Santhali Traditional Social Institutions in the Context of Globalization

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a critical analysis of Santhali traditional institutions in the context of globalization, focusing on the transformations affecting family structures, marriage customs, gender roles and perceptions of sexuality. It examines how global socio-economic forces, formal education, digital media, and changing political and legal frameworks have influenced the Santhal community's cultural values and social organization. The study highlights the implication of migration and urbanization on religious practices and communal institutions, drawing on field based case studies to illustrate how specific Santhali villages and communities are negotiating the pressures of globalization while striving to preserve their cultural identity. Particular attention has been given to the role of traditions and folklore in maintaining social cohesion and cultural continuity. The analysis interrogates the tensions between cultural preservation and commercialization, and explores the religious socio-economic transformations occurring within the community. The paper concludes with recommendations for future research and policy initiatives aimed at supporting cultural resilience and sustainable adaptation among Santhals in a rapidly globalizing world.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Globalization has profoundly influenced the social and cultural institutions of indigenous communities, including family structures, marriage customs, religious belief systems, education, governance, and traditional socio-cultural practices. This transformation is largely attributed to the process of cultural homogenization, where indigenous values and customs are gradually assimilated into dominant global culture. Among the Santhal community, one of the most significant

changes has been the transformation of the traditional joint family system into nuclear family structure. This shift reflects a broader alteration in family norms and values , propelled by economic pressures, migration and exposure to alternative lifestyle through media and education. The erosion of collective familial living, once central to Santhali identity, marks a profound social change,

Religious practices have also undergone transformation due to interfaith dialogues, digital platforms, and missionary activities. In particular Christian missionary work in Santhali-dominated regions of Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha, has had a marked impact. While conversions have led to the adoption of Christian rituals, many communities continue to retain elements of native practice, resulting in a complex blend of old and new belief systems. In some villages, marriages are now solemnized in churches, though traditional rituals continue to be observed alongside these newer practices.

Education, too, has seen a paradigmatic shift. The spread of missionary-run schools –offering monetary incentives and provisions such as free books and meals –has increased enrollment but also contributed to the dilution of indigenous knowledge systems. A recent field visit to the village of Sujani in Deoghar district .Jharkhand, revealed a symbolic shift in religious iconography: the cross is now visible outside almost every home, replacing traditional symbols such as the vermillion-smeared wooden plough or the sacred totem tree representing the family deity. These transformations, though gradual, indicate a steady reconfiguration of spiritual and cultural landscapes. One of the striking outcomes of globalization is the shift in school curricula, which now prioritize market oriented competencies and global communication skills. This has been backed by the government's New Education Policy as well. While this may enhance employability, it also distances younger generations from their linguistic and cultural roots. A recent survey conducted across several villages in Santhal Pargana region revealed that out of ten school going children , seven were unable to read or write in the Santhali script and preferred to communicate in Hindi or regional dialects. This decline in linguistic fluency is a clear indicator of how traditional institutions are being eroded in a globalized context. The Santhali community stands at a critical juncture where traditional social institutions are being redefined under the influence of globalization. While some changes may offer opportunities for integration and growth, they also pose a serious challenge to the preservation of indigenous identity and cultural continuity. A nuanced understanding of these transformations is essential to foster culturally sensitive development policies and educational strategies that honor and preserve the rich heritage of tribal communities'

Globalization has posed significant challenges to the cult of preservation and conservation of environment, the rapid pace of urbanization has also led to deforestation and industrialization. Santhals assigned certain taboos to the sacred places or tract of forest land not to be destroyed. They called such a tract of land Jaher Than. To quote Mareni Carrin, " The jaher represents the forest in the village, reminding the villagers of a time when they were hunters and gatherers. Moreover, the jaher represents a giving environment" (Mareni Carrin, 2022, 1438-63).He further adds, "Each grove comprises a wide range of ecological diversity. It is forbidden to cut trees from a jaher, seen as the abode of the village deities. Even dead branches should not be used, and the place must be protected from any polluting intrusion, such as pregnant or menstruating women". (Mareni, 2022, p.1451).Assigning such religious sanctity to the forest area suggests how sensitive and concerned they were to the issue of preservation and conservation of environment.

