

Exploring Marginalization & Identity Dynamics Of The Santhal Community

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Abstract:

The study of small communities within regional settings has gained significant importance in contemporary society. One such community is the Santhal tribe, officially recognized by the Government of India, residing in the Chotanagpur plateau across states like Orissa, Bihar, West Bengal, and Assam with slight variations in pronunciation such as Santal, Santhal, and Saontal. This community, due to historical and socio-economic challenges both internal and external in nature, experienced significant marginalization's, leading to their migration to various regions of the state during the British colonial period. Many Santhal settled in the Lakhimpur District during this time. However, unlike in other states and regions where they are recognized as tribal communities, in Lakhimpur District, they are classified as Other Backward Class (OBC). This paper aims to explore the factors that led to their marginalization from own tribal identity, and why they are enlisted as OBC in this particular region.

Keywords: Marginalization, Tribe, Identity, Tribal Life, Teagarden, Santhal.

Introduction:

The Santhal tribe, referred to as Samanpalas in the Mahabharata, holds a respected position within the diverse tapestry of Indian tribal communities. They are recognized as the "first people" or indigenous population, deeply rooted in the pre-Aryan era. Notably, the Santals exhibited remarkable courage as noble fighters during the British colonial rule in India. Their resistance was evident in their fierce opposition to Lord Corn Wally's permanent settlement in 1855, led by the esteemed Santal hero, Sidhu, who mobilized around 10,000 Santals to establish a parallel government challenging the British authority. Even earlier, in 1789, Baba Tilka Majhi emerged as the first Santal leader to take up arms against the Britishers. The Santhals had long back settled in Santhal Pargana. In the later part of 18th and beginning of the 19th century, they are believed to have cleared the dense forests in the area and had built up a sense of solidarity amongst themselves. Their settlement was known as Damin-i-koh, in Rajmahal hills. In due course, the Santhals in Damin-i-koh faced a serious

challenge from money-lenders, traders, Zamindars and contractors. These exploiters were referred to as the Dikus, a term which meant outsiders. The exploitation of the Santhals was beyond proportion.

In the early 1820s, the British stumbled upon the native tea leaf in Assam, which had long been enjoyed as a brew by the Singpho tribe. The leaf was introduced to military personnel named Bruce, leading to the discovery of tea's potential. The British East India Company, recognizing the opportunity to rival China's tea production monopoly, took over Assam in 1826 through the Yandaboo Treaty. Subsequently, in 1837, the first tea garden was established in Chabua, located in the Dibrugarh District of upper Assam. This marked the beginning of commercial tea production with the establishment of the Assam Tea Company in 1840.

In Assam, Santhal have entered after the Santhal rebellion in Chotanagpur, they were trying to extricate themselves from Britishers here and there. Narration found that – Number of Santhals moved to neighboring country like- Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and in states like Assam, Uttar Pradesh as well. Survival was their prime requirements, initially there were 16 Santhal families entered into Assam around 1857. They made their first presence in Kokrajhar District. After that the records found in history, a missionary Mr. Boersen arrived with the first batch of 42 families on 8th February 1881. They came by train and steamer and first landed at Dhubri. Thereafter they marched on foot about 30 miles north of Dhubri and gathered under a huge tree near a market place called Dingdinga. After their arrival, another batch of 13 families arrived under the leadership of Hezekiah Das, a teacher at the Ebenezer Boys School, Dumka. The families who landed at Dingdinga soon started clearing jungles of the area allotted to them and built some new huts in the area meant for them. So, the 55 families spread over five villages and a church was built at a place called Thakurpur, meaning village of God. It was the first church of the Santhal mission in Assam. And the village remained the headquarters of the colony for some years. The families, who had come, were engaged in the mini tea garden called Mornai Tea Estate located very close to the villages where the Santhals settled. After working in the tea garden for sometimes, when the economic condition of the families improved a little bit, they moved to the surrounding areas and cleared the jungles for settlement. When they first settled in five villages, certain laws were framed to be followed by these families and the rules were like no brewing, no drinking, no gambling etc. Some of the families found the rules very difficult to follow and they left the village to settle down in other areas where no such strict rules are to be followed. (M. Basumatary & S. Sarkar 2019) Folks narrates that- this is the reason Santhal moved to nearby District Udalguri, Rangia, Sonitpur etc. Most of the aged Santhal people living in Assam claimed themselves as one of the eldest tribal groups of Assam. They also assert themselves older than Bodos. The 1996 conflict between Santhal and Bodo community marked as the example of their dominance in this region. There are Santhal people live in Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. As they were persecuted and tortured by tea planters physically and economically, some of

them moved to Meghalaya and some of them went to Arunachal Pradesh and small group of Santhal went to Tripura (Tudu, D. 2018).

