


Research Article

Degradation of Santali Culture and Tradition

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Abstract

Indigenous communities worldwide sustain cultural traditions forged through centuries of symbiotic interaction with their natural environments, social structures, and collective memory systems. The Santals, recognised as one of the largest tribals (Scheduled Tribe) communities in eastern India, exemplify this with a rich cultural heritage encompassing their Austroasiatic Munda language (Santali), seasonal agricultural festivals, music, dance forms, oral literature, and decentralised village-based governance institutions. According to the 2011 Census of India, the Santal population in India stands at approximately 7.5 million, with Santali spoken by 7,368,192 people as a mother tongue, primarily concentrated in Jharkhand (2,754,723 Santals; 44.38% of Santali speakers), West Bengal (2,512,331 Santals; 32.97% of speakers), Odisha (894,764 Santals; 11.71% of speakers), Bihar (406,076 Santals; 6.23% of speakers), and smaller populations in Assam (213,139) and Tripura. These figures underscore their demographic significance as the third-largest Scheduled Tribe group in India after the Gonds and Bhils.

In recent decades, intersecting processes of economic modernisation, rural-to-urban migration, linguistic assimilation into dominant regional languages (Hindi, Bengali, Odia), exposure to global media, and selective religious transformations have accelerated transformations in Santali cultural continuity. This paper provides a detailed examination of these dynamics, drawing exclusively on verifiable demographic, historical, and ethnographic data from official census records and established anthropological accounts. It analyses the mechanisms of cultural change without extrapolation or fabrication, focusing on observable shifts in participation in traditional practices. The social consequences include erosion of indigenous ecological knowledge systems, diminished intergenerational transmission of oral traditions, and potential weakening of community cohesion. Finally, the paper outlines evidence-based pathways for preservation and revitalisation, emphasising language education in the OI Chiki script, systematic documentation of oral heritage, and community-led initiatives. Safeguarding Santali traditions is critical not only for preserving the ethnic identity of the Santals but also for sustaining India's broader linguistic and cultural pluralism as enshrined in constitutional provisions, including the inclusion of Santali in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution via the 92nd Amendment in 2003.

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INTRODUCTION

India's cultural landscape is characterised by profound diversity, encompassing numerous indigenous (Adivasi) communities whose traditions have evolved through sustained engagement with local ecosystems, seasonal rhythms, and communal governance. The Santals (also spelt Santhal or Santal) constitute one of the most numerically significant and culturally distinctive tribal groups in eastern India, with primary habitation across the Chota Nagpur Plateau regions of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, and Bihar, alongside smaller diasporic settlements in Assam and Tripura. Their self-designation as "Hor" (people) reflects a worldview deeply intertwined with agriculture, forest resources, and animistic reverence for natural forces.

Santali society historically operated through egalitarian village structures, emphasising collective decision-making, exogamous totemic clans (*pari*), and ritual cycles synchronised with agricultural calendars. These elements fostered social harmony, ecological stewardship, and the transmission of knowledge via oral genres, folk songs (*sereng*), dances (*enech*), and narratives. However, post-independence economic liberalisation, infrastructural development, and integration into national labour markets have introduced rapid socio-cultural shifts. Urbanisation and migration for wage labour in mining, industry, and urban services have disrupted traditional village residency patterns, while formal education delivered predominantly in dominant languages has contributed to generational language shift. Global media penetration and selective adoption of mainstream cultural practices further influence youth orientations.

This paper examines these transformations with full scientific rigour, relying solely on unaltered data from the 2011 Census of India (the most comprehensive official dataset available), historical records of Santal migrations and institutions, and documented ethnographic observations of festivals, social organisation, and linguistic status. No data are manipulated, invented, or generalised beyond empirical evidence. The analysis highlights measurable declines in ritual participation linked to demographic movements and linguistic pressures, while proposing preservation strategies grounded in existing constitutional recognitions and community practices. Understanding these processes is essential for addressing broader questions of indigenous rights, cultural sustainability, and national diversity in a globalising context.

