

Lifestyle and culture of the santhals of Jalpaiguri district in the twentieth century: A historical outline

Manadev Roy

Assistant Professor of History, Khandra College (Affiliated to Kazi Nazrul University) Burdwan, West Bengal, India.

Abstract

The Santhals are major among the tribes of Jalpaiguri district. They migrated to the district during British period. At the time of migration the Santhals also brought their own language, Majhi system', bow-arrow, hariya, various gods and disembodied spirits, folk norms of performing arts, musical instruments, folk technology of making crafts and numerous festivals etc. After the settlement in Jalpaiguri district and the interaction with other communities as well as influence of the Christian missionaries and western culture the Santhals had to modify their earlier lifestyle and culture. A good number of Santhals gradually began to avoid their long established rituals. The converted Santhals distanced from traditional beliefs and practices. Nevertheless the original characteristic feature of the Santhals of Jalpaiguri district did not disappear.

Keywords: The Santhals, tea-garden, Majhi, ulki, witch, Ojha

Introduction

The Santhals are one of the major tribal groups in Jalpaiguri district. Like other tribal people such as the Oraons, Mundas, the Santhals migrated to Jalpaiguri district during British period. The migration of the Santhals to Jalpaiguri was initiated by D.H.E. Sunder the then Survey and Settlement Officer of the district. In his report he wrote that while holding charge of Buxa Sub-Division of Jalpaiguri, he communicated with Mr. Stark, Deputy Magistrate, who was then in charge of the Damini forests (Rajmahal hills), in the Santhal Parganas (presently situated in Jharkhand) of Bihar and Mr. Sunder also sent his Santhal servants at his own cost, to Bihar to find out whether Santhals would be willing to come and settle in the waste lands of the western Duars. The reports which reached him made him very hopeful that they would do so, and he accordingly recommended, in his letter No. 769G of the 4th January 1890, to the Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri, that a Santhal colony be started in the Duars. Then Reverend A.J. Shields of the Church Missionary Society came up with a party of Santhals from Gouda district (presently situated in Jharkhand) under Bihar. He was very pleased with the land which Mr. Sunder had selected for the Santhals between the Gaddadhar and Raydak rivers, east of Alipurduar the subdivision of Jalpaiguri district, where a batch of 500 (five hundred) of them men, women, and children came to settle there in the year of 1891^[1]. They were tall and their complexions were black. They had curly to straight hair. Their physical appearances were like Negro people. They were of Dravidian origin.

After the historical Santhal uprising of 1855 the British Government started to harass the tribal people of the Santhal pargana (presently situated in Jharkhand) of Bihar. This forced them to leave their native land for employment and to protect themselves from policy harassment. Almost after two decades in 1875 Gazoldoba Tea garden was established in Jalpaiguri district^[2] and thereafter numerous tea gardens were introduced, which created a big labour crisis as the indigenous people such as the Rajbansis, Meches and the Garos etc., of the district were not interested to work in the tea gardens. Naturally the owners of the tea gardens whether British or Bengali searched for labourers and brought the simple

Santhals to the tea gardens as workers like the other tribals such as the Mundas, the Oraons the Kherias etc. In the meantime by the introduction of railway communication from Santhal Pargana of Bihar to Mandalghat of Jalpaiguri district the migration of the Santhals was easy because the contemporary governor of Bengal gave free pass for the Santhals who migrated to Jalpaiguri district^[3]. Some of the Santhals came and settled in the district from South Bengal, Orissa and Central Province. Gradually they spread out to Falakata, Samuktala, Madarihat of Jalpaiguri district. Many of them appointed themselves as tea garden coolies at Malbazar, Meteli, Chalsa, Kalchini and Nagrakata of Jalpaiguri. A good number Santhals settled at Choto Pukuria, Boro Pukuria, Bania Gaon, Tiralatola, Gartola, Jampoitila, Sambalpur, Baniyadabri Garomuta, Kadampur, Gagekadampur, Parokata, Sirkata, Gadadhar etc. the villages of Samuktala under Jalpaiguri district^[4]. Apart from these villages the Santhals settled themselves in various pocket areas of the district. As per the Census Report of 1901, the Santhal population of Jalpaiguri district was 10857 and about 24000 in 1921^[5]. The Santhal population of the district gradually increased year after year.

At the time of their migration to Jalpaiguri district the Santhals also brought their own language, Majhi headman system, bow-arrow hariya domestically prepared wine, various gods and disembodied spirits and numerous festivals etc. After the settlement in a new environment Jalpaiguri and the interaction with other communities as well as influence of the Christian missionaries and western culture the Santhals had to modify their earlier lifestyle and culture. In the course of time they gradually lost some of their traditional habits and practices, yet they had a distinctive way of life in the district. Dhirendranath Baske in his book Pashimbanger Adibasi Samaj in Bengali gave a wonderful description about the livelihoods of the Santhals. Likewise Achintya Jana in his Suthal Jeeban Katha in Bengali described about the individuality of the Santhals H.H. Risley member of I.C.S. in his book 'Tribes & Castes of Bengal' pointed out the identity of the Santhals. According to him 'Santal, Sonthal, Saontar, a large Dravidian tribe, ceased on linguistic grounds to be a Kolarian, which is found in Western Bengal, Northern Orissa, Bhagalpur and

Santal Parganas. According to Mr. Skresrud the tribe after their sojourn for several generations in the country were said to be having *Kharwar khar*. Meaning root of Khar, which was a variant of *Hor* man, the names which all Santals used among themselves. Still the Santhals identified themselves by the term of Hara or Horo^[6].