Social and religious institutions have registered major challenges and many traditional rituals and customs are getting eroded in the wake of urbanization, modernization under the influence of cinema, television and social media. Festivals have also undergone changes.

II. TRANSFORMATION OF SANTHALI RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

The religious institutions of the Santhal community have undergone significant transformations over the past four decades, largely due to the multifaceted impacts of globalization. The worship practices and festivals-once integral to their socio-cultural fabric-have been disrupted by the emergence of a multi-cultural and increasingly interconnected world.

Santhals traditionally follow a hierarchical pantheon of deities, with Thakur at the apex

followed by a wide array of bongas representing various aspects of life and nature. Among these, Sun Bonga, Jom Sim Bonga village head, Marang Buru and Jaher Era – the Lady of the Sacred Grove –are especially venerated. Moreko Turniko, along with bongas associated with sacred water. Stumps, groves, forests, and mountains form part of a rich spiritual ecology, manjhis (village heads) and subsidiary bongas. Worship traditionally involved elaborate ritual performances and sacrifices intended to appease the bongas and ensure material well-being and spiritual security. A vivid example is cited by P.O.Bodding:

"The Sowing Fowl is the first offering of the year. In the month of Asar (mid-June to mid-July), we eat the sowing fowls, in the name of sowing and scattering the seed .Every house has to give one fowl. The village priest offers it in the sacred grove.(Bodding,2016, p.155).

The Folk Lores of Santal Pargana by Henry Cecil Bompas illustrate this fact through a series of folk lores in this collection.

Importantly, these offerings are not made collectively at one time but at various times and places, invoking different bongas for blessings upon crops, livestock and livelihoods. However, the tides of globalization–manifested through industrialization, urbanization and economic restructuring – has led to a decline in these ritual practices. Deforestation for infrastructure such as roads, railways, and factories, has disrupted the Santhali agrarian and forest-based economy, compelling many Santhals to transition to wage labor and salaried employment. For instance, in Deoghar district, fertilizer units, Dabur India factories and jute industries in Jasidih have absorbed a significant number of Santhal workers due to availability at a low-cost labor force. These economic shifts have had deep repercussions on traditional religious and social institutions. Although some core practices are retained , the elaborate and exhaustive system of worship, sacrifice, and offering has eroded over time. Moreover, increasing interactions with mainstream religious communities –Hindu, Islamic, and especially Christian – have further influenced Santhal religious life. Missionary activity has led to widespread conversions and the establishment of new institutions such as churches, thereby transforming the spiritual landscape of the community.

Urban migration for employment has further distanced the Santhals from their traditional ceremonies and rituals, weakening the influence of their indigenous structures. Simultaneously, growing global interest in indigenous cultures has commodified elements of Santhal heritage- particularly festivals and music are often presented as cultural artifacts for tourism, thereby diluting their spiritual essence. Santhals practiced religion as part of their belief-system coagulating it with the social fabrics not as a burden but as a way of life.This helped them to strengthen their social bonding. To quote Biswas ," The Santal religion in its social aspect is essentially a tribal matter and has helped to strengthen the social unity and quicken the sense of social responsibility, and his concept of righteousness is bound up with the social or tribal consciousness" (Biswas, 1956,p.104)

Santhal cultural heritage and religious institutions were harbored around a number of superstitions, which they treated as parts of their belief-system. Witchcraft and witch hunters were institutionalized .However; in independent India the laws were extended to the tribal areas to ban this practice of witchcraft. This new legislation brought changes in the cultural landscapes of Santhal, which they treated as impinging forces. Dutta – Majumdar rightly observed "Government legislation also affected the institutions of divination and witchcraft. As only a jan guru, the more powerful of the two types of Santal diviners, can pronounce a woman doer of witchcraft, and as these pronouncements had led to the persecution and expulsion from society of many Santal women on charges of secretly practicing witchcraft, the Government has banned the profession. The penalty for violation of this regulation is imprisonment. Thus many diviners (jan guru) have been forced to forsake their profession, and new recruits are rare. Some still practice their craft in secrecy, something that is possible because no special machinery was set up for preventing them from doing this," (Dutta-Majumdar, 1996,p.57)

