



A Study on Civilization Process of Santhal Community with special reference to Tripura

Mr. Tanmoy Acharjee¹, Dr. Ankita Paul²

1. Guest Faculty, Department of Rural Management and development, Tripura University (A Central University)
Mob- +918787450108, Email- tanmoyacharya63@gmail.com
2. An Independent Researcher in the Rural Development Academy, Mob- +918258008184, Email- ankitapaul516@gmail.com

Abstract: The Santhal community, one of the largest tribal groups in India, has undergone significant transformations in their socio-cultural and economic life over the decades. This study aims to explore the civilization process of the Santhal community in rural Tripura, focusing on the gradual changes in lifestyle, education, livelihood, and social structure. Through qualitative fieldwork and participatory observation in selected Santhal-inhabited villages, the paper investigates how modernization, government policies, and rural development initiatives have influenced their traditional customs and identity. The findings reveal that while the Santhals have embraced aspects of modernization such as education and improved livelihoods, they continue to preserve their cultural roots, language, and community solidarity, reflecting a hybrid form of civilization.

Keywords: Santhal Community, Civilization Process, Tribal Development, Rural Tripura, Socio-cultural Change, Modernization.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study:

Tribal communities represent an essential segment of India's cultural mosaic. Among them, the Santhal community occupies a significant place due to their distinct language, customs, and socio-economic patterns. In Tripura, the Santhals have settled mainly in rural and semi-rural areas, engaging primarily in agriculture, forest-based activities, and wage labour. Over the past few decades, the process of civilization and modernization has gradually influenced their traditional way of life. This paper studies how external and internal forces have reshaped the Santhal community's socio-cultural and economic dimensions.

The Santhals are one of the largest tribes in India. They are found in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Orissa, Assam, Meghalaya, and Tripura. They are also found in Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Nepal. They are skilled in various arts including music, handicrafts, and have a rich cultural heritage. Literature on their customs, tradition and culture are however scanty. Individuals belonging to this community are mostly deprived of education and hence pass on traditions and customs orally from one generation to the other. The dances they perform, the clothes they wear, the festivals they celebrate, the gods they worship, the crafts they specialize in, the tasks they perform have been compiled in the study. (Soren Priyanka, 2021)

1.2 Santhal Tribes in Tripura

Santals are among the immigrant tribes in Tripura. They belong to Austro-Asiatic racial stock. Their original homelands are in west Bengal, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. They have migrated to this state as Tea garden laborers. As per 2001 Census Santhals are only 2,151 persons in Tripura. They mainly concentrated in Simna and Mechliban Tea Garden areas of Sadar Sub-Division and other places in the State. Agriculture and Hunting of wild animals sustain their additional food requirement. In fact most of them do not have land. Land usually allotted by Tea garden owner outside the garden generally cultivated by them to produce paddy and vegetable. Santals cremate their dead. The Christian Santhals bury the dead. In case of death due to incurable diseases, accidental death or pre-mature death, bodies are buried. After cremation, bones and ash are brought in a grove over which a stone slave is placed in the memory of the deceased. The Santals are peace-loving tribe and live together with other communities in a peaceful co-existence.

1.3 Culture and their Musical Instruments

Santhals love dancing. It is in their blood. Dance is the important part of the Santhals fairs and festivals after the long day hard work, Santhals relax themselves with the light music and dance. Santhal women wearing dress in the red bordered white sari and dance in the line sequence. Apart from dance Santhals play great music using Tirio (bamboo flute with the seven holes), Dhodro banam (which consists of belly called lac covered with an animal skin on which rests the bridge(sadam, lit, horse), an open chest(korom), a short neck(hotok)and a head(bohok), Phet banam (a fretless stringed instrument with three or four strings), Tumdak, Tamak, Junko and Singa.

2. Review of literature

(Samrat Mal, March 2020) In this study, the link between democracy and universal education is emphasized, noting that education is essential for creating responsible citizens. The term “education” in Bengali, derived from the Sanskrit word Shas, implies not just learning but shaping moral character. Historically, access to education in India was unequal—lowers castes and tribal communities were systematically excluded, as seen in ancient texts like the Mahabharata and Upanishads. Even during British rule, education was mainly spread among the middle class for administrative purposes, leaving tribal populations behind. The study focuses on the educational progress in Santal tribal villages of the Gorarangdih area, where no primary schools existed until 1956–1957. Now, the area has multiple schools and the number of Santal students enrolled has increased significantly—often surpassing national averages. This growth is credited to awareness efforts by public servants, volunteers, and the local community, signaling a strong move toward eliminating illiteracy in the region.