Materials and methods:

This study follows both explorative and descriptive 'Research Design'. The data was collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was collected through participant observation and secondary data was collected from census and other sources like books, periodicals and journals. Most of the components of the study are based on Ethnographic account. The total sample size was 300. The criteria of sampling are 'Random', taking 100 people, fifty females, from each tea garden. The unit of sample is tea gardens and villages of the district where Santhal are living. As Santhal are spread out in entire District of Lakhimpur so data was collected from exclusively Santhal inhabited tea gardens/villages of different localities of three tea gardens of Lakhimpur District.

Objectives of the study:

To study the factors leading to the marginalization of Santhal community

To understand what made them OBC here

Migration of Santhal and Life in Tea Garden:

Migration is an inherent aspect of human society, characterized by individuals relocating from one place to another for a multitude of reasons. Factors such as seeking improved livelihoods, escaping poverty, war, ensuring food security, and responding to natural phenomena are considered pivotal drivers of migration. In the context of Assam's history, particularly during the pre-independence British era, the region underwent significant transformation and played a significant role in shaping the migration patterns observed in Assam (E.A Gait, 2001). The discovery of tea-bush in the jungles of Assam by the British, during the early part of the 19th century and its subsequent establishment of tea plantations marked the beginning of the settlement of the present tea – garden labourers in the state of Assam. The life in tea garden is rural in nature, their way of life is unchanged in tea garden since their migration into this region, they live in the tea garden area and nearby villages, they live in tea garden houses which were provided by the tea garden authorities, the inhabited area of the labours called coolie lines were situated near the tea gardens surrounded by jungles. The condition of their houses was below the general norms. The leaky roofs and damp floors of their houses made them physically poor. The labours were also not even provided with beds for sleeping. They had to sleep on beds made of bamboo or machang. They were paid nominal wages which were less than the wage of the Public Works Department. Thus, lack of proper sanitation and the supply of unhealthy food further added to their miseries. The impure drinking water also one of the major causes of their poor health (Bose, Sanat Kumar, 1954:74-79). The tea garden labours were not allowed to leave their garden on any occasions and

also, they could not raise their voice against the oppression of the managers. (Gogoi, Rajen, 2001:116). Both the male and female and even the children of the labours were often physically tortured. Flogging and canning by the garden authorities had become a common phenomenon. Dipankar Banerjee says, "Abduction of married women, unlawful engagement of children of even five years of age, fraud, wrongful confinement, intimidation- all these become an integral part of the Planter Raj and had its spiral effect- many died in the very first year of their arrival in Assam". Thus, labours were exploited physically, mentally, and economically by the planters. But they had no right to raise their voice against the garden authorities. Even the law in almost all cases favored the planters and their European authorities if there was the case of abuse of garden labours. (Banerjee, Dipankar, 2006:105).

The Santhals, belonging to the Santhal Pargana region of the erstwhile Bengal Presidency, were settled in the area by the colonial administration after the Santhal rebellion of 1855(C.K. Sharma, 2012). A significant portion of the Santhal community residing in the Lakhimpur District can trace their roots back to West Bengal, Orissa, and Hazaribagh. Detailed documentation from three tea estates reveals that approximately 40-60% of Santhals have ancestral ties to Hazaribagh, Jharkhand, and Orissa, while roughly 20% originate from West Bengal. Whether their movement is on a national, regional, or intra-District scale, the majority of Santhal migrants predominantly come from the Sonitpur and Udalguri Districts. Their motivation for migrating within the tea plantations stems from their aspiration for better employment opportunities and the need to secure their livelihoods, often due to the devastating impact of frequent flooding.

Initially, the Santhals settled in close proximity to lush jungles and forests, where they cleared the land and cultivated various local crops. However, when the district faced catastrophic floods, the fertile lands were scattered, compelling them to seek employment under Zaminders, Mohri babus, and other affluent individuals. Eventually, with the emergence of tea cultivation in the region, Santhals were recruited as laborers in the tea plantations, continuing their journey as workers in the tea gardens.

The Santhal people in Assam have been widely acknowledged for their strong work ethic and close connections to the working class, both historically and in the present day. Their cultural society has its roots in the principles of early communal living. The community's social status was often tied to its cultural contributions, and their progress and prosperity were linked to their active involvement in cultural practices. Before their involvement in the tea gardens of Assam, the Santhals primarily consisted of impoverished peasants, earning meager wages and living under feudal rulers. During the period of British colonial rule, these individuals were placed under their oversight and employed as laborers in the tea gardens through contractual arrangements. They were then dispatched to work in industrial settings where tea companies had established plantations, frequently accepting lower-paying contracts.