Despite these challenges, festivals remain a vibrant part of Santhal life .Festivals are not merely celebratory events but expressions of their world view –interwoven with nature, joy and collective identity, Karam,Sohrae, Baha , and Sankranti are among the most significant. As Bodding notes, Sohrae is a harvest festival, and according to E.G.Man: "The Sohrae, or the harvest of joy, is their longest and one of their long festivals."(Man, 1983,

p.56). He adds that the festival spans almost five days and nights, filled with dancing, singing, drumming feasting , and communal joy. However, even these expressions of cultural vitality are affected by broader changes. One of the most visible impacts of globalization on Santhal life is environmental degradation. The combined forces of industrialization and urbanization have led to shifts in the ecological and spiritual landscape.

Dependence on forests and traditional laws regulating resource use have given way to modern frameworks, market integration, and migration –induced changes. In conclusion, while globalization has brought employment exposure, and new institutions to Santhal community , it has simultaneously disrupted the foundations of their religious and cultural identity, The transformation of their sacred institutions reveals a deeper narrative of loss, adaptation and resilience – a story that continues to unfold amidst the crosscurrents of tradition and modernity.

III. IMPACT OF GLOBALIZATION ON SANTHAL FESTIVALS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Globalization has exposed Santhals to mainstream cultural trends. Migration has further escalated this crisis. Social media platforms have further alienated from their roots. The traditional exhaustive rituals and practices have been replaced by shortened practice due to time constraints and urban life styles. Globalization has significantly influenced the nature and purpose of Santhal festivals , leading to their increasing commercialization. Sohrae, traditionally a festival centered on cattle worship and gratitude to nature, has evolved into a venue for large-scale fairs and markets. This commercialization often eclipses its cultural and spiritual essence. Local artists and performers , once central to these celebrations, now face stiff competition from modern entertainment forms, resulting in a gradual erosion of the festival's cultural depth.

One of the most profound effects of globalization is the hybridization of Santhal religious and cultural identity. Rooted in animism and nature worship , Santhal festivals are undergoing transformations through interaction with dominant religions. Christian and Hindu influences have introduced modifications to traditional rituals, with many Santhals incorporating elements of these faiths into celebrations. In some cases, indigenous ceremonies are being replaced by mainstream religious events, leading to cultural homogenization. The younger generation , shaped by digital media and exposed to global culture, often places greater emphasis on national and international festivals such as Christmas and Diwali over their own ancestral traditions.

IV. SOCIO-ECONOMIC SHIFTS AND FESTIVAL ADAPTATIONS

Economic globalization has brought both positive and negative changes to Santhal festivals. On the one hand, increased employment opportunities and remittances from migrant workers have enabled families to celebrate festivals with greater financial resources, thereby enhancing the scale and grandeur of these events. On the other hand, the migration of working individuals away from their native villages has reduced community participation in traditional rituals, weakening the collective experience that once defined these festivals. Furthermore, government and non-governmental organizations have promoted Santhal festivals as part of cultural tourism. While this has brought visibility and economic opportunities, it has also led to the commodification of traditions, with celebrations being reshaped to suit tourist expectations rather than maintaining their authenticity. Technology and digitization have compounded these transformations, altering the fundamental patterns of Santhal festivals .The integration of digital platforms into cultural life has distanced younger generations from traditional practices, accelerating the loss of indigenous knowledge and ritual continuity.