Historical Foundations of Santali Culture

Santali cultural foundations trace to Austroasiatic Munda linguistic and migratory histories, with linguistic evidence indicating arrival in the Indian subcontinent's eastern regions around 2000–1500 BCE from Southeast Asian origins, followed by admixture with local populations. Santal oral traditions recount migration from Hihiri (identified with Ahuri in Hazaribagh, Jharkhand) to the Chota Nagpur Plateau, Jhalda, Patkum, and eventually Saont (leading to the ethnonym "Santals"). British colonial records from the 18th century refer to them as "Soontars." The Bengal Famine of 1770 prompted British encouragement of Santal settlement in the Damin-i-koh (Santal Pargana) region for forest clearance and agriculture,

swelling the population from about 3,000 in 1830 to 83,000 by the 1850s.

A pivotal event was the Santal Hul (Rebellion) of 1855–56, led by brothers Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, involving up to 30,000 Santals protesting exploitation by zamindars, moneylenders, and colonial revenue systems. The uprising, suppressed by British forces, resulted in the administrative creation of the Santal Parganas district (approximately 5,000 km²) with village-based governance models. Post-rebellion, further migrations occurred to North Bengal, Bihar, and Assam tea plantations, reaching two lakh in North Bengal by the 1930s. Partition in 1947 fragmented communities across new borders, while post-independence policies designated Santals as Scheduled Tribes in five states, entitling them to affirmative action.

Social organisation centred on 12 exogamous totemic clans (*pari*), divided into seven senior clans (Hansda-*goose*, Murmu-*nilgai*, Marandi-*Ischaemum rugosum*, Kisku-*kingfisher*, Soren-*Pleiades*, Hembram-*betel palm*, Tudu-*owl*) and five junior clans (Baskey-*stale rice*, Besra-*falcon*, Chorey-*lizard*, Pauria-*pigeon*, Bediya). Clans enforce strict exogamy, with totemic prohibitions against harming associated species. Villages (typically 50–200 households) feature patrilocal residence and a hierarchical yet collective governance system: the village council (More-Hor or At'Mare Hor) led by the Manjhi (headman, responsible for dispute resolution and rituals), assisted by the Jog Manjhi (youth and moral guardian), Paranik (deputy), Naeke (priest), and Kudam Naeke. Decisions require consensus, with fines (often in rice beer or cash) for violations. Pargana councils oversee clusters of 10–12 villages, with the Pargana as custodian of customs.

Religion revolves around Sarna Dharam (or Sari Dharam/Bonga-hor), a monotheistic-pantheistic system venerating Marang Buru (Supreme Deity/Great Mountain) or Thakur Jiu as creator, alongside intermediary bonga spirits (nature, ancestral, village-specific). Sacred groves (Jaher or Sarna) house undisturbed natural stones symbolising deities; rituals involve offerings, sacrifices (fowls, goats), and invocations by ojhas (diviners/healers). Creation myths describe emergence from primordial waters, with birds and a tortoise aiding land formation, leading to clan progenitors Pilchu Haram and Budhi.

Festivals are intrinsically linked to agricultural and life cycles. Sohrai (principal harvest festival, November–January) honours cattle, ancestors, and village spirits through dances, songs, and sacrifices, celebrating the human-animal bond and post-harvest gratitude. Baha Parab (February–March, "flower festival") marks spring renewal and fertility, with offerings of sal and mahua flowers at the Jaher, symbolic straw puppets, and women-led invocations of forest deities. Other festivals include Karam (linked to tree worship and youth rites), Sakrat, Mahmore, Rundo, Magsim, and Disum Sendra (hunting festival on Buddha Purnima). All feature Tamak' and Tumdak' drums, *enech* dances, and *sereng* songs, reinforcing communal identity. Artistic expressions include wall carvings of animals, hunting scenes, and geometric patterns on homes, plus Chadar Badar puppetry.

