

Beyond Equality: Exploring Gender Equation among the Santals in Colonial Eastern India

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Abstract:*The Adivasis (Tribes) are mostly known for their democratic social formation and gender equality as women enjoyed certain fundamental and equal rights in contrast to their male counterpart to an extent. In fact, there was other side of the coin that speaks different reality of gender equation in tribal societies of Eastern India due to their patriarchal system of living. Being Adivasis the Santals were not exceptional in this regard as they had been controlled through customary rule and regulations from one generation to another and remained peaceful and organised. As a matter of fact, Santali women had various rights and privileges such as bride-price instead of dowry system in marriages, no restrictions for working women, freedom for participating in socio-cultural functions etc. Thus, the social scientists have often focused and romanticised the status of women in Santal society. On the other hand, Santal women were deprived and restricted from other rights and activities as well. This paper focuses to explore the status of women in Santal community of eastern India.*

Keywords: Dowry System, Eastern India, Gender Equation, Santal, Women etc.

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Introduction

History reveals that inequality emerged with the development of human civilization though it varied from community to community. As a matter of fact, India is a land of diversity of human culture as well as melting pot of anthropology.¹ This land has maintained her heterogeneous characteristics through the ages.² On the one hand, diversity makes an important feature of Indian culture and heritage. On the other hand, inequality based on caste,

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class, community and gender was responsible for conflicts and contest within Indian society. The colonial period witnessed a long series of external and internal conflicts. Therefore, Indian nation builders searched for unity in diversity and equality in unequal socio-cultural and economic spheres of the nation. In fact, the Adivasis have contributed a lot in this diversified socio-cultural tradition of India as they divided into different groups with different characteristics. It is also considered that the Adivasis enjoyed democratic as well as egalitarian social life from generation to generation. The scholars of different fields praised equalitarian living style of the Adivasis but they overlooked some sophisticated inequality that existed in their society and categorically speaking, gender inequality.

The Santal community is one of the largest Adivasi communities of India basically found in the states like Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha and Assam of eastern India. Geographically, Chotanagpur plateau was their prime abode and Santal Parganas was constituted as their homeland after historical struggle (1855-56). However, the Santal community was considered to be an egalitarian social-political entity which remained under patriarchy. Hence, there were a number of restrictions on their women. It is said that their customary law did not discriminate any of their village members on the basis of class or gender. Moreover, women played significant role during village formation but with time and space, they became marginalised within their social framework.

Adivasis in Indian History

It has been noticed that the Adivasis came lately into the forefront of colonial-writing as a separate socio-cultural entity of India. They experienced new challenges and developments due to colonial rule, such as their role in existing political system, access to local territory and forest resources, growing influx of outsiders into their villages and restructuring of age-old indigenous institutions, penetration of missionaries etc.³ It was for the first time during colonial period when the officials, anthropologists, missionaries and few Indian writers began to write on the Adivasis. Basically, these writings were systematic documentations of oral traditions of Tribal people. However, the Adivasis and their issues remained neglected in Indian historical writings for a long time. From 1980 onwards, historians of India took serious attempts towards the Adivasi issues. As a matter of fact, the turning points were emergence of Subaltern Studies and attention of United Nations Organization (UNO) on Indigenous People as a separate socio-cultural entity. Hence in recent times, Adivasis become

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an attractive research field for the scholars of different academia of social sciences. But the gender issues or women related issues have not received much attention from the scholars as they always remained under the shadow of patriarchal hegemony though gained some crucial rights in their society. As Debasree De has rightly commented:

These are, in fact, the colourful side of the tribal life, but there is also a dark side as the women in tribal societies are often considered doubly disadvantaged, in the first instances as tribal and in the second, as women. The discrimination, humiliation, torture, harassment that a caste women faces, is also faced by her. If she is beaten by her drunk husband she feels pain, if she works hard the whole day she gets tired, if she gets displaced she laments for her hut, if she loses her job in the course of deforestation for mining she starves, if she gets raped her entire personality shatters.⁴

But the status and position of Santal women in society had not received much attention of the scholars and they arbitrarily depicted a romantic picture of egalitarian Santal community. In this way, they overlooked gender based differences within Santal societal framework. In fact, different roles of women in their society and how they faced unequal treatment on several matters of the community also become the issues of historical writing in India that need more explorations.

