

The Role of Women in Santhal Society: Tradition, Livelihood, Culture and Changing Social Realities.

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Abstract: Women occupy a central and multifaceted position in Santhal society. Their contribution extends beyond domestic responsibilities to agriculture, forest-based livelihood, cultural preservation, social organization, and the transmission of indigenous knowledge. Santhal women have traditionally participated in agricultural activities, collection and processing of forest produce, household management, childcare, community celebrations, and cultural practices. At the same time, changing socio-economic conditions, education, urbanization, migration, government interventions, and the expansion of market economies have transformed their roles and aspirations. This paper examines the position and contribution of women in Santhal society, with particular emphasis on their economic, social, cultural, ecological, and familial roles. It also considers the challenges confronting Santhal women, including poverty, unequal access to resources, educational disadvantages, displacement, changing livelihood patterns, and the burden of multiple forms of labour. The paper argues that Santhal women should not be understood merely as passive participants within a patriarchal social structure; rather, they are active agents who contribute substantially to the survival, continuity, and transformation of Santhal society. Recognizing their knowledge, labour, agency, and leadership is essential for understanding the social and cultural dynamics of Santhal communities.

Key words: Santhal women, tribal society, indigenous knowledge, livelihood, agriculture, culture, gender

**Introduction:**

The Santhals are the third largest tribal community in India. They predominantly reside in the states of Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal, and parts of Bangladesh. They are part of the Austro-Asiatic family, distinctly related to Vietnamese and Khmer. They belong to the Pre-Aryan period. They were the great freedom fighters during the British regime in India. The great Santhal heroes like Baba Tilaka Murmu, Sido and Kanhu Murmu revolted bravely against the British Colonial authority to drive them away from Motherland. Santhal society is mainly patriarchal i.e men play superior role in the society. However, in the male dominated Santhal society, women play a multifaceted and indispensable role. They serve as the pillars of strength of the society. Their contributions are significant in economic, social and cultural spheres.

The Santhal women possess a very charming appearance. While many have a dusky complexion, their personalities are often considered very attractive. They are known for their traditional attire, especially the white sari with a red border, which is symbol of their cultural identity. They have good physiques as they work very hard. A common feature among the Santhal women is that they possess abundant hair which is neatly tied. Women hold significant position within Santhal society. Beyond their diligent performance in domestic duties, they are active participants in all facets of life. Santhal women work side by side with their male counterparts and have a vibrant social life, taking part in various social and cultural functions. Their contributions are so significant that they are considered as the backbone of Santhal society. Santhal women work tirelessly from dawn to dusk to fulfill the basic needs of the family. They also play a central role in the community's economy. Their contributions are essential to both the family and the wider community.

Socio-economic Contributions:



In Santhal society, women are a crucial and significant unit. The economic life of the Santhal Community is deeply intertwined with the labour and ingenuity of its women.

The family constitutes an important social unit in Santhal society, and women perform several interconnected responsibilities within it. Traditionally, women have been responsible for cooking, cleaning, childcare, collection of water and fuel, food processing, and other household activities. However, defining these responsibilities simply as “domestic work” overlooks the considerable economic value of women's labour.

Women play little or no part in the organization of social or religious life, but they are supreme in household affairs. Although men lay claim to superior intelligence and women openly disclaim any knowledge or interest in affairs outside the home circle, the attitude of the two groups towards each other is one of good-natured tolerance. (Culshaw, 29)

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They perform all the household tasks very carefully. Everyday they clean their house and yards with cowdung. Most of the Santhal families in villages keep cattle, goats and poultry and they are looked after by the women folk. They do the milking and collect the cowdung. They also clean the cowshed. Hansda Sowvendra Sekhar in his novel *The Mysterious Ailment of Rupī Baskey*, has very well portrayed the contribution of a woman in Santhal family through the character Rupī. As he writes,