Nevertheless there is still much work to be done on the Santhals of Jalpaiguri district. Considering this background I have decided to present a historical outline on this major tribe of Jalpaiguri district in the twentieth century. The main objective in writing this paper is to point out the lifestyle and culture of the Santhals in minute details.

Lifestyle and Culture

We realize two characteristic features of lifestyle and culture of the Santhals of Jalpaiguri district in the twentieth century, which were: [1] traditional feature and [2] changing feature. The traditional livelihood and the changing livelihood both were historically researchable. They had a rich cultural heritage and free way of living which were really distinct from the other communities. Simultaneously they had to change some of their long established beliefs and practices and accept modern culture that was also accountable.

Language and Script

The Santhals who migrated had their own language which was a part of the Austro-Asiatic family, distantly related to Vietnamese. The Santhal script was a relatively recent innovation. The Santhals did not have a written language until the twentieth century and used *Latin/Roman*, *Devnagri* and Bengali writing systems. A need for a distinct script to accommodate the Santhali language, combining features of both the Indic and Roman scripts was felt, that resulted in the invention of new script called *Olchiki* by Pandit Raghunath Murmu in 1925. The Santhali script or *Olchiki* was alphabetic, and did not share any other symbolic properties of the other Indic scripts such as *Devanagari*. Sir Griyerson GA. in his '*Linguistic Survey of India*' pointed out that 'Santhali Language' was actually *Kherwari* Language^[7] it is frankly admitted that the 'Santhali Language' was a colloquial language in West Bengal for a long time even in the twentieth century.

Gradually they realized the importance of the Bengali language that prevailed in educational and official institutions of West Bengal. They used Santhali Language at the time of their conversion. They also used Sadri Language with other tribal people such as the Oraon Munda etc. as Sadri was a Bridge Language among the tribal people of the district. Some of them also talked in Rajbansi Language with neighbouring Rajbansi people. The Santhals of the district did not use '*Olchiki* Script' for writing any epic or any story. Some educated Santhals wrote some poems, stories, dramas in Bengali. Naike Soren, Pramila Murmu and others wrote some stories and poems in Bengali^[8].

Homestead and Home

The Santhals of Jalpaiguri district built up their houses with mud, straw, tin and bamboo. The courtyard and the house of the tribals were always clean. They used to clean their house spraying cow-dung with water. Every house had a basil tree and sometimes symbols of cross made with mud. As they were lovers of flowers, they systematically planted many

flowers in their homestead^[9] some well-to-do Santhals built up their house like the established Rajbansis or Southern Bengalis of Jalpaiguri district. They set up buildings and arranged sanitation systems like modern rich people.

Dress and Ornaments

The Santhal women were fond of dress and ornaments. They liked to wear red bordered white sarees and numerous ornaments. The un-married girls wore frock. They also drew various symbols on their forehead and throat that was called ulki. The boys also took shika one kind symbol on their left hand. The men put on gamchha that was loincloth as common garments. The Santhal women liked to keep palas a kind of beautiful red flower having no fragrance on their hair-bun. But in the course of time and by the influence of modern culture a good number of Santhals of the district did not like to use their traditional dress. They gradually began to use pant and shirt like the advanced community of the district. The women also started to use saree, frock, churidar, T-shirt and pant like the educated Bengali girls of the area. The educated Santhali girls gradually began to dislike using their conventional flower garlands and eagerly started using some imitation of modern necklace^[10].

Different Gotras

The society was devoid of caste hierarchy and therefore, the Santhal society was a casteless society. By birth no person, family, clan, group was superior or inferior. The internal structure of the Santhals was singularly complete and elaborate. There were twelve exogamous sects or *gotras*, which were^[1] Hasdak, ^[2] Murmu, ^[3] Kisku, ^[4] Hembrom, ^[5] Marandi, ^[6] Soren, ^[7] Tudu, ^[8] Baske, ^[9] Besra, ^[10] Puria, ^[11] Chonre and ^[12] Bedea. The first seven were said to have descended from the seven sons of Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Burhi, the parents of the race. The five others were added afterwards. All these sects were patriarchal^[11]. All Santhals obeyed the rules and regulations of their own gotras or sects. Eleven *gotras* existed in the district and very few actually belonged to the Bedea gotra. They could put their titles in the names of their gotras also and every gotra had conventional occupation like soldier, administrator, cultivator, business, worshipper, blacksmith, madal musical drum playing. Every *gotra* had totem symbol such as areca-nut, duck, pigeon, seven stars, rice, grass etc. They respected these symbols. Every gotra had sub-gotra that was called khut. Few names of these sub-gotras were Binda Hansda, Gar Kisku, Sada Murmu, Gada Mandi, Sada Hembram, Saja Soren, *et al.* Every sub-*gotra* had totem symbol likewise main *gotra*. These were vermilion, white colour, horse, vulture, flower, crow, *hariya* (domestically prepared wine) etc^[12]. The Santhals also drew these symbols on their own bodies and cattle owned by them. These symbols indicated their individual *gotras* and also the gotras of owners of cattle.