In the Lakhimpur District, the Santhal community maintains a direct connection with the tea industry, but unfortunately, they are confronted with worsening working conditions within the tea gardens. It is truly regrettable that the welfare programs provided to the workers in these gardens are in an extremely poor state. A significant portion of the labor force in the tea gardens lacks access to essential healthcare, clean drinking water, and other basic necessities. Current slogans arising from the tea gardens emphasize the need for proper education for children, imparted by well-qualified teachers. However, the harsh reality reveals an incredibly disheartening truth: practically every school within the gardens is staffed by inexperienced teachers who bear the burden of educating 90 or more students. This situation is undeniably a severe violation of human rights.

The laboring class often pushed to their limits while toiling in the gardens, occasionally expresses their frustration through peaceful protests. They have endured neglectful treatment akin to that of a step motherly figure by the Indian sahibs. As a result, some Santhal have chosen to transition to farming as an alternative means of livelihood. Nonetheless, even those who continue working in the tea gardens are compelled to rely solely on their own hard work and unwavering determination.

Marginalization of Santhal:

The term 'marginalized' refers to people or communities on the lower spectrum of the hierarchy in terms of economic, social or cultural resources or power. These resources are critical for equal participation in a given society whether it is regional, national or global. The term 'marginality' in sociology has three dimensions: cultural marginality, social marginality and structural marginality (Bernt and Colini, 2013). Cultural marginality deals with issue of cross-cultural identities and assimilation. Social marginality indicates the isolation of an individual or a group from participating in a positive reference group. Structural marginality refers to the social, economic and political powerlessness and disadvantage of an individual or a group. Therefore, the issues of poverty or economic dislocation and disempowerment or social dislocation are considered as two important dimensions of marginalization (Burton and Kagan, 2003, in press).

A tribe can be described as a simple society comprised of various kinship groups. Horticulture serves as the primary occupation for tribes. While tribes typically lack formal leaders or chiefs, their members possess a shared understanding of behavioral norms and exhibit a higher level of social organization. Therefore, key attributes of a tribe include kinship bonds, a shared territory, a common language, and the absence of internal conflicts. In Santal villages, common features encompass agricultural lands, a graveyard, and a communal place of worship known as Jaher era. The socio-economic, health, and educational status of the Santals serve as indicators highlighting their marginalized position. Upon their arrival in Assam, the Santhal people encountered low levels of education, weak trade unions, and widespread land

alienation. The plight of tea garden laborers has worsened, with many lacking access to proper healthcare, clean drinking water, and adequate sanitation facilities. The persistence of indentured labor practices in the 21st century raises fundamental questions about their identity and well-being. Over the past 150 years, the tea community in Assam has not received the necessary attention for their development.

Being marginalized Santhals are compelled to live on the edges or on the periphery of things, rather than in the center. The community experiences exclusion in the social environment in every sphere of their life. This exclusion is due to external or internal differences. For example, speaking a different language called 'Bagania' have distinct customs, or belonging to a different religious group 'Sarnaism'. Santhals suffer prejudices because of their low economic status. People belonging to lower strata of society are perceived as less human than others. Marginalized groups are sometimes viewed with animosity and terror. Because of their perception of difference and exclusion, communities are unable to utilize the resources and opportunities available. They feel helpless and disadvantaged in comparison to more wealthy and dominating elements of society that own land are rich, well-educated, and politically influential. Just because of this marginalization is prevalent in entire tea plantation, Santhals in society are marginalized due to a combination of economic, social, cultural, and political circumstances.

With a hope of better economic prosperity and a better life Santhals came to Assam. However, as soon as they left their native place, they were confronted with immense suffering and misfortune, which persisted for an indefinite period. On their way to Assam, they endured both physical and mental torture, and upon reaching their destination, they found themselves in an undesirable predicament. The promises made to them by agents turned out to be deceitful. They were left unheard and unsupported, abandoned by the Sardars and Arkattis who were supposed to assist them. To add to their plight, the English planters demonstrated an unsympathetic attitude towards their struggles.

Santhal as OBC:

Despite their internal differences they are today referred to as a single community with the nomenclatures like 'Chah Janajati', 'Adivasi', 'Jaharkhand Adivasi', etc. The socioeconomic condition of this community is most deplorable and has been a cause for their further exploitation. For years after independence, the leading political parties, especially the Congress party, have been using them as 'vote bank' for electoral politics (C.K.Sharma 2012). In so far as identity of tea garden workers is concerned, they hailed from heterogeneous backgrounds. Firstly, they came from different geographical regions. Secondly, a section of them hailed from non-tribal communities (e.g., the Kurmis, Telis, Tantis etc.), too. Thirdly, the Santhals of western Assam came to Assam not as plantation workers. The Santhals, belonging to the Santhal Pargana region of the erstwhile Bengal Presidency, were settled in the area by

the colonial administration after the Santhal rebellion of 1855 (ibid. Sharma 2012).