(Saren, June, 2025) In this study, the socio-cultural and historical aspects of the Santal community are explored using a qualitative approach based on traditional knowledge and secondary sources. The Santals, an Austroasiatic ethnic group, are the largest tribal community in West Bengal, making up 5.8% of the state’s population and 47.43% of its Scheduled Tribe (ST) population (Census 2011). They are mainly concentrated in districts like Bankura, Purulia, and Jhargram. Tribal culture, including that of the Santals, significantly enriches India’s heritage through unique customs, music, rituals, and language. Despite their cultural richness, Santals face challenges in education, healthcare, and land rights. Historically, they resisted British rule during the Santal Hul, India’s first tribal uprising. Government initiatives post-independence have aimed to improve their socio-economic conditions. Increased representation, like the election of President Droupadi Murmu, symbolizes hope and empowerment. Literature emphasizes the resilience and cultural pride of the Santal community amid modernization pressures.

(Dey, July - August 2015) According to this study, the Santhals are one of the largest tribal communities in India, mainly residing in Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha, and Assam. They belong to the Pre-Aryan period and played a major role in resisting British rule, with leaders like Sidhu and Baba Tilka Majhi. Scholars like Sreferud (1968) and O.J. Troisi have traced the origin of the term "Santhal" and their migration history. Traditionally, Santhals lived a forest-based life and followed specific gender roles. However, with the spread of education, urban migration, and exposure to modern technology and health systems, their lifestyle, beliefs, and social structures have significantly changed. Researchers have noted the effects of modernization on their cultural values, occupational roles, and the declining importance of patriarchy in their community.

(Sahoo, 2016) In this study, we explore how communication impacts the lives of tribal communities, especially the Santals in eastern India. Earlier studies show that tribal people have been historically marginalised and left out of mainstream development. Researchers found that they face many problems like poor education, low income, and limited access to healthcare. Traditional forms of communication, such as folk songs, stories, and village meetings, help them share knowledge and preserve culture. Other studies highlight that modern media, like TV, radio, and mobile phones, bring important information about jobs, education, and government schemes. Communication also

helps increase awareness, confidence, and unity among tribal people. It plays a strong role in improving their living standards. Both traditional and modern communication methods are important for empowering tribal communities. This study builds on earlier research to understand how communication brings social change and development among the Santals.

(Hembrom)According to this study, the Santals are among the earliest inhabitants of India, with some scholars suggesting their roots date back to before Christ. Others believe they migrated from regions like Babylon, Persia, or present-day Pakistan. Researchers agree that the Santals have a strong cultural identity shaped by their myths, traditions, and connection to nature. Folktales play a key role in preserving and expressing their beliefs, history, and values. The Santals see nature not just as a resource, but as family—trees, animals, and spirits are treated with deep respect. Studies also highlight that Santal life is closely tied to their community, clan rules, festivals, and traditional governance. Theoretical frameworks like National Folklore Theory and Functional Theory show how folklore reflects their culture and identity. These tales reveal that Santals live in harmony with nature and pass down knowledge through oral stories, making folklore a powerful tool in understanding who they are.

(Ronit Chakraborty, 2018)On this article, the study explores the cultural and communication patterns of the Santal community in Bishnupur, West Bengal. The Santals are considered indigenous people, with a long history of resistance, such as the revolt led by Sidhu-Kanu against British rule. The research highlights how their traditional lifestyle has adapted over time, especially through exposure to modern agriculture and technology. Interviews conducted with villagers reveal the importance of oral communication and cultural practices in daily life. The study also points out the role of Christian missionaries in providing healthcare, but notes concerns about cultural division caused by religious conversion. Santals continue to maintain strong community bonds through festivals, rituals, and traditional governance. However, modern influences have started to reshape their identity. This literature forms a base to study how communication shapes cultural continuity and change among the Santals.