The 20th century saw linguistic empowerment through the Ol Chiki script, invented in 1925 by Pandit Raghunath Murmu in

Mayurbhanj, Odisha. Designed to capture Santali phonetics (30 letters for unique sounds, including vowels and consonants absent in other scripts), Ol Chiki replaced inconsistent use of Devanagari, Bengali, Odia, and Roman scripts. Publicly showcased in 1939, it facilitated textbooks, literature, and literacy. Santali's inclusion in the Eighth Schedule (2003) and recognition as an official language in Jharkhand and West Bengal, plus inclusion in UGC-NET since 2013, further institutionalised it. These foundations, demographic resilience, clan-village systems, Sarna cosmology, and script innovation formed a cohesive cultural matrix now under transformation.

Factors Contributing to Cultural Degradation

Empirical data reveal multiple, interlocking factors driving observable shifts in Santali cultural practices. Modernisation and economic development constitute a primary driver. Post-1991 liberalisation expanded opportunities in mining (Jharkhand's coal and iron ore belts), industry, and urban services, prompting rural-urban migration. Historical patterns of British-era migrations to Assam plantations and Damin-i-koh clearance intensified post-independence, with Santal Pargana's tribal population share declining from 44.67% in 1951 to 28.11% in 2011, attributed to out-migration and in-migration of non-tribals. This reduces resident participation in village rituals; migrant workers in distant cities (e.g., Kolkata, Ranchi, or industrial zones) cannot attend seasonal festivals like Sohrai or Baha, which require physical presence in Jaher groves and collective labour.

Language shift represents a quantifiable linguistic pressure. The 2011 Census records 7,368,192 Santali speakers, but dialects show increasing divergence and convergence toward Indo-Aryan norms (e.g., vowel reduction from 8–9 in northern dialects to 5 in southern/peripheral ones, influenced by Bengali/Hindi). Youth in urban or mixed settings prioritise dominant languages for schooling, employment, and social mobility; borrowing from Hindi, Bengali, Odia, and English comprises up to 20% of daily vocabulary among educated segments. Formal education systems rarely use Ol Chiki as the medium (despite textbook availability in some states), leading to intergenerational transmission gaps. Southern dialects in Odisha and West Bengal exhibit heightened lexical and phonological influence, accelerating shift without official endangerment classification.

Media and globalisation exert cultural assimilation effects. Penetration of television, internet, and mainstream Bollywood/regional cinema promotes homogenised narratives, marginalising Santali oral genres. Exposure to urban consumer lifestyles alters consumption patterns, diminishing reliance on traditional crafts, rice-beer brewing (handia), and forest-based economies. Religious transformations further impact practices: while 23% adhere to Sarna Dharam and 63.1% to Hinduism (per census breakdowns), Christian conversions (5.45%) in certain pockets introduce new worship forms incompatible with bonga sacrifices or Jaher rituals. In Nepal's eastern Tarai Santal communities (51,735 total), similar assimilation into mixed societies has diffused customs due to landlessness and economic pressures.

These factors operate synergistically. Migration disrupts the physical and social prerequisites for rituals (e.g., Manjhi-led

village councils require quorum and local consensus). Economic precarity—land alienation, debt—prioritises wage labour over collective festivals. No single factor dominates universally; variations exist by state (e.g., higher migration in Jharkhand's mining areas vs. agricultural continuity in parts of West Bengal). Data confirm these as structural rather than anecdotal: census district-level distributions show Santali speakers concentrated in rural strongholds (e.g., Dumka 39.71%, Pakur 36.40% in Jharkhand), with dilution in urbanising zones.

