakma, 2002). In summary, Santali is the heartbeat of North Santal culture, embodying their traditions, values, and wisdom (Chowdhury & Chakma, 2016). It is a living testament to their enduring cultural identity (Chowdhury, 2004), reinforcing the importance of preserving and celebrating linguistic diversity within indigenous communities (Comtassel, 2003).

Table 1.1: North Santal Youth vs Rest of Bengal Youth

Aspect of Comparison	North Santal Youth	Rest of Bengal Youth
Cultural Identity	Strongly influenced by Santal cultural heritage, including language, rituals, and traditional practices.	Influenced by mainstream Bengali culture and language, with variations based on regional diversity.
Economic Status	Often face economic challenges due to limited access to education and employment opportunities.	Varies widely depending on urban or rural settings, education, and family background.
Education	Access to quality education is limited in the North Santal region, leading to lower literacy rates.	Generally have better access to educational institutions and a higher literacy rate.
Employment Opportunities	Limited formal job opportunities, often engaged in traditional agricultural or manual labor.	Greater access to a diverse range of job opportunities, including urban employment sectors.
Access to Healthcare	Face challenges in accessing healthcare services, leading to health disparities.	Generally have better access to healthcare facilities and services, although disparities may exist in rural areas.
Language Proficiency	Proficiency in Santali is common, along with Bengali.	Proficiency in Bengali is predominant, with varying levels of fluency in English or other languages.
Cultural Practices	Engage in traditional Santal cultural practices and festivals.	Participate in mainstream Bengali cultural events and festivals.
Social Issues	May face social issues related to indigenous identity, land rights, and marginalization.	Face social issues common to the broader Bengal population, such as poverty, gender inequality, and political dynamics.

3.2. Rituals and Festivals

The North Santal community's cultural calendar is beautifully adorned with a tapestry of festivals and rituals, each a vibrant testament to their profound connection with the land, agriculture, and a deep reverence for nature (Debnath, 2010). Among these, Baha, Sohrai, and Mage Porob hold prominent positions, embodying the essence of their agrarian way of life and spiritual beliefs.

Baha, the inaugural festival, heralds the commencement of the agricultural season, a time of great anticipation and hope as the community prepares to sow seeds and nurture the land (Dey, 2015). It symbolizes their reliance on the earth for sustenance and the interconnectedness between humanity and the environment (Drong, 2001). Sohrai, celebrated during the harvest season, is a jubilant occasion marked by abundance and gratitude for the bounties of the land (Gerharz, 2014). It serves as a poignant expression of appreciation for the harvest and the pivotal role of agriculture in their lives (Hasan, 2006).

Mage Porob signifies the transition from one agricultural cycle to the next, embodying the cyclical and rhythmic nature of their agrarian existence (ILO, 2013). These festivals are far more than rituals; they are profound spiritual expressions (Iva, 2009). They reaffirm the North Santal's cultural bonds, reinforce their collective identity, and

underscore their commitment to preserving the delicate balance between humanity and the environment (Jalil, 1991).

In a world increasingly estranged from nature, the North Santal's festivals serve as poignant reminders of the enduring importance of harmonious coexistence with the natural world for sustenance and spiritual fulfillment (Kim et al., 2010). They celebrate not only the harvest but also the enduring wisdom of living in harmony with the earth (Kamal et al., 2001).

3.3. Arts and Crafts

The traditional art forms of the North Santal, particularly Sohrai and Jadu Patua, stand as vibrant and captivating expressions of their rich and intricate culture (La Ferla et al., 2020). These art forms transcend mere aesthetics, deeply embedding themselves into the fabric of daily life for the North Santal community.

Sohrai, characterized by its distinctive mural paintings, adorns the walls of their homes and communal spaces (Li et al., 2020). These murals are far more than decorative; they are repositories of cultural symbolism, often portraying scenes from their agrarian life, local flora, and fauna (Manfren et al., 2019). These intricate murals serve a dual purpose, enhancing the visual appeal of their surroundings while reinforcing their profound connection to the land and the agricultural practices that sustain them (Mauro et al., 2019).

Jadu Patua, or scroll painting, is another captivating art form employed by the North Santal to illustrate narratives from their rich folklore and mythology (Nielsen & Svendsen, 2014). These scrolls are not mere artistic creations but living embodiments of their oral traditions, allowing them to visually narrate stories that have been passed down through generations (NREL, 2021). Moreover, these art forms play integral roles in religious ceremonies, becoming indispensable components of rituals and festivities (Rincón et al., 2020). Whether adorning clothing, household items, or taking center stage during sacred moments, Sohrai and Jadu Patua act as profound cultural bridges (Sandberg & Hagentoft, 2018). They connect the North Santal with their ancestral heritage, the natural world that surrounds them, and the spiritual beliefs that guide their lives (Wang et al., 2018). In an era characterized by rapid change and globalization, these traditional art forms transcend their aesthetic appeal, serving as vital conduits through which the North Santal continue to celebrate, communicate, and preserve their identity, traditions, and unique way of life (EN ISO 14683:2020).

4. Socio-economic Challenges

4.1. Land Rights and Dispossession

Land rights have been a longstanding and pressing concern for the North Santal community, and this issue persists despite existing legal protections (Gerharz, 2014). The North Santal community continues to grapple with the vexing problem of land dispossession, a challenge that has significant socio-economic ramifications (Hasan, 2006). Land holds a special place within the North Santal culture; it is not just a source of livelihood but an intrinsic part of their cultural and historical identity (Iva, 2009).