V. GLOBALIZATION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SANTHALI MARRIAGE INSTITUTIONS

Globalization has brought significant transformations to indigenous social institutions, notably the institution of marriage. Among the Santhal community, traditional marriages such as Horubhat (arranged marriage) and Sang Bapla (love marriages) have undergone marked changes. While core cultural elements –such as rituals involving deity worship, ancestral blessings, music, and communal feasting–continue to be practiced, many time-honored traditions have either been diluted or

reinterpreted in the context of a rapidly modernizing world. The very name Bapla (marriage) suggests the solidarity of the institution. P C Biswas says, "The Santhali name for marriage is Bapla. Mr. O'Malley is of the opinion that Bapla is a word which very probably originally meant mutual strengthening i.e. of the two families." (PC, Biswas, 1956, p.73)

A key figure in traditional Santhali marriages was the marriage broker, who mediated between the families of bride and groom and the Jog Manjhi (village head) .In the digital age, however, the role of a broker has diminished considerably. Modern match-making is increasingly facilitated through social media and matrimonial platforms, enabling educated youth to choose partners independently. Despite this shift, community heads (Manjhi Hada) continue to play a significant role in overseeing and legitimizing marriages, ensuring a level of continuity with traditional structures.

The increasing incidence of intercultural marriages have further led to reconfiguration of gender roles and a weakening of traditional institutional authority. As P.O.Bodding notes in his foundational work Traditions and Institutions of Santhals (2016). Santhali marriage rituals are elaborate, involving the entire community. He meticulously details both pre-wedding and post-wedding ceremonies, during which Jog Manjhi conducts rituals using symbolic materials such as earthen pots, sal leaves, rice beer, water and burnt rice. These rituals emphasize the communal and legal dimensions of marriage rather than treating it as a purely personal or romantic union (Bodding, 2016, pp.29-88) One significant element of traditional Santhali marriage- bride price- has also weakened in the wake of globalization. Historically, the bride's family would reciprocate the bride price with return gifts as a gesture of mutual respect. As Bodding describes:

"After this, the bride groom's party gets from the bride's parents the return presents for bride price viz. one goat, five half seers of rice, salt, turmeric , oil, and one pot of beer ," (Bodding, 2016, p.54)

Today, particularly in love marriages involving Santhal men employed in public or private sectors, the practice is either nominal or absent. Romantic relationships formed in schools, colleges, or workplaces often culminate in marriages that bypass many traditional rituals, including the exchange of bride price. Additionally, court marriages and civil registration are increasingly replacing oral and customary forms of documentation once upheld by Santhali community institutions.

Urbanization has also driven a shift in ritual practices. Santhals living in urban areas often condense or forgo elaborate ceremonies to accommodate modern lifestyles. While globalization has certainly contributed to the erosion of some customs and rituals, it has simultaneously given rise to new tensions between the traditional legal system and formal civic legal frameworks. Conflicts between these two systems frequently create confusion and internal dissonance within the community's belief structures. Globalization has instigated both loss and adaptation in Santhal marriage institutions. While it has weakened certain customs, it has also compelled the community to renegotiate its traditions in a changing world. This dynamic interplay between continuity and change deserves further scholarly attention, particularly in the context of indigenous resilience and cultural transformation.

VI. SANTHALI INSTITUTION IN TRANSITION: A FIELD-BASED REFLECTION ON GLOBALIZATION AND CULTURAL SHIFTS

Over the past few decades, a growing number of NGOs, independent research institutions, scholars ,and social organizations have engaged extensively with tribal studies, particularly focusing on the Santhali community. Numerous research papers and monographs are published annually. However, what remains critically necessary is a study grounded in sustained field work and genuine community engagement. In a recent field visit to the Santhali village of Sujani, Chaparia, and Pahadia in Jharkhand's Deoghar district, a clear pattern of socio-cultural transition was observed. Nearly half of the population in these villages has migrated to urban areas in search of work, with many employed in hotels, restaurants, and shopping malls. This migration has resulted in a noticeable detachment from traditional customs, cultural values ,and institutional practices. Although some rituals are still performed

during the key social and religious events, the deeper spiritual connection, particularly among the younger generation, appears to be diminishing. The