Education

The Santhals obtained some traditional education that was non-formal education. But in Jalpaiguri district they had to face many obstacles for obtaining formal education. They had to face language problem, as most of the Santhal children could not understand Bengali, where Bengali was the medium of education in maximum number of schools. In some schools the Santhal boys or girls also had to study in Hindi or Nepali,

which were not their mother tongue. On the other hand the teachers too were either Bengali or Nepali or Hindi speaking and they neither understood the Santhali culture and sentiment nor could they communicate adequately with the Santhal children. The result was that the much needed communication cord between the teachers and the Santhal students was never established. This was a big problem in primary schools of Jalpaiguri district as there was no Santhal teacher. Although the state government had recognized '*Olchiki*' as script of the Santhal community, till the last date of twentieth century it had not been introduced as a medium of instruction in educational institutions of Jalpaiguri district. Adivasi Samaj Siksha O Sanskriti Sanstha was continuously demanding for the introduction of Olchiki in educational institutions. Adivasi Gaon Sudhrao Samity had complained that the Santhal students were not treated well in government aided schools. Hence in the Terai-Duars area of Jalpaiguri district the tribals clamoured for establishment of more Hindi Medium Schools. Demand had also been raised for the introduction of the Sadri language as medium of instruction in Terai-Duars^[13]. Anyway after the establishment of some mission schools and the welfare activities of some Christian missionaries, some welfare organization, state government and central governments, the Santhal became educated and accepted western culture.

Occupation

The Santhals were mostly involved in agriculture and as labourers in the tea gardens. They were also more or less habituated in making some essential goods for their daily life such as mat, bamboo or wooden code, fishing trap, broom, plow etc. Very few of them were appointed in service of state government or central government. It is also admitted that after the introduction of some mission schools under Christian missionaries and influence of western education, a good number of Santhals of the district occupied high ranks in government offices in the last decades of the twentieth century. Generally it may be said that most of the Santhals of the district were involved in agriculture as farmers and tea garden workers in the first half of the twentieth century and in the second half of the century they became fully fledged labourers in agricultural fields though hunting and fishing were their secondary occupations. The Santhals, those had come to the district through the initiative of tea garden managers for working in the tea gardens, lost their jobs in the postcolonial period of India due to closure and lock-out of tea gardens^[14]. Naturally in the whole twentieth century it could be seen that malnutrition, starvation, deaths, diseases, joblessness, child trafficking had become regular features in the Santhal Society of the district.

Traditional Administrative System

The system of governance of the society of this community was known as Majhi-Paragana that may be compared to what was often called Local Self Governance. This body was responsible for making decisions about a village's socio-economic condition. This social organization had very interesting characteristics that contained flexibility in rigidity. There were three kinds of local justice system in the Santhal society of Jalpaiguri district. These were Ato, Behara and Sendra, which could make decision and announce ordinance against accused persons who committed offence. The Santhals

were bound to obey this ordinance. Three headmen i.e. Majhi controlled the Ato Body; Parganait controlled the Behara Body while Diharee controlled the Sendra Body. These headmen were also assisted by some assistance. Majhi was assisted as well as guided by the villagers; Parganait was by his assistant named Khushiya while Diharee was guided by all dignitary personalities and common people of the Santhal village. The accused person could appeal for right justice to Parganait if he or she was not satisfied by the justice of Majhi. If the accused person was disappointed in the judgment of Parganait, he or she could appeal to Diharee for re-judgment in the case. '*Sikar boithak*' or La-Bir-Baisi was their supreme court. It was very active till twentieth century at Samuktala of Jalpaiguri district. This annually boithak (meeting) was usually held in the time of Yearly Hunting Ceremony of their society. The Majhi had to perform many social responsibilities. The villagers took his opinion regarding observance of social ceremonies associated with birth, death, marriage, festivals etc. The villagers had to attend the courtyard of the Majhi after one day of the settlement of new village, house building, settlement of border, selection of altar of gods and goddesses etc. Then the Majhi explained various social rituals and regulation before the gathered villagers. After the death of the Majhi Parganait. Could carry out the role of Majhi if he had no successor like brother or son. Each Santhal village had a Jagmanjhi whose most important duty was to look after the morals of the boys and girls. He had the right for giving any punishment to those boys or girls, who had done any illegal or antisocial activities in their village. The boys or girls could dance in the festivals after taking permission of the Jag Majhi. Any dancing programme in any festivals could not be started without the permission of Jag Majhi. There was also a Paramanik whose function was to attend the farming arrangements of the villagers. There was also a village priest called Neua or Nayaki. He only worshipped the god and goddesses in festivals. The assistant of Nayaki was called Kudam Nayaki. He was also the worshipper of nature. He worshipped and propitiated the evil gods, as the Santhals believed that the evil gods caused harms to the villagers. At the time of worshipping the priest sacrificed few drops of his own blood in the altar of the evil gods for saving the villagers. At the time of hunting the Santhals worshipped evil gods by Kudam Nayaki (assistant priest) as they had to face many obstacles at the time of hunting. One of the ranks of the administrative body or the village organization was Godet. The person who possessed the rank named Godet was called Marang Majhi. He acted his role as an informer among the villagers, as he had to inform them about any conference or meeting of the Majhi. Actually he was the messenger of Majhi. Sometime he had to take the responsibility of arranging and conducting social festivals or programmes^[15].