3. Objectives of the Study

- To understand the traditional socio-cultural life of the Santhal community in rural Tripura.
- To examine the impact of modernization, education, and government initiatives on their lifestyle.
- To analyze the transformation in their livelihood patterns and social organization.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Study Area

The present study is located in Tripura. From 8 district of Tripura, Sepahijala District & West Tripura District both rural & urban area have been selected for the study as civilization process of Santhal community among Tribels groups in Tripura. In the Sepahijala District the current study are situated under Bishalgarh R.D Block & Agartala Municipality Corporation. In other side the West Tripura District the current study area are situated under Dukli R.D Block, Bamutia R.D Block and Agartala Municipality Corporation.

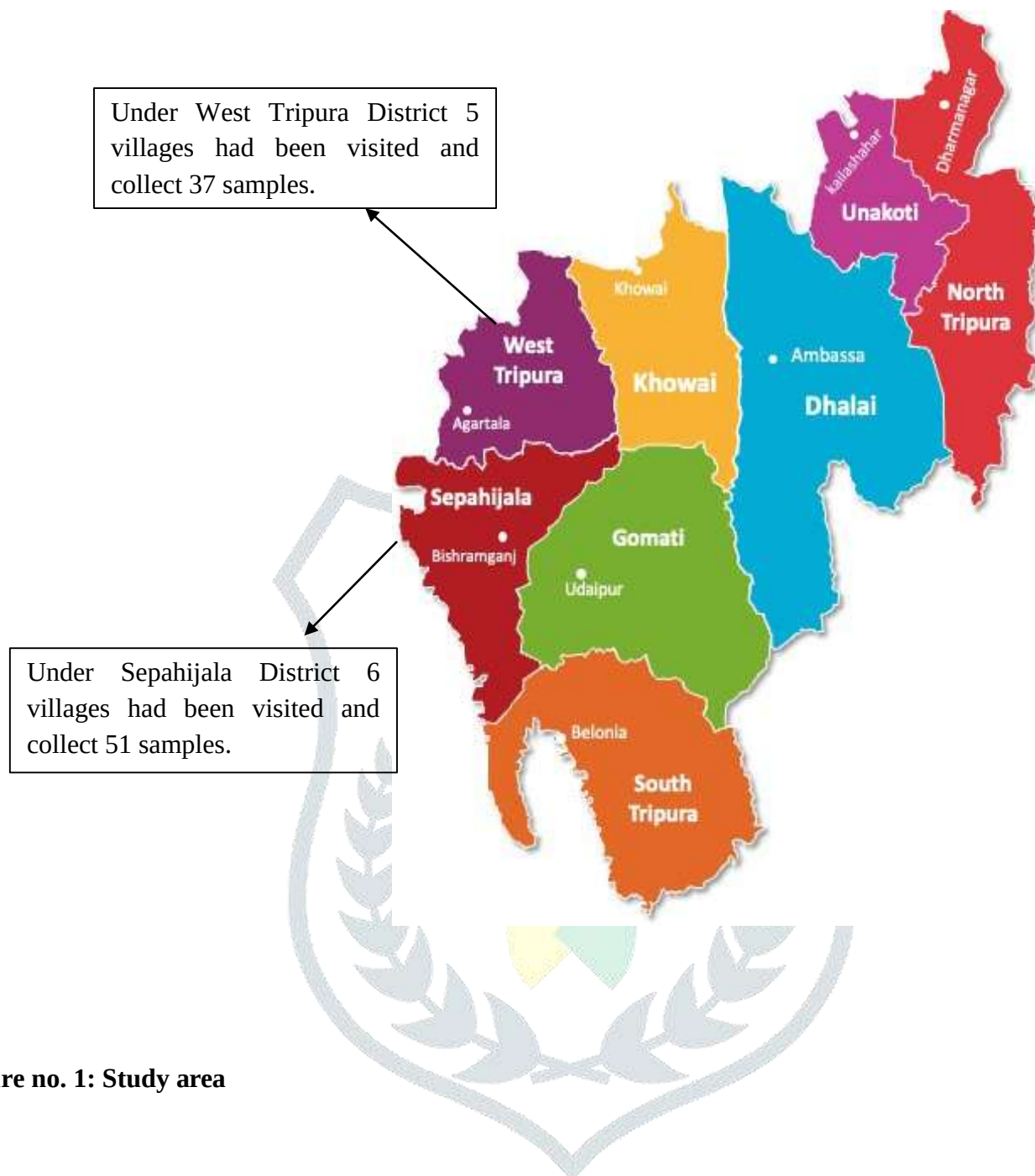
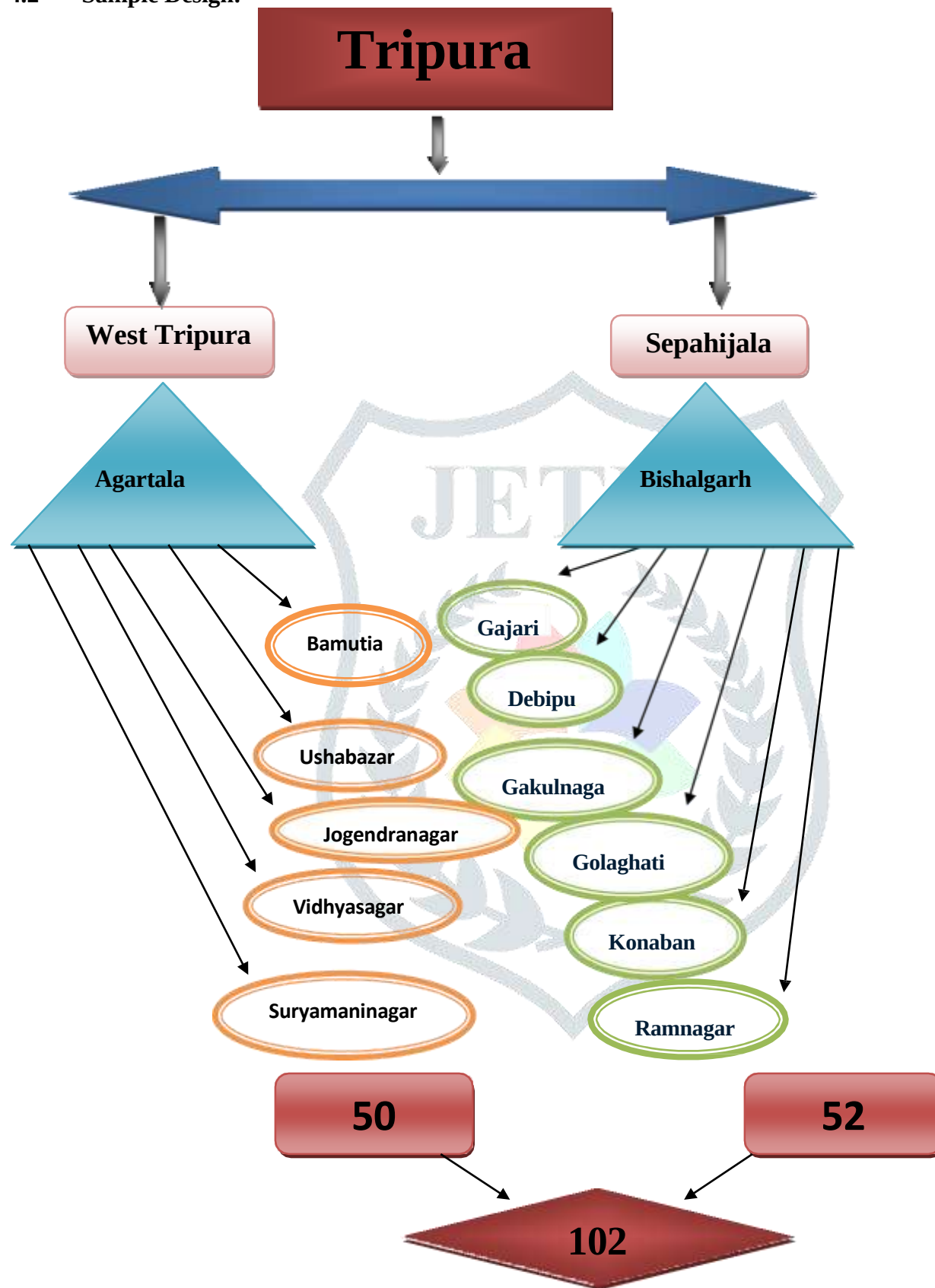


Figure no. 1: Study area

4.2 Sample Design:



4.3 Sample Size of the Study

Total 102 respondents are collected from two District of Tripura such as West Tripura & Shipahijala District.