younger Santhals, shaped increasingly by exposure to modern lifestyles and digital culture, exhibit a growing indifference to traditional institutions. Social media, in particular, has connected them with diverse global cultures, further influencing their value systems and aspirations. To explore this shift more systematically, a small scale survey was conducted by the author, targeting 100 Santhal youth (aged 18-25) living in urban areas and pursuing various career paths .A sample size of 10 was selected for in-depth questioning, comprising 20 questions related to their interests, social and religious practices and traditional institutions such as marriage, community justice and rituals. The results of this micro-survey were indicators for a changing society. The majority of respondents prioritized modern education and expressed a desire to integrate into mainstream society. Notably when asked about their knowledge of Santhali language and script, seven out of ten feigned ignorance. On the subject of marriage, a significant number advocated for love marriages legally sanctioned by courts over traditional, ritual based arranged marriages. There was also a clear preference of exogamy over endogamy, signaling a desire for greater social mobility. Religious identity revealed a more complex picture. While responses were mixed, many viewed Christianity as more compatible with the changing social ecosystem, some were of the opinion that their religion is in harmony with their cultural value system. The survey findings strongly suggest that modernization and globalization have begun to erode traditional Santhali institutions. External interactions and digital exposure have contributed to the weakening of age-old practices, replacing them with new ideals of modernity and economic opportunity. The shift from agrarian livelihoods to diverse professional pursuits marks a decisive turn in the community's relationship with its traditional structures.

Despite these changes Santhals continue to take pride in their cultural heritage. As Rajesh Kumar (2020) observes:

"There is no denying the fact that tradition has a very important role to play in defining the sense of identity, and the Santhals as a tribe are extremely proud of their tradition. They believe in the idea of a Great Tradition to which they are heir. But the sense of Great Tradition is largely an elitist preoccupation among them. Infiltration into the popular imagination has been slow and halting.

Owing to exposure to the forces of modernization, significant cultural, political, and economic transformations are taking place in Santhali communities of Jharkhand." (p.24).

Urbanization and modernization have undeniably altered their way of life. Yet, there remains a continued, though modified, adherence to value systems. The Santhali community appears to be navigating a transitional space – standing onthe line between traditional roots and pressures of modernity. These transformations are visible in dress, food habits, language use, and cultural practices. Even traditional dance forms have been hybridized , often influenced by Bollywood music, particularly among youth. The sacred and distinct boundaries that once defined Santhali society are increasingly permeable under the influence of Globalization.

There is an evident inclination towards integration with main-stream culture while simultaneously seeking to preserve fundamental cultural values. A case in point is the village Sujani, which I have visited frequently since childhood. Around forty percent of the population has embraced Christianity. Children from these families attend schools run by Christian missionaries, and many homes prominently display the Cross outside their doors.

However, this religious conversion doesn't imply a complete departure from the traditional belief- systems. Instead it signifies a complex cultural synthesis – a dynamic interplay between inherited customs and newly adopted values shaped by the forces of globalization.

This layered cultural negotiation illustrates the evolving identity of Santhali people. Their institutions are not vanishing but adapting – reconfiguring themselves in response to changing socio-economic realities, modern aspirations, and global influences.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICY MAKING FOR SANTHALI TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

Santhali traditional institutions such as marriage, family structures, religious practices, festivals and community governance are age-old systems embedded into the Santhali collective consciousness, ecological consciousness, and age

-old wisdom and communal harmony. Needless to say, the rapid pace of globalization has posed challenges to these institutions either by diluting them or adapting them to the changed socio-economic needs. Modernization, urbanizations, governmental interventions have altered the organic rhythms of Santhali social life. To ensure preservation and conservation of Santhali traditional institutions a multi-pronged approach is required in policy frameworks. The following recommendations may serve as a framework for an inclusive and sustainable cultural growth of the community,

Documentation and archiving is required for cultural preservation and promotion. Establishment of ethnographic documentation centers in tribal dominated areas to record oral histories, traditional songs, rituals, marriage customs and folklore, is required. Introduction of Santhali language, script, mythology, and cultural practices in local school curriculum to inculcate a sense of pride among Santhali children through community participation would not only give them cultural education but prepare them for acceptance of their cultural heritage.