Women in Struggle

The district of Santal Parganas came into existence in 1855 by the colonial government of the British East India Company for reconciliation with the Santals. It was a result of a life devoted struggle of the Santals. There were multiple reasons deep rooted in the socio-economic grievances of the Santals and the rebellion was the culmination of a long sufferings and fear of losing their traditional rights. However, the prestige of women was also a main reason behind the struggle. It broke out in *Damin-i-koh* region due to inhuman exploitation of the Santals by moneylenders and landlords. Besides, kidnapping, harassment and raped of women also added extra force to discontent. The records and interrogations revealed that one of the 'Railway Sahibs' had carried off two Santal women for his recreation. Another instance, one Sahib named Thomas regularly used to go out at night with a light in search of women and dishonoured them and also carried off goats, fowls by force. Therefore, the women of this Sahib family were eventually killed by the Santal rebels during the rebellion.⁵ Certainly, women not only the cause of the *Hul* but also involved actively in mobilizing the masses before or after the rebellion. The women visited from house to house of the village and encouraged the households for the cause of rebellion. In the course of the rebellion the

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men busied themselves with the rough task such as wrecking, demolition property of the *dikus*(whom they considered to be their enemy) while the women gathered the loot-according to social division of labour on the basis of gender. During pick time of the rebellion between October and November 1855, there were at least 45 Santal women imprisoned in Birbhum Jail, some carried kids with them too. Many were sentenced by the Sessions Judge on the basis of serious involvement in the insurgency and having actively assisted the insurgents in plundering and carrying the goods from different villages. There were two names figured out in a list of 19 Santal prisoners appeared before the Magistrate of Murshidabad in a fortnight after the outbreak of the *Hul*.⁶ Further, during entire time of the rebellion, women of the society bravely participated and played an important role with their male counterpart. Unfortunately, Indian historical writings remained silent on the matter of women participation and activities in the struggle, Phulo and Jhano Murmu were exceptional as a matter of leadership, they entered into colonial government camp and eventually, killed 21 soldiers with their swords. They were sister of Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu the great heroes of the *Hul*.⁷ However, the roles of women mostly were two types as they supplied all the necessary articles to the male fighters. On the other hand, they secretly worked as the spies and collected the information regarding the movements of the army. Therefore, the colonial administration arbitrarily arrested the Santali women and imprisoned them for long time. Ranajit Guha in his description of Santal struggle stated that ‘the entire female population of the Santal districts in 1855 could have been accused of acting as the providers and as eyes and the ears of the rebel forces.’⁸ The colonial records shows that women were the most sufferer as they harassed, tortured by the colonial administration and also by their own community leaders due to gender equation.⁹ Truly speaking, women had made an equal contribution to the cause of the formation of Santal Parganas as a homeland of the Santal community, but their role systematically was overlooked by all stakeholders for a long period of time. Moreover, Santal women participated and dedicated their lives for the cause of liberation throughout the course of the struggle. Eventually, they were sentenced for long imprisonment even with their children.¹⁰ But women received much less acknowledgment in contemporary writings.