4.4 Data Collection method

The research follows a qualitative and descriptive methodology. Data were collected through:

- **Primary Sources:** Field observations, semi-structured interviews with Santhal households, community leaders, and women's groups in selected villages of Dhalai and West Tripura districts.
- **Secondary Sources:** Census data, government reports, research articles, and documents from the Tripura Tribal Research and Cultural Institute.

The study employs a thematic analysis to interpret the collected data, focusing on social, cultural, and economic changes.

5. Result & Discussion

Table 5.1: Education Status of the Respondents

Qualification status	Number of Female	Number of Male	Percentage
Illiterate	16	20	40.90
Primary	17	16	37.5
High School	05	08	14.77
Graduate	04	02	6.81
Total	42	46	88 (100)

Source: - Field Survey, 2024-25

The result represents that the educational qualifications of males and females of the Santhal community. There the result founded that 40.90 percent of total male and female respondents had illiterate. 37.5 percent respondents' education level was primary. Here, 14.77 percent respondents had completed their high school studies and only 6.88 percent respondents said that they had completed their graduation.

Table 5.2: Occupational Distribution of Family Members by Gender

Occupational status	Number of Female	Number of Male	Percentage
Agriculture (cultivation)	02	06	9.09
Agricultural labour	11	09	22.72
Shifting Cultivation (Jhum)	06	03	10.22

Forest-based Activities	03	04	7.95
Daily wage labour	02	14	18.18
Government job	00	01	1.13
Private job	00	03	3.40
Handicraft and traditional work	14	04	20.45
No work	04	02	6.81
Total	42	46	88 (100)

Source-Field survey 2024-25

This table reveals that 9.09 percent Santhals in Tripura are small or marginal farmers. They grow crops such as paddy (rice), maize, vegetables, and sometimes jute or oilseeds, mainly for subsistence. 22.72 percent Santhals also work as farm laborers on others' land, especially during sowing and harvesting seasons. In some hilly areas, a few families still practice jhum cultivation, though this is declining due to government restrictions and modernization. 7.95 percent Santhal were collection of firewood, fruits, bamboo, and forest produce supplements their income. There are 18.18 percent respondents had taken up daily wage work, construction, especially in urban and semi-urban areas. 20.45 percent respondents are engage in bamboo work, weaving, and traditional music or dance performances during festivals. Only 1.13 percent respondent are work in government sector.

Table 5.3: Dishes of Santhal Community in Tripura

Vegetarian Dishes	Non-vegetarian Dishes
--------------------------	------------------------------

While a lot of specific data for Santhals in Tripura is lacking, the wider tribal vegetarian side in Tripura gives some cues:

- The state's vegetarian dishes include vegetable curries like a 5-spice vegetable dish ("Panch Phoron Tarkari" made with brinjal, pumpkin, potato) from Tripura cuisine.
- Thus, for Santhals in Tripura, a traditional forms likely included rice plus vegetables/wild greens/tubers, with minimal non-veg in the vegetarian portion of meals.
- Some typical Santhal dishes are: Handia (Rice Beer), Baha Bhat (Rice with Wild Greens), Daka Bhat (Boiled Rice with Lentils), Sinna (Vegetable Curry).

Some typical non-vegetarian Santhal dishes are:

- Fish curry: fish is marinated with turmeric and salt, and then fried. A curry base is prepared with onions, garlic, ginger, and tomatoes, and the fried fish is simmered in the curry.
- Meat Stew: meat is slow-cooked with onions, garlic, ginger and wild herbs until tender. Turmeric and salt are added for flavor.

Source-Field survey 2024-25

Table 5.4: Usage of Kitchen Tools (Past & Present)

Aspect	Past Traditional Tools	Present Modernization
Materials	Bamboo, cane, wood, earthen clay, leaves	Stainless steel, aluminium, plastic, possibly bamboo/cane for selected items
Cooking hearth/fuel	Firewood, open flame, clay hearth	Improved stoves (smokeless), possibly LPG/electric, metal pots
Vessels & utensils	Earthen pots, bamboo baskets, leaf plates	Pressure cookers, metal pots/kadai, metal ladles, plastic/metal storage
Storage/processing tools	Bamboo winnowers, sieves, baskets crafted locally	Purchased containers, sacks/plastic bins, fewer hand-processing tools
Serve ware & tableware	Leaf plates, bamboo trays, natural serve-ware	Metal plates/cutlery, plastic-ware, occasional traditional items