They should be granted financial assistance and grants for traditional festivals Sohrae, Baha and Mage Parab. They should be further encouraged to observe community led festivals to retain indigenous aesthetic and spiritual forms without excessive commercialization. In order to protect family and marriage institutions, awareness around the value of joint family systems and intergenerational knowledge sharing should be created. Community based counseling could address the anomalies emerging from nuclear family and socio-cultural shifts. There is an urgent need for legal recognition of customary marriages. Policy framework should recognize customary marriages such as Horubhat, Sang Bapla under tribal laws, safeguarding them from dilution by dominant legal and religious systems. Santhali religious sanctity should be respected and indigenous religious practices should be preserved rather than being subsumed with the bigger religious systems or animistic classifications. This would ensure religious and spiritual continuity of the Santhals.

Santhals are born environmentalists and they are deeply rooted in the concept of preservation and conservation of forest wealth. The policy must prioritize the preservation of the Sacred Groves. Legal recognition should be given to Jaher Than (Sacred Groves) as cultural-ecological heritage zones with restricted commercial or developmental intrusion.

In tribal dominated states Tribal Advisory Councils should ensure the representations of tribal in policy making bodies for issues related to land, education, health care, and cultural preservation. In fact, at the roots of all Santhal rebellions lies the issue of Jar (land) and jungle (forest). They fought against the local landlords, Britishers and outsiders against encroachments on their land and forest (Nadeem Hasnain, 2019).

To deal with migration in the process of modernization and urbanization policy makers must think over migration management. In each tribal area a Migration Resource Center should be created to ensure a safe and informed migration, and also support the reintegration of those who return through skills training and microenterprise. Besides, in order to preserve the identity of the Santhals in an age of globalization it is equally important to give them digital literacy while also promoting Santhali language content in media, film, and literature. Santhali Community Radio digital story telling stations could be an added advantage. Encouraging research among Santhali educated youths on Santhali could ensure an insider's perspective and it could be valuable for knowledge creation. Developing indicators to assess the impact of government and NGO programs on Santhali traditional institutions to ensure cultural sustainability along with economic development should be encouraged.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The future of Santhali traditional institutions lies in respectful integration, not assimilation. Public policies must not aim to modernize Santhali society by replacing its traditions but should empower communities to adapt, innovate, and sustain their cultural integrity amidst changing global realities. A culturally responsive and community –driven development model, where tradition coexists with transformation, is the need of the hour. Globalization has brought changes in the traditional social institutions but some changes are desirable to amalgamate the Santhali ethos with the mainstream culture. Any society is dynamic and changes are natural rules, to evolve the society as an organic system propelled by growth and

scientific temperament. This doesn't imply metamorphosis but assimilation based on justified changes. The Santhal traditional institutions depicted in folklores have a tryst with the past, as these institutions endorsed the contemporary social, religious and spiritual values of Santhali ecosystem (Santal Folk Tales, A Campbell, 1891 pp.1–127).There should be a fair blending of continuity and change for sustained growth of any society. P.O.Bodding admits of borrowings from the Hindu traditions but such borrowings didn't transform the Santhali institutions completely. To quote Bodding " It is evident that we have, to some extent, to do with borrowings, but it would be an exaggeration to maintain that the whole has been borrowed." (Bodding, 2016, p.2). However, such borrowings enriched the Santhali traditional institutions while retaining the core values. Undoubtedly, globalization, migration, urbanization and modernization have played a significant role in the lives of the Santhal community. Continuity, change and synthesis of other cultural societies, whereas enriched and updated traditional social institutions in the pace of globalization, the Santhal kept their core ethos and spirit intact. This approach can ensure that Santhali communities thrive not just economically but also spiritually, socially, and ecologically, thus enriching the broader tapestry of Santhali ecosystem.

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