Upon their arrival in Lakhimpur District, the Santhal community not only lost their traditional culture but also their Scheduled Tribe status. In this region, they are commonly referred to as the "Tea Tribe." Remarkably, all tea tribes in the area have been reclassified as Other Backward Class (OBC) instead of Scheduled Tribe. This alteration occurred after India gained its independence, resulting in the Santhal people being stripped of the educational, economic, and political privileges guaranteed to them by the Indian Constitution. The process of migration, displacement, and change of occupation has significantly impacted their sense of identity. Santhals working in the tea gardens of Lakhimpur District are not treated on an equal footing with the tribes of Assam. The act of migration has led to the erosion of their ecological attributes, which were once considered criteria for tribal recognition. Their displacement and change of occupation have caused them to lose all the distinctive elements of tribal life. In the Lakhimpur District, they are coerced into assimilating with other non-Santhal communities and, to some extent, adopting the ways of the local society.

The Santhal community, similar to Assam, faces significant challenges in terms of human development, placing them at the lowest end of the spectrum among all communities in India. Poverty, illiteracy, political marginalization, and complex socio-economic issues contribute to the overall state of human development within the Santhal community.

Conclusion:

Marginalization process can be viewed at this juncture due the paucity of information and communication that they receive in the society. Marginalization is the social process which can be identified at individual, community, and societal level. The idea of marginalization denotes an abstract idea and a concretized reality that is representative of some of the cruelty callous situations to be faced human beings. Since it is portrayed as invisible, but a continued process that is highly contextual to understand and explore. As Cox find that, "Marginalization is neither be quantified nor even defined in concise rather it is basically signifies is a situation in which a section of the population is pushed to the margins of a society". Tribal in general, Santhal community in particular, over the years has become the disadvantaged, exploited and the neglected a lot in our society. They live at the margin of periphery and dwell in the forests areas of Odisha, Jharkhand, Chatisgarh, Bengal and Assam. This community suffers from numerous problems due to lack of information and communication. Their problems are completely invisible, historically ignored and unnoticed. Social marginality is clearly visible due to lack of source of social power, but potential sources of prejudice and discrimination prevails among Santhal community in tribal society. Santhal are at the margin of the society. Not only, are they at the margin in terms of geographical location but also less representation and participation in political

and public sphere. In terms of religion, region, participation, caste, equal access of opportunities in health and education, they are not only backward, but historically marginalized.

The Santhal people are officially recognized as Scheduled Tribes only in Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, and Tripura states of India. Santhals residing in other administrative regions, particularly in the Northeastern states, which migrated during British Raj to work as labourers in Assam's tea gardens, are not listed as Scheduled Tribes. The term "Scheduled Tribes" first appeared in the Indian Constitution under Articles 366(25) which defines Scheduled Tribes as tribes or tribal communities, including subgroups, recognized as Scheduled Tribes for the purposes of the constitution based on Article 342. The Constitution of India lays down specific criteria for a community to be recognized as a Scheduled Tribe, including primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, limited interaction with the larger community, and socio-economic backwardness. On June 15, 1999, the Government of India approved procedures for considering claims for inclusion, exclusion, and modifications in the lists of Scheduled Tribes, subject to recommendations and justifications by the respective state governments or Union Territory administrations. These proposals must receive concurrence from the Registrar General of India (RGI) and the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST) before being considered for legislative amendments.

The Santhal community, being migrants, cannot be considered indigenous to the current area. Granting them Scheduled Tribe (ST) status could potentially undermine the privileges and political power that other communities have achieved through years of struggle to secure their own distinct status. The migration of Santhal communities has had detrimental effects on their ecological attributes, which are essential criteria for tribal recognition. Their displacement and shift in occupations have eroded all aspects of tribal life. In their new surroundings, they are compelled to assimilate with non-Santhal communities in the tea gardens and, to some extent, adopt the customs and practices of the local Hindu society. Consequently, their tribal identity has been permanently lost. Santhal people are dissatisfied with its imposed identity, i.e.; OBC, and have consistently resisted and protested against this categorization. They aspire to preserve their unique tribal identity. The (ASSU) Assam Santhal Student Union, an organization representing the interests of the Santhal community, firmly believes that the government should reconsider its decision and grant them Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, taking into account their long history of exploitation and socio-economic backwardness.

(Acknowledgement: Tarali Das acknowledges ICSSR Doctoral Fellowship granted by ICSSR, New Delhi. File no: RFD/2017-18/SOC/39)

Acronyms

AASSU: All Assam Santhal Student Union

ATTSA: Assam Tea Tribes Student Association

MNRGA: Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Guarantee Act

NCST: National Commission for Scheduled Tribe

OBC: Other Backward Class

RGI: Registrar General of India

ST: Scheduled Tribe

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