Women and Village Organization

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Once, men and women both equally took part in the forming the Santal Society as their tradition reflects through the story of origin that *Pilchuharam*(first men) and *Pilchubudhi*(first women) were the earliest Santals. They always called themselves as *HorHopon*(means children of human being) and they accustomed in community based rights and activities. For example- making village and cultivable land through clearing the forests by joint workforce of able person of the Society and enjoyed equal rights over landed property. It was fact that irrespective of men and women of the society played vital role during early days of settlement under instruction of *Manjiharam* (the headman). The village council ensured social justice and peaceful living of the community through the ages. Presently, it was known as the Traditional Self-Governance (TSG) that still exists in the Santal villages.¹¹In fact, they have beliefs in patriarchy and women of the society carried double burden of patriarchal inscription on her body within dominant-subaltern power contestation.¹² The village organization or *Manjhi* system was fully regulated by male members of the village. The Santal women had an inferior position in the matter of village organization i.e. she had no role to play at the time of *Kulhidurup* or village meeting.¹³Because all the post holders of the organization were male members of the village, such as *Manjiharam*(Village headmen), *Jogmanjhi*(Officer of youth affairs), *Paranik*(Assistant of headmen), *Jog-paranik*(Assistant of *Jogmanjhi*), *Naike*(Village priest), *Kudom-naike*(Assistant of *Naike*) and *Godet*.(Village messenger) In the past, the village organization was the sole authority to deal with all the village affairs. Therefore, *Manjhi* organization had to perform the social rituals, conduction of festivals, marriage ceremony, and death rituals and get solution for the socio-economic and political disputes of the village. Traditionally, there were three women had to play vital role in socio-cultural functions, namely *Manjhi Budi*, *Jogmanjhi Budi* and *Naike Budi* respectively, the wives of *Manjhi*, *Jogmanjhi* and *Naike*. Otherwise, women had narrow space in the traditional village organization.¹⁴In this context to be said that Women of Santal community faces massive sufferings from their male counterpart's despite of these, they bear burden as the natural law of the village organization regulated by patriarchal ideas. Actually, the village organization or *Panchayats* were all about male affairs under the leadership of *Manjhi*(Village-headmen). Hence, women never were in decision-making process of the village.¹⁵The *Damin-i-koh* was formed in 1833 by the colonial authority in the name of better administration and gradually undermined and neglected the *Manjhi*'s authority.¹⁶Eventually, there were emerging massive

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grievances among the Santals and that was burst at the eve of the *Hul* of 1855, when the power and prestige of the village organization was curbed and *Manjhi* was reduced to a position of an ordinary villager. The outbreak of *Hul* was setback for colonial rule and went into the cause of it and recognised the power of the *Manjhi* system. Therefore, after formation of Santal Parganas district his traditional authority was revived and also the government made village headmen as the revenue collector and gave right to settle local disputes. Thus, the colonial authority realised the power and prestige of the traditional village organization in popular mindset of the Santals, but on the other hand, the status of Santal women did not change anymore. Generally, the Santal women never raised their voices against men regulated *Manjhi* system because they also had great beliefs in their socio-cultural institution that could not be violated and obeyed throughout their life. Hence, they were outside the decision making process of the society and men had to take all the decisions in village as well as community related matters. On the other hand, women had great role to play in household matters as they had an equal economic share of the family. Furthermore, the Santals welcomed both male and female child in their society with great joy.¹⁷ Despite hard reality was that women had no right to deal with village and community affairs as the social organization was completely reserved for male members of the community. Besides, women were debarred from religious participation because according to Santal customs men were the appropriate authority to perform religious activities. In 1949, one scholar noted that:

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....The Santal wife attends fairs and markets; she buys her own clothes and attends to the household shopping. The contrast between them and their non-Santal neighbours is heightened by the fact that they do not cover their heads. One end of the sari is thrown loosely across the breasts and over the left shoulder.¹⁸

Rights of Women

Adivasi Women had to perform multiple duties inside and outside of home. Similarly, Santal women had to bear many responsibilities on their shoulder as daughter, wife and mother in a family. Certainly, it is relevant to discuss the property rights of women in Santal society. The colonial ethnographers and anthropologists had recorded their customs, traditions, myths and superstitions but did not throw much light on the customary rights and privileges irrespective male and female attached to the village community.¹⁹ Frankly speaking, in patriarchal Santal