The traditional administrative situation of the Santhals once again received a jolt when Christian missionaries entered the Santhal villages. Apart from their religious aim the missionaries started taking part in village affairs by active assistance in securing justice for the converts among the tribals, organizing village committee etc. In villages where the Christians were in a sizable majority the entire village organization would come under their fold^[16].

In the post-independent period the inauguration of statutory panchayats and later the Panchayati Raj also gave a set-back

to the traditional panchayat of the Santhals. The headman was then elected and any villager could seek election. The introduction of community development programmes also changed the situation to a great extent. Persons close to the officials found ample opportunities to become local leaders. Educated Santhals started taking interest in village politics. Elections on all India level also affected them and the result was the growth of factions and parties in the villages and formation of regional political parties ^[17].

Emergence of Competing-Political Leaders

New political leaders had come forward to lead the villagers in the changed demographic set-up. The ideas of general election, panchayat election, statutory panchayat and community development programmes, etc. were entirely new to this community. A few educated Santhals tried to utilize every opportunity to popularize themselves to get the leadership and thus competing politicians emerged among the villagers posing a threat to the traditional village-headmen. Many Santhal leaders of Saontalpur under Jalpaiguri district possessed a statutory *panchayat* that was government sponsored and based on elections in the second half of the twentieth century. Santhals with good economic status based on land ownership and education, traditional knowledge with contacts with courts and the world outside were the kind of men who assumed the new leadership ^[18].

Marriage System

The Santhals used the term *Bapla* to mean marriage. In Santhal society, marriage was one of the sacred events of life and it added to considerable respect in society. However there were some traditions and customs needed to be strictly followed in doing so. It was strictly forbidden for any Santhal to marry within his or her own sect (own community). He could marry into any other sects or sub-sects to which his or her mother belonged. There were some sects that never intermarried as a consequence of some ancient feuds between them. For example, a Hansdak male or a female never married a Murmu female or male respectively. Similarly, a Tudu male never married a Besra female and vice versa. There was no restriction in the age of marriage. The bride might be younger, older or of equal age with bridegroom. There were two types of marriage mostly practiced by the Santhals that were the marriage arranged by Raibar (match maker) and the couple married themselves in their own choice ^[19]. Sanga Bapla, Kudam Bapla, Kiring Jawaee, Ghardi Jawaee, Tunki Dipil Bapla, Itut Bapla, Nirbolok, *et al.* were other forms of marriages among the Santhals of Jalpaiguri district.

A brief description is given about some forms of their marriages. In 'Regular marriage', negotiation was initiated by father of a young man, who usually employed a professional match maker to look for a suitable girl. The Ghardi Jawaee was resorted to when a girl was ugly and there was no prospect of her being married in the ordinary way. The Itut Bapla was adopted by a pushing young man who was not quite sure whether the girl would accept him, and adopted some ways of compelling her to marry him. The man smeared his fingers with vermilion or common earth and put it on her forehead whenever he got such an opportunity in a market place or a similar place and claimed her as his wife. The Nirbolok Bapla may be described as the female variety of Itut. A girl who could not get the man she wanted in the regular way took a pot

of handia and entered the boy's house and insisted on staying there. Etiquette prohibited that she should be expelled by male force. The man's mother who desired to have a say in the selection of her daughter-in-law might use any sort of personal violence. If she endured the ordeal, she was held to have won her husband. The Sanga Bapla was used for the marriage of widows and divorced women. The Kiring Jawaee was resorted to in the comparatively rare case when a girl had a liaison with and become pregnant, by a man of her clan whom she could not marry. In order to avoid scandal someone was procured to accept the post of husband ^[20]. Kudam Bapla was also one kind of marriage among the Santhal society of Jalpaiguri district. If a girl became pregnant, the young man by whom she became so was bound to marry her. Generally young man informed the Jag Majhi (village headman) of his offence and the girl confessed it to the wife of Jog Majhi. Then they informed the parents of bride and bridegroom. As usual, bridegroom paid bride price and bull. Bridegroom at the time of applying vermilion stood facing west and bride facing east. Poor men performed Tukini Dilip Bapla. As they did not have sufficient money to bear the expenses of the regular marriage Raibar Bapla, they chose this type of marriage. The bride was brought to the house of the bridegroom with a small basket on her head; a few friends and relatives accompanied her. The bridegroom in the presence of these persons applied vermilion on her head and the couple then lived as husband and wife ^[21].