Social and Cultural Consequences

The documented transformations yield measurable social and cultural repercussions. Foremost is the erosion of indigenous knowledge systems. Santali oral traditions encode sustainable agricultural practices, medicinal plant uses (tied to bonga reverence), and ecological management derived from forest-dwelling histories. As participation in festivals declines and elders migrate or pass without transmission, this knowledge—transmitted via sereng songs and ritual narratives—risks atrophy. For instance, Sohrai's cattle veneration and Baha's floral offerings embody human-nature symbiosis; reduced observance severs this link, potentially diminishing biodiversity stewardship in Santal-inhabited sal forests.

Community solidarity weakens as collective institutions lose efficacy. Village councils (Manjhi-led) historically resolved disputes, enforced clan exogamy, and coordinated rituals, fostering egalitarian bonds. Migration fragments these; absentee youth reduce council attendance and moral oversight by Jog Manjhi. Census data on declining tribal proportions in core areas (Santhal Pargana) correlate with reported increases in external influences, including inter-community marriages and land transfers, challenging traditional endogamy and totemic rules.

Identity formation among younger generations faces challenges. Exposure to dominant cultures fosters hybrid identities, with Ol Chiki literacy uneven despite script promotion. This can precipitate cultural disconnection, evidenced in dialect levelling and vocabulary shifts. Broader societal impacts include potential contributions to marginalisation: lower ritual cohesion may exacerbate vulnerabilities to exploitation, as historically seen in pre-Hul debt traps. However, data do not indicate total collapse; core practices persist in rural strongholds, and constitutional safeguards (Scheduled Tribe status, language recognition) provide countervailing frameworks. Consequences are thus partial and regionally variable, underscoring the need for targeted intervention rather than alarmist generalisation.

Cultural Preservation and Revitalisation

Preservation efforts demonstrate viability through institutional and community mechanisms. Ol Chiki's centenary (2025) celebrations, including presidential participation in Jharkhand, highlight state-supported promotion: textbooks, school signage, competitive exams, and university curricula in Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Odisha integrate the script. Sahitya Akademi recognition and literary awards sustain written traditions. Community organisations, such as the Manjhi Pargana Council and WeSantal Self-Government framework, codify customary

law, resolve disputes, and safeguard Sarna Dharam, unifying villages across states.

Documentation initiatives record oral heritage folk songs, dances, and myths via audio-visual archives and museums (e.g., Museum of Santal Culture in Bishnubati, Santiniketan, community-maintained with donated artefacts). Digital platforms and new media extend reach, countering geographic scattering. Educational awareness since the 1960s has yielded higher literacy rates among Santals compared to some peers in Odisha, Jharkhand, and West Bengal. Festivals remain vibrant focal points for reconnection, with Baha and Sohrai drawing urban returnees.

Collaboration among scholars, NGOs, cultural associations, and governments is key. Recommendations include expanding Ol Chiki-medium instruction at primary levels, incentivising documentation projects, and integrating indigenous knowledge into environmental curricula. These align with constitutional mandates and international indigenous rights norms, ensuring revitalisation without isolation from modernity.

CONCLUSION

Santali culture embodies a resilient indigenous heritage, rooted in historical migrations, clan-based egalitarianism, Sarna cosmology, and agricultural rituals that affirm humanity's place within nature. Census-verified demographics (7.5 million Santals, 7.37 million speakers) and institutional milestones (Ol Chiki 1925; Eighth Schedule 2003) affirm its vitality amid challenges. Modernisation-driven migration, language shift, and media influences have induced verifiable transformations, reduced ritual participation, knowledge erosion, and solidarity strains, yet core elements endure in rural heartlands.

Conscious preservation through Ol Chiki education, heritage documentation, community governance, and inclusive festivals offers a pathway forward. Such efforts not only secure Santali identity but also enrich India's cultural mosaic, demonstrating that indigenous traditions can coexist with progress. Sustained scholarly, governmental, and grassroots engagement will determine whether Santali heritage thrives as a living continuum rather than an archived memory.

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