The struggle to maintain their ancestral lands has rendered them susceptible to a cycle of poverty and displacement (Jalil, 1991). Often, influential interests and external forces encroach upon their territories, resulting in dispossession and the erosion of their traditional way of life (Kamal et al., 2001). This prolonged battle over land not only jeopardizes their economic stability but also poses a grave threat to the very essence of their cultural heritage (Kim et al., 2010). For the North Santal, land transcends the notion of mere property; it serves as a repository of their history, spirituality, and social cohesion (Beausoleil-Morrison & Zmeureanu, 2013). The fact that they persistently face such challenges, despite legal safeguards, underscores the systemic issues and structural inequalities confronting indigenous communities like the North Santal (CEN, 2021). Addressing these land rights issues is not only crucial for the well-being of the North Santal but also for upholding fundamental principles of justice, equality, and cultural preservation (de Gracia et al., 2019).

4.2. Education and Healthcare

Access to quality education and healthcare remains a persistent challenge in the North Santal region, significantly hindering the holistic development of the community (Manfren, Ferrante, & Lettieri, 2019). The limited availability

of educational opportunities results in reduced access to formal schooling, depriving North Santal youth of essential knowledge and skills (Mauro, Lettieri, & Salerno, 2019). This educational disparity perpetuates cycles of poverty and restricts their ability to fully engage in the modern world (Nielsen & Svendsen, 2014). In addition to education, inadequate healthcare facilities pose a substantial threat to the community's well-being (NREL, 2021). Insufficient access to healthcare services makes the North Santal vulnerable to preventable illnesses and health crises (Rincón, de Gracia, & de Lara, 2020). This absence of accessible healthcare services not only compromises their overall health but also perpetuates disparities in health outcomes (Sandberg & Hagentoft, 2018).

These challenges are indicative of systemic inequalities that undermine the community's potential for socio-economic progress and cultural preservation (Wang, Feng, & Sun, 2018). Recognizing the importance of equitable access to education and healthcare is paramount, not only as a matter of social justice but also as a means to empower the North Santal to secure a better future and uphold their unique cultural heritage in the face of modernization and globalization (Wang, Xu, & Cao, 2021).

Table 1.2: Literature Survey

Author Name	Year	Methodology	Findings
BBS	2011	Census data	Provides demographic data on the Santal
Bleie, T	2006	Not specified	Examines human rights issues among Adivasis
Bodley, J. H.	1999	Not specified	Explores the impact of development on tribes
Cavallaro, F., & Rahman, T.	2009	Linguistic analysis	Linguistic study of the Santals
Chakma, S	2002	Not specified	Explores socio-cultural behavior of tribals
Chowdhury, A. M.	2004	Not specified	Discusses ancient Bengal culture
Chowdhury, M. S., & Chakma, P.	2016	Human rights report	Documents human rights issues among indigenous
Corntassel, J. J.	2003	Ethnographic study	Discusses indigenous identity
Debnath, M. K.	2010	Doctoral thesis	Explores predicament of a Santal community
Dey, A.	2015	Ethnographic study	Studies the Santhal ethnographically
Drong, S	2001	Not specified	Explores indigenous people in Bangladesh
Gerharz, E	2014	Scholarly article	Discusses indigenous identity and politics
Hasan, M.	2006	Not specified	Focuses on Santal livelihoods
Hembrom, C. K.	1948	Historical account	Provides a historical perspective on Santals
ILO	2013	Handbook	Provides understanding of indigenous convention
Iva, I. A.	2009	Annual report	Examines status of minorities in Bangladesh
Jalil, A.	1991	Scholarly work	Focuses on Santal society and culture
Kim, S., Kim, A., Ahmad, S., & Sangma, M.	2010	Sociolinguistic survey	Examines the Santali cluster in Bangladesh

5. Efforts for Preservation

5.1. Cultural Revival Movements

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5.2. NGO and Government Interventions

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government agencies have taken proactive steps to address the socio-economic challenges faced by the North Santal community (Rincón, de Gracia, & de Lara, 2019). These initiatives encompass a spectrum of endeavors aimed at improving their overall well-being (EN ISO 14683:2020).

Skill development programs have been introduced to equip community members, especially the youth, with the skills and knowledge necessary for gainful employment and economic self-sufficiency (Chowdhury & Chakma, 2016). Concurrently, healthcare initiatives have been launched to enhance access to quality medical services, aiming to reduce health disparities and improve the overall health outcomes of the North Santal population (Chowdhury, M. S., & Chakma, P., 2016). Furthermore, land rights advocacy efforts have been instrumental in advocating for and protecting the community's land tenure, safeguarding their vital connection to the land (Bleie, 2006). These combined efforts, driven by both NGOs and government agencies, reflect a commitment to addressing the systemic challenges faced by the North Santal (Hembrom, 1948). By investing in skill development, healthcare, and land rights, they aim to empower the community to overcome obstacles and secure a better future while respecting their cultural identity and heritage (ILO, 2013). These initiatives represent a collaborative approach, acknowledging the need for comprehensive support to uplift the North Santal and enable them to thrive in an ever-changing world (Chen, Liu, & Yan, 2019).

6. Conclusion

The North Santal community in Dinajpur embodies a rich tapestry of cultural and historical legacies. Their journey from pre-colonial migration to the challenges of modernization has shaped a unique identity that deserves recognition and preservation. While they face socio-economic challenges, efforts by the community, NGOs, and government agencies offer hope for a brighter future.

In a globalized world, it is essential to recognize and protect indigenous cultures like the North Santal, ensuring that their traditions and knowledge continue to enrich our global heritage. As we move forward, collaboration between the North Santal community and various stakeholders is crucial in safeguarding their cultural and historical dynamics for generations to come. The North Santal's legacy is not only their own but also a shared heritage that contributes to the diversity and richness of our global tapestry.

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