Marriage of Christian Santhals

The converted Santhals of the district, who embraced Christianity, also had different rituals of marriage. Here father of the bridegroom informed a match maker (middle man) to search for a suitable girl for his son when he attained marriageable age. In the case of an earlier choice and settlement of marriage from both sides i.e. the families of bride and bridegroom, a match maker was not appointed. Anyway after knowing the willingness of both sides the match maker called the bride and bridegroom in a haat small village market, which was regularly arranged one or two days in a week and there they stood face to face according to the direction of the match maker. During this time the parents as well as one or two relatives of bride and bridegroom could also attend. If both sides agreed, the bridegroom offered ten or twenty rupees in the hands of the bride. After the baahore enpel that was an open meeting in the haat the date of marriage was fixed. Three weeks before of the date of marriage the bride and bridegroom attended the church with their parents and relatives as well as village headmen of both families. Then the Reverend of the church registered the names of the bride and bridegroom in the register book of the church. A prayer meeting was arranged for a few minutes. After the prayer, the Reverend of the church handed over two cards mentioning the names and addresses of the bride and the bridegroom and date of marriage to the parents of bride and bridegroom. This card was called banos card and the ceremony of writing names of bride and bridegroom was called banos dhukano ^[22].

Divorce

Divorce was a common sequel to the Santhal marriage and was granted at the wish of either husband or wife. The following were the grounds on which the Santhal men and

women demanded divorce. The husband could demand the divorce if his wife was proved to be a witch, or was sexually immoral or if she did not obey him or always lived in her father's house. The wife could claim divorce, if husband could not supply sufficient foods, clothing, ornaments etc. Sterility was another ground for divorce. In case husband wanted the divorce, he could not claim the bride price and had to pay certain amount of money as fine. If wife demanded divorce then her father had to refund the bride price. The divorce was effective in the presence of assembled villagers in the way that the husband was made to stand facing the sun on leg. He had a cloth round his neck and the ends of the cloth were held in the hand along with three Sal leaves. Then taking the name of Sin-Bonga he tore the Sal leaves in the token separation and upset a brass pot full of water. Wife repeated that too. There was belief that if the Sal leaves were not fully torn or the lotta brass pot was not wholly emptied then the couple must again come together ^[23].

Birth and Naming Ceremony

When the Santhal woman got pregnant, she and her husband observed certain taboos. The husband during his wife's pregnancy never killed any animal nor participated in any funeral ceremony and did not come in contact with any dead body. The pregnant woman during the evening very rarely came out of the house. She did not weep at the death of any of her relatives. On the day of lunar eclipse, she would not come out of her room. She would not sit in the courtyard with her hair or cloth hanging downwards. A sound was immediately created by throwing an object on the hut that housed the pregnant woman when she gave birth to a child. This ritual was called sarim dal. Beating something. It was believed by the Santhals that the child would be brave, if it loudly cried at the time of birth. After birth of a child, the house was considered polluted. So the Santhals performed the janam chatiar ceremony. Until that was done, no other activities could be undertaken like hunting etc. The usual day for the ceremony was fifth day for male and third day for female child. After ceremony, the men and women and children of the village who had assembled at the house of each took a full cup of rice with water and the leaves of neem. On the fifth day, the child was given a name. Should it happen to be a son the name of grandfather was given to him. Should it be second son, he took the name of maternal grandfather and thus third from paternal grandfather's brother and fourth from maternal grandfather's brother and so on. The same procedure was followed for girls the female relations being in the same order ^[24].

Religion

The Santhals believed in supernatural beings and ancestral spirits. The Santhali rituals consisted mainly of sacrificial offerings and invocations to the spirits or bongas. It is believed by some scholars that Bonga means the same as Bhaga or Bhagawan God ^[25]. However those who were Semi-Hindu had a great god 'Thakur' whom the Santhals had long ceased to worship for the reason that it did neither good nor ill to mankind. He was identified by some with the Sun whom Santhals regarded as god and worshipped every fifth or tenth years with sacrifices of goats. But there was a doubt over the existence of this god. Anyway, the popular gods of the Santhals were *Marang Buru*, *Moreko*, *Jair Era*, *Gosain Era*,

Pargana, *Manjhi*. All these gods had their allotted place in the sacred Jahirthan grove and were worshipped. Marang Baru alone was also worshipped privately in the public house. Each family had two special gods of its own; those were the Orak bonga or household god and the Abge bonga or sacred god ^[26].