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community women had no control on immovable or landed property except certain cases. The girls had some rights on movable properties of her parents until she was unmarried. Once she got married she lost her property rights. In case of divorced or widow women certain property rights were reserved for their survival. The divorcee women received a portion of land from her parents or relatives and in case of widow, women kept her movable and immovable properties of her husband under control. In practical, women had very limited rights in the immovable property of her father side.²⁰ She could not ask for partition or portion of property at the time of her brother's separation. Although, a piece of land kept for meet her marriage purpose. However, the colonial Santal Parganas witnessed similar kind of instances regarding women property rights i.e. women had very little space in matter of property rights. Despite women received many rights on landed property after her husband's death. Even a daughter had an important share her father's wealth if she returned to natal house.²¹ However, women suffered from displacement more directly due to large developmental projects in eastern India. For instance, construction of Massanjore dam created land alienation for the Santals. It not only deteriorated the traditional living conditions of both men and women in resettled locations but also imposed burdens on women due to low quality of resources. In this context, scholars have noted that:

There has been a loss of access to common property, particularly forests and grazing fields, as well as markets. Alongside a decline in the total land held by the household, women's specific plots of land, namely, the *bari*, no longer exist. Finally, in a generalised context of limited land availability, there is an increased questioning of women's customary rights to land.²²

Women and Witchcraft

The Santals had strong beliefs in witchcraft. This was the most dreadful superstition prevailed in Santal community. The whole idea of witchcraft mostly related to women of the society and often this practice comes under the light of news media for committing violent activities even after so many years of independence.²³ Scholar like Shashank S. Sinha stated an incident that: 'On 17 October 2009, Sushila Devi and four other women, generally widows, accused of being *dayans* (witches), were beaten, paraded naked and forced to eat excreta in Patharghatia village in Deoghar district of Santal Parganas.²⁴ It was recent incident of cruel superstition like witchcraft prevailed among the Santals. Similar incidents were regularly occurred in colonial Santal Parganas. Assistant Commissioner of Bengal E. G. Man had depicted:

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A young Sonthal came running in to tell Amicus (a certain Assistant Commissioner) that his wife had been accused of witchcraft by a professional witch-finder and as the son of the head of the village had been long ill and was said to be under her influence, he had fears for her safety. My friend immediately rode out to the spot, and upon his arrival called a *Punchayat*. It did not take long for the whole of the village to assemble under a group of trees. The elder men formed a circle, sitting on their haunches, outside of which were grouped the younger ones and the women- some with children in their arms, some just rising into conscious womanhood- grouped themselves in wondering curiosity beyond, so as they could see the whole proceedings.²⁵

This was actual picture of Witch hunting by the *Ojhas* (traditional health practitioner and witch-finder). In many cases, rumour of witchcraft was planned to grab the landed property of widow women.²⁶ A well-known missionary L.O. Skrefsrud sincerely recorded the words of Kolean Guru (an experienced Santal) regarding the background of witchcraft in Santal society as follows:

The ancestors of old tell, they say, that Maranburu (Supreme Being) was teaching the men witchcraft; but by trick the women got the magic power first. One day, it is told, the men had set down in council to consult each other, what they should do with their scolding women. They said: we are men, how is it that our word does not count? When we say a couple of words to the women, they commence to scold shamelessly; we will not stand such behaviour. Then they said: Come along, let us go to Maranburu; from him we shall learn some kind of secret skill, that we may subdue these women.²⁷

However, due to witchcraft the women of the Santal society mostly suffered and their position often reduced and brought to the ground. Basically, widow and divorcee women with landed property were soft target to the culprits of the society as they kept eye on the property and eventually spread rumour. On the other hand, Ivy Imogene Hansdak sketched a historical picture of her past generation who had suffered from this inhuman social belief as follow:

Palu Hansdak was born in the village of Bijaypur, in the Santal Parganas, in 1862. Being an intelligent man with some education, he worked as a mukhtar or petition-writer. He was happily married, owned a small plot of land and had the simple needs of his class. Then a storm burst upon him that would change his life forever. His young wife was accused of witchcraft by the village ojha (Witch-finder) and threatened with death. To escape the wrath of their neighbours, the young couple fled from Bijaypur at night and took shelter at a Lutheran mission in Ranga. This was called the Niyadih congregation and they were given shelter by the village hapram or preacher. Here they converted to Christianity and Palu Hansdak started working both as preacher and a petition-writer. In 1923, at the age of 61 years, he was ordained as the pastor of Dumaria congregation of the Santal Mission of the Northern Churches. Since Dumaria was at some distance from Ranga, he was given a plot of land there by the Manjhi to build his house. In 1932, when a small Church was dedicated at Dumaria, Palu Hansdak was its pastor.²⁸

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Therefore, the Santal Parganas witnessed a different kind of incident of witchcraft where a young housewife of an established family was identified as a witch and threatened to death. It was rare but not invisible in Santal villages due to deep rooted superstition made no distinction between poor and wealthy of the villages. Certainly, women were supposed to be witches of the society. There was another point that violence and cruelty over witchcraft was one of important factor for the gradual popularity of the Christian missionaries in colonial Santal Parganas. However, the gender discrimination was prevailed among the Santals which degraded the status of their women. This kind of superstition had damaged the honour of the society.

Women and Inequality

If the witchcraft brought the implicit conflict marking gender relations in Santal society though this was not applied on certain gender freedom, as the idea of sexual pleasure in Santal stories and songs were remarkable.²⁹ Moreover, the Santals irrespective of their sex or gender enjoyed the life with rule and regulations of the society, specially, during grand village festivals such as *Sohrai* (the harvest festival) and *Bahaporob* (Flower festival). It reveals through insightful research on the Santal Society that there were certain restrictions imposed on the women. They were debarred from shoot arrows, use a razor, chisel holes, strike with an axe of fish with line and hook. They could not wear male clothes or play male instruments. Moreover, these acts were reserved for male members of the Society. Likewise, women visit to the *Jaherstan* (Ritual place or Sacred Grove of the Santal) was strictly prohibited. Eventually, the widow and divorced women were debarred from sacrificing animals, fowls as well as witnessing such activities. The ritual hunting in forest was reserved only for the male members of the society and women were restricted to enter to *bhitar* or private shrine of the village.³⁰ The women were also restricted from accompany of corps at the time of cremation. It was believed that due to the sex of women will contaminate the *Bongas*. Moreover, there were many restrictions imposed on the women kept them under patriarchal domination. Historically speaking, the women had the most vital contribution in forest and cultivation

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based Santal society for making the houses, collecting the firewood, food from the forestry and also actively participated in the irrigational workforce. However, the status of women in Santal society began to change with the effect of constitutional law, modern education and globalization, because the traditional village organization has gradually lost its hold on every individual of the community.

Conclusion

To sum up, Santal women were virtually free like men and enjoyed equal rights over certain matters like absolute freedom to select the company within the community, earning by herself, equal involvement in the village festivals, bride price instead of dowry, right to divorce and remarry etc. On the other hand, if we look into the status of women in Santal society then true fact will come out which show that they were always under shadow of patriarchy during colonial eastern India. In fact, so called egalitarian Santal society contained many male dominated values that created some inequality among them on the basis of gender. However, the post-colonial India witnessed no rapid changes in this regard due to poor education rate and economic development among them. According to their ignorant attitudes towards earthly complexities was cause for the systematic deprivation from their natural resources. Hence, they were bound to migrate to West Bengal for their seasonal livelihood irrespective of gender. It is interesting note that there was proportionate gender equation in the workplace. However, the status of Santal women has significantly been developed in post-colonial period due to various reasons.

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