Rupī was from Tereldihi, a village in the hills. She had grown up hunting sparrows with slingshots even as she performed the routine tasks expected of any girl in a village. She cleaned the house, washed utensils and clothes, and drew water from the well. She threw grains to the fowl and grazed the cattle and goats. She helped raise her younger siblings and cousins. (Shekhar, 2)



In the Santhal community, women contribute significantly to the agricultural economy. They are involved in all stages of cultivation, from sowing and weeding to harvesting. Their knowledge of local crops, soil types, and traditional farming techniques is essential for the community's sustenance. Beyond agriculture, Santhal women play a crucial role in the forest economy, gathering firewood, medicinal plants, edible leaves, and fruits, which are used both for household consumption and sale in local markets. This economic activity provides a significant source of income and nutritional security for the family.

When not working in the fields, Santhal women engage themselves in making various useful household items like mats, brooms, and leaf plates. They often sell these items in local markets, contributing to the family income.

Many Santhal women brew and sell traditional alcoholic beverages, such as rice beer, which is a source of livelihood. They often follow rituals and traditions while preparing these drinks. As Culshaw writes,

The women prepare the rice beer which is brewed in all the homes. First they collect the roots that are used as fermenting agents from the forest. In this, as in most of their gathering activities, the women of the village work together. (Culshaw, 31)

The care of livestock and poultry is another domain where Santhal women's contributions are significant. They play a crucial and multifaceted role in livestock management. They feed and give water to the animals and clean their sheds. They collect fodder and other feed from nearby forests and fields for the animals. It is common among the Santhal women, to take livestock, especially cows and goats, out for grazing during the day. They also collect milk from the cows and eggs from poultry. The products are used for household consumption or sold to generate income.

While men may help with tasks like grazing, the responsibility for the care, feeding, and cleaning of the animals falls mainly on the women and girls of the family. This dual role – managing



household duties and contributing significantly to the community's economic activities- highlights the important and indispensable position women hold within the Santhal social and economic structure.

The Santhal women truly enjoy no leisure while the male members spend time by playing cards, visiting relatives, attending party meeting or village council's meeting etc. (Sahu ,69)

Women also have an important role in the socialization of children. Mothers and older women transmit language, stories, songs, customs, food practices, knowledge of plants, agricultural practices, and community values to younger generations. In this sense, women function as important cultural mediators between generations

Cultural and Ritualistic Roles:

Santhal women are the primary custodians of their community's cultural heritage and ritualistic practices.

Rituals and Festivals: Santhals are fond of festivals. Festivals are an important part of their social and cultural life. Throughout the whole year they celebrate various festivals in different occasions like Baha, Sohrai, Mah Moreh, Sakrat, Gomha, Karam etc. These festivals very well reflect their art and culture. Santhal women are key participants in all major festivals and ceremonies of the community. The opening day of the major festivals like Baha and Sohrai is known as 'Um Maha' i.e. bathing day. On this day women of every santhal family become very busy in washing clothes and cleaning houses with cowdung. They perform all the necessary duties regarding festival.

During Sohrai festival Santhal women practice indigenous art form. This art form is ritualistic art done on mud walls to welcome the new harvest.

A woman learns to decorate and design house at the early age of her life.

The Santhal women give sufficient proof of their aesthetics sense by



drawing simple and artistic designs and patterns on the walls of their house. (Sahu ,69)

Besides, They sing traditional songs, perform folk dances, and prepare ritualistic foods during these festivals. Singing and dancing are integral part of Santhali culture. These activities are not merely for entertainment, they are a vital means of reinforcing community bonds, celebrating nature, and communicating Santhal mythology and values to the next generation.

Women as Custodians of Santhal Culture:

One of the most significant contributions of Santhal women is their role in the preservation and transmission of cultural traditions. Oral culture occupies an important place in many indigenous societies, and women participate in transmitting cultural knowledge through everyday practices as well as through songs, folktales, proverbs, ceremonies, and festivals.

Traditional songs may communicate memories, emotions, social values, relationships with nature, and community history. Women's participation in singing and dancing during festivals contributes to the continuation of collective cultural identity.