Ancestor Worship

The activities of ancestors were quite evident for the Santhals and ancestor worship found an important place in their religious beliefs. They recognized that man's power was restricted and that he had access to limited areas, but, through ancestor worship, he acquired powers of a far-reaching and compulsive kind. They believed in the existence of ancestors and their interest and intervention in the worldly affairs. They were at work in their real life. The Santhals firmly believed in the idea that spirit of the dead ancestors had power to decide their destiny; they were very cautious in performing the rites and observed all the ceremonies carefully. The newly dead person was believed to have joined the earlier dead ancestors. The spirit of ancestors were called and worshipped, (i) annually, (ii) occasionally or (iii) when one was economically able to perform it. The Santhals as well as other tribals of the district believed that unless the spirit of the newly dead ancestor was worshipped it continued to exist, and appeared in dreams. It always harassed its relatives to expedite the preparation for worship, mortuary sacrifice and feast ^[27].

Funeral Ceremony

The Santhals cremated the dead body. Those who had converted to Christianity buried their dead. The dead body of a pregnant woman and children were not cremated. They carried out the dead body to cremation ghat by throwing parched rice and seeds of cotton. They also slew a chicken before setting fire to the funeral pyre. After five days of cremating the dead, a programme was arranged called telnahan. In this programme they sacrificed a hen and haria that was domestically prepared wine to the Maran Baru. Main God and the dead's ancestral spirits. E.T. Dalton in his Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal explained. It is to be observed that the Santals in disposing of their dead differ from the Mundas, the former approximates to the Brahmanical customs. It is in fact a rough outline of the Brahman ritual and only wants filling it ^[28].

Chacho Chatiar

One of the important ceremonies of the Santhals of Jalpaiguri district was Chacho Chatiar that enabled a person to take his place in their society and participate in its rights, rules and ceremonies. Without this no Santhal could be married or cremated ^[29].

Bitlaha

The term of bitlaha meant outcasting a Santhal from his society. This outcaste took place by the order of assembly of villagers. It was resorted to when a Santhal woman indulged in any physical relationships with either diku (non-Santhal) or with a person of her own *gotra*, though it is noteworthy that relatively free sex was prevalent among Santhal society. If the offence was proved, then the assembly gave the order of outcast and they proceeded to carry out the day after annual hunting. A man in the market who carried a branch of Sal tree with leaves announced the date of bitlaha. The person in the market on seeing him understood the matter and counted the

leaves that indicated the number of days.

The day of bitlaha all female members kept themselves away from village. In the early morning bachelors and other male members of the neighbouring villages with flutes and drums, bows and arrows met at the end of village-street where the culprit lived. Drumming was kept terribly high so that it could be heard from a long distance. When the crowd reached the house of the offender they tied a short charred piece of firewood, worn out broom and some used leaves which were placed on the pole of bamboo and fixed at the entrance of the courtyard. Bachelors in a state of undress desecrated the rooms. The person who became outcaste was not allowed to take food with others^[30].

Jam Jati

A Santhal, who had been outcasted, could be taken in the society by performing Jam Jati ceremony. The outcasted man and woman went to the village street with twisted cloth round their necks and water in a lota a pot of brass before the headman and his assistant. Then the offenders acknowledged the offence and agreed to pay a fine for it. After taking water from lota they washed the mouth of the headmen and passed it to all leading man who would repeat the same. After this they entered the village and the courtyard of the outcast who personally washed the feet of the leader of the people^[31].

Main Festivals

The Santhals of the district observed numerous festivals in different seasons. The chief festivals of the Santhals were the Sohrai festival, celebrated in Poush November-December, after the chief rice crop of the year had been harvested. Sacrificial fowls of the public were offered by the priest in the sacred grove; pigs, goats and fowls were sacrificed by private families and a general saturnalia of drunkenness and sexual intercourse prevailed. Next in importance was the *Baha Puja*, kept in Phalgun February-March when the Sal trees started to flower. Then family sacrifices were held, everyone entertained their friends, dance and music went on day and night. Other festivals worth mentioning were Erok-sim, the sowing festival in Ashar May-June, hariar-sim the feast of the sprouting of the rice in Bhadra September-October; Irigundli nanai the offering of the first fruits of the millets iri and gundli also in Bhaha; Janthar puja in Aghran October-November, the first fruits of the winter rice crop; *Sankrant puja* on the last day of Poush when bread and chira (beaten rice) and molasses were offered to the dead ancestors; Magh-sim in the month of Magh December-January when the jungle grass was cut^[32].

Art and Culture

Santhali culture has attracted many scholars and anthropologists. This culture was depicted in the paintings and art work in the walls of their houses. The Santhal people loved music and dance. Like other ethnic groups, their culture had been influenced by mainstream Indian culture and by Western culture, but traditional music and dance still remain. Santhali music differed from Hindusthani classical music in significant ways. The Santhals traditionally accompanied many of their dances with two drums i.e. the tamak and the tumda. The tiriao flute was considered the most important traditional instrument of the Santhals and is still considered important by most. Santhal dance and music traditionally revolved around religious celebrations of the Santhals. The names of many

Santhali tunes were derived from the traditional ritual with which they were once associated. *Sohrai* tunes, for example, were those sung at the Sohrai festival^[33].

Medicinal Practices

The Santhals did not avail modern medical practices. They had strong belief in Ojhas Jugulars and Witches. The Ojhas had two separate roles to play: ^[i] that of spiritual leader and ^[ii] that of medicine man or village doctor. The remedies used by an Ojha were rudimentary. He gave medicine made out of herbs, roots, barks, shrubs, plants or fruits. The Santhals believed in three sources of diseases i.e. natural source, supernatural source and human source. They also divided the diseases into two categories, physical illness and mental illness. All diseases, they believed were mental but in course of time it affected a person physically. To diagnose a disease the Ojha took two Sal leaves, rubbed oil on it, sprinkled vermilion and chanted incantations. After a while he looked into the leaves and read. It was believed that the Ojha could see the cause and cure of the disease in the leaves. Treatment of diseases was done in two ways through divination and magic and through medicines. Theories of diseases and clinical diagnosis were not known to the Santhals. They took recourse to herbal medicines to terminate pregnancy as they had no faith in the treatment of doctors. Naturally they refused modern family planning methods. In the course of time and influence of western education a good number of well to do Santhals began to avail modern treatment from hospital or health centre^[34].

Witch System

One of the long established customs of the Santhal society was related to the existence of dainy witch which could harm others. The Santhals believed that some supernatural spirits which entered the body of human beings, caused diseases and even deaths to people. The Santhals believed that this ghost entered particularly the body of widows or old age women as well as physically disabled persons. Then they called the persons dainy witch. The Santhals feared the persons who had been possessed by the ghost and the possessed person also feared to think that she was under the control of a disembodied spirit. This matter struck her every time and every moment. The witch was declared outcaste and was told to leave her village also. Sometimes she was murdered by other people of the village. They killed the witch for the good of the villagers. Sometimes a few heartless and selfish persons killed the witch for their self-interest. After killing the woman possessed by ghost, the Santhal society did not repent for this act. A good number of innocent persons lost their lives in witch-hunting. The Santhals thought that the witch caused harm to the newly born child and the mother who had just given birth to a child. When a child passed away, the Santhals began to think that the witch caused its death by chanting her incantations. They thought that the witch called up the ghost named penga to harm others. Grandfathers and grandmothers as well as aged persons narrated the dangers posed by the witch to the younger generation to create awareness regarding the harmful existence of the witch. As a result the Santhals from childhood became aware of the existence of witch. A witch was murdered with axe, chopper, and spear in the presence of others. Bow and arrow was not used for killing the witch. The Santhals and other tribals thought that they could bring bliss to

their society and even their country by killing the witch. They buried the witch after killing her. The jugular village doctor declared a person dainy who was generally above fifty years old. Then everybody believed that this widow or woman or physically disabled person must be a witch. Thus the person possessed by disembodied spirit lost her life at the hand of other tribals. It was a stigma of the undeveloped Santhal society. The educated Santhals do not care for the matter. They always try to avoid this long established custom. The government took some measures for suppressing this system, but the result was not satisfactory ^[35]. A table of recent incidents of witch-hunts in Jalpaiguri district is given below ^[36],

Years	Name of place	Name of place	Name of place	Total number incidents
1997-2005	Jalpaiguri Sadar	Malbazar	Alipurduar	59
	11	15	33	

Conclusion

The Santhals of the district had their rich and distinct lifestyle & cultural traditions composed of distinct name, language, religion, folk norms of performing arts, musical instruments, folk technology of making crafts and liquor, traditional Panchayats, customary laws, folk medicine, dress, food habit, social institutions and organizations, norms, beliefs, values and so on. While living in multi-cultural set-ups the minority Santhal communities often came under the influence of neighbouring communities with more powerful culture and the mediated cultures of national and international origins. Changing lifestyle, demographic structure, penetration of new exogenous forces, instruction of consumer culture have influenced the cultural fabric of the Santhals; they lost much of their language, traditional religion and faith, traditional art and technology, and much of their distinctive modes of life. The power equations with dominant communities such as Southern Bengalis or well to do Rajbansis imbalanced in reproduction and dissemination of cultural forms contributed to the loss of elements of Santhali culture. The three most significant areas where the culture loss was most serious were language, religion, art and crafts. Nobody would advocate a rigid defense of traditional culture in all situations because that would be an anti-development stand and would be interpreted as a reactionary position. However, cultural loss was a problem if it was induced and against the choice of the Santhal folk. Much of the traditional arts and crafts had been lost as the livelihood of the community had changed over time. There was no governmental recognition of their traditional festivals of Karam Puja and Sarhul festival. The semi –Hindu religious faiths had been replaced by Christianity. A good number of Santhals of the district were Christians and Christianity of various denominations was spreading fast among them. The Santhal children did not have the choice to study in their mother tongue; although they spoke in their mother tongue within the community. Even they had to learn the language of their dominant neighbours in order to be able to communicate with them. Faced with deprivation in every sphere and due to their economic backwardness the Santhals of the district gradually alienated themselves from the mainstream political parties and joined the Akhil Bharatiya Adibasi Bikash Parishad which was demanding for the introduction of sixth schedule for Terai-Duars area a big portion of Jalpaiguri

district ^[37].