Women also transmit cultural practices through food preparation, clothing, childcare, rituals, agricultural customs, and knowledge of local plants. Such everyday practices may appear ordinary, but collectively they constitute an important mechanism through which cultural continuity is maintained.

The study of Santhal culture must therefore recognize women not simply as participants in cultural activities but as active custodians and transmitters of cultural memory.

**Health and Wellness:**

In Santhal community many women possess extensive knowledge of medicinal plants and herbal remedies. They act as caregivers for their families and neighbors, providing basic healthcare and traditional treatments. This role highlights their deep connection to nature and their expertise in local ecology.

Challenges and Rights:

Despite their significant contributions Santhal women face challenges related to their status and society. While they may have a higher degree of freedom compared to some non-tribal women in certain aspects, they still encounter significant disadvantages.

Social and Cultural Challenges: Santhal society, despite its communal nature, is still largely patriarchal, which leads to the marginalization of women in several key areas.

Gender Asymmetry and Customary Law: Customary laws often perpetuate gender inequality by limiting women's rights and autonomy. While a woman can choose her partner and divorce her husband, she is often excluded from decision making roles in village councils.

Property and Inheritance Rights: A major challenge is the denial of land rights and inheritance. Santhal women are frequently not allowed to inherit land, which is a primary source of livelihood and economic security for the community. This leaves them vulnerable, especially for widows, single, or separated women.

Exclusion from Religious Practices: Santhal women are sometimes prohibited from entering sacred places like sacred groves, and are often excluded from participating in community festivals during menstruation.

Exclusion from Judicial System: The Santhal people have an organized Judicial system for the management and solution of various problems within the community. They make every effort to solve the social problems arising within their community. The Santhal system of Governance, is known as Majhi- Pargana. The head of the Santhal Community is called Manjhi Hadam



(Headman of village). He is the chief of the executive, judicial and all other functions within the society. He is assisted by other office bearers like Paranik, Jagmanjhi, Jagparanik, Naike, Godet etc. who work in their respective fields to solve various kinds of problems. Thus it is seen that all the members of the Santhal Judicial System are male. Women are not permitted to take part in the village Judicial system.

Educational Challenges: The literacy rate among Santhal women is generally low, which limits their access to information, opportunities, and a decent standard of living. In Santhal society, girls get very little scope for study as they are expected to perform domestic chores, such as cooking, cleaning and caring for younger siblings.

As a daily work a 10 years girl sweeps the house, looks after the children, goats, pigs, chicken etc. Some times she brings leaves for goat, collects fuel etc. with other female members of the village. (Sahu, 70)

Another significant barrier is the practice of early marriage. Girls are often married between the ages of 16 and 18, which frequently forces them to drop out of school to assume household and spousal responsibilities.

Economic Challenges: Santhal women face various economic hardships in their day to day lives.

Loss of Livelihood and Displacement: The loss of traditional access and control over natural resources, such as forests and land, due to deforestation, industrial encroachment, and development projects, has eroded their livelihood avenues. This often leads to displacement from their ancestral homes.

Labor and Migration: Santhal women are heavily involved in agriculture and forest product collection, but they often face low wages and a lack of employment opportunities. This



contributes to a high rate of migration, with many seeking work as migrant laborers in urban areas.

Heavy Workload: Santhal women often bear a disproportionate workload, balancing agricultural and non-agricultural jobs with household chores and childcare. This can negatively affect their health and well-being.

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Conclusion:

The role of women in Santhals society is profound and multifaceted, characterized by their significant contributions to economic sustenance, their unwavering commitment as cultural custodians, and their active participation in social resistance. While they demonstrate remarkable resilience and autonomy within their households, systemic challenges related to their land rights, the burden of labor, and access to education and healthcare persist. Recognizing and addressing these challenges is crucial for empowering Santhal women and ensuring their full and equitable participation in the development and preservation of their unique community. Further research and targeted interventions are necessary to strengthen their agency, protect their rights, and uplift their overall socio-economic status, allowing them to continue their vital role in shaping the future of the Santhal community.



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