A good number of Santhals gradually began to avoid their long established rituals after conversion Christianity. The converted Santhals distanced themselves from traditional rituals. At the time of field survey at Saontalpur of Jalpaiguri district the present author noticed that those Santhals who converted to Christianity were much advanced. Socio-economically they were far ahead than the other Santhals. As the Christian missionaries tried to control the religious life of the Santhals who embraced Christianity, they lost some of their traditional religious rituals. But the main characteristic feature of all Santhals of Jalpaiguri district did not disappear. Though the Hindu Santhals were socio-economically backward, yet they did not leave their conventional beliefs and practices. Side by side their children studied in schools or colleges and took modern education as well as accepted western culture ^[38]. In this situation we should avoid imposing anything on them and try to encourage in every sphere their way of living. If it is possible for them to make an assessment of their way of living, then only will they be able to do a realistic appraisal of their own lifestyle and culture.

References

1. Sunder D.H.E. Edited by: Roy D.C., Final Survey and Settlement of the Western Duars in the District of Jalpaiguri, N.L. Publishers, Shib Mandir, Siliguri, West Bengal, 1889-95, p.213.
2. Ghosh BC. Edited by: Soumendra Prasad Saha, Ananda Gopal Ghosh, The Development of Tea Industry in the District of Jalpaiguri Publishers NL, Sibmandir, Siliguri, West Bengal 1869-1968, 2013, p.76.
3. Kirat Bhumi. Jalpaiguri Jela Sangkalan in Bengali, Part-II, Registration No-5324/88, Sanskritipara, Jalpaiguri, p. 639.
4. Ibid, p. 640.
5. Dasgupta Ranajit. Economy, Society and Politics in Bengal: Jalpaiguri 1869-1947, Oxford University Press, 1992, p.25.
6. Ibid, 640-41.
7. Roy Dilip, Pramod Nath ed. Uttarbanga Darpan in Bengali, Publishers NI, Kolkata 2010; 2:187.
8. Ibid, p.187.
9. Kirat Bhumi, op.cit. p. 645.
10. Deb Ranajit. Uttarbanger Upojatir Itibritto in Bengali, Mainstream Publication, Kolkata 2014, 128-29.
11. Bhadra RK. Social Dimension of Health of Tea Plantation Workers in India, Publishers NL. Dibrugarh 1997, p.73-74.
12. Deb Ranajit. op.cit, 125-128.
13. Sarkar, Shyamal Chandra (Edited). Changing Society of Twentieth Century Bengal, Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, 2014, 176-77.
14. Ibid, p. 179.
15. Deb Ranajit. op.cit, 130-131.
16. Vidyarthi LP, Binay Kumar Rai. The tribal culture of India, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1976, Reprinted, 1985, p.255.
17. Ibid. p. 225.
18. Ibid. 225-226.
19. Karmakar Madhusudan, A geographical outline of North Bengal, Publishers NL, Sibmandir, Siliguri, West Bengal, 2011, 161-62.

20. Bhadra RK, op.cit, 74-75.
21. Karmakar Madhusudan. op.cit. 162-63.
22. Biswas Ratan Edited. Uttarbanger Jati-O-Upojati in Bengali, Punascha, and Kolkata, 2001, p.188.
23. Karmakar Madhusudan. op.cit. p.164.
24. Ibid.164-65.
25. Karmakar Madhusudan. op.cit. 160.
26. Bhadra RK. op.cit. p.75.
27. Vidyarthi LP, Binay Kumar Rai. op.cit. 245-246.
28. Kirat Bhumi. op.cit. 643-644.
29. Karmakar Madhusudan. op.cit. p.165.
30. Ibid. 163-164.
31. Ibid. 164.
32. Bhadra RK. op.cit. p.75.
33. Karmakar Madhusudan. op.cit. p.160.
34. Bhadra RK. op.cit. 16-17.
35. Deb Ranajit. op.cit. 153-155.
36. Chakravarty Anurudha, Soma Choudhuri. Strategic framing work(s): How microcredit loans facilitate anti-witch-hunt movements, p.180. <https://vaw.msu.edu/wp-content/.../chaudhuri-2012-micro-credit.pdf>.
37. Sarkar Shyamal Chandra Edited. op.cit. 181-182.
38. Interview with Biswanath Marandi, aged-55, an educated Santhal of Samuktala under Jalpaiguri district, dated-15th December, 2015.