Craft linkage	Many tools self-made or locally crafted	Many tools market-bought; traditional craft may persist in niche roles
Cultural continuity	High — tools integral to lifestyle & forest/tribal economy	Mixed — some traditional tools retained, many modern tools adopted
Sustainability/Materials sourcing	Highly sustainable, low external input	More reliance on market goods, materials with higher cost and less local production

Source-Field survey 2024-25

This table discuss the usage of kitchen tools in Tripura reflects the state's cultural evolution — from traditional tribal and rural practices to more modern, urbanized lifestyles. The transition from past to present kitchen tools shows how modernization, availability of manufactured goods, and changing lifestyles have transformed food preparation methods. The preceding detailed description of kitchen tools used in the past and present in Tripura, especially among rural and urban Santhal community.

Table 5.5: Types of Marriage Practiced in Santhal Society

Type of Marriage	Santhali Term	Description
Arranged Marriage	Kirin Dala / Bapla	Family-arranged, with bride price
Love/Elopement Marriage	Kirin Gahuriat	Couple elopes, later regularized
Widow Remarriage	Kirin Sanga	Widow remarries, socially accepted
Sororate Marriage	Kirin Chhoti Bibaha	Man marries wife's sister after her death
Service Marriage	Kirin Itut	Groom works for bride's family
Exchange Marriage	Kirin Nirbolok	Exchange of brides between families
Capture Marriage	Kirin Thala	Marriage by capture (rare now)
Remarriage after Divorce	Kirin Mankid	Divorced individuals remarry

Types of marriage	Numbers of member	Percentage
-------------------	-------------------	------------

Source-Field survey 2024-25

In Santhal society (including those living in Tripura and other parts of eastern India like Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, and Assam), marriage is a vital social institution that strengthens family and clan ties. The Santhals practice several distinct types of marriage, each with its own customs and rituals.

Table 5.6: Distribution of Gender Preference among Parents

Gender preference	Approx. % of Santhal parents	Remarks
Preference for Sons	40	Mostly in rural, less educated families
Preference for Daughters	25	Seen among educated or economically independent families.
NoPreference (Gender Neutral)	35	Common in moderate-income, mixed-cultural families.

Source-Field survey 2024-25

The data shows that 40 percent of respondents prefer sons, and they mostly belonged in rural and less educated families. While 25 percent prefer daughters, they are belonged in educated & financially independent families. About 35 percent of respondents have no gender preference, indicating they value both equally. The higher preference for boys suggests a possible gender bias in the society. However, the significant percentage preferring both indicates a shift toward gender-neutral attitudes among some individuals.

Table 5.7: Comparative Table: Past vs. Present Water Sources

Aspect	Past (Traditional Period)	Present (Modern Period)
Main Sources	Rivers, ponds, wells, springs	Tube wells, hand pumps, piped supply
Ownership	Community-based	Household or government-based
Accessibility	Limited; required walking long distances	Easily available near homes
Water Quality	Natural but unfiltered; sometimes contaminated	Filtered or treated water, safer for health
Maintenance	Community responsibility	Government or household responsibility

Use of Technology	None	High (mechanical pumps, filtration, pipelines)
Women's Role	Carried water daily from sources	Reduced burden due to closer



		access
Environmental Impact	Eco-friendly, sustainable	Extraction of groundwater increasing
Seasonal Dependence	Highly dependent on rainfall	Less seasonal impact, but power-dependent
Cultural Value	Water sources as community gathering points	Reduced social interaction due to privatization

Source-Field survey 2024-25

Water is central to the livelihood and health of the Santhal community in Tripura, a predominantly rural and agrarian group. Traditionally, the Santhals relied on natural and community-based water sources like rivers, ponds, and wells. In the present era, however, there has been a major shift toward modern, technology-based water systems such as tube wells, piped water, and public supply schemes. This comparison highlights the transition in terms of availability, accessibility, quality, and usage of water over time.

Table 5.8: Factors behind the Change of Water Sources

Factor	Impact on Water Source Transition
Government Schemes	Rural water supply programs improved access.
Education & Awareness	Increased understanding of hygiene and safe drinking water.
Technology & Infrastructure	Hand pumps, pipelines, and filtration systems introduced.
Population Growth	Increased demand for safe and reliable sources.
Climate Change	Drying of traditional water bodies led to shift toward deep wells.

Source-Field survey 2024-25

5.9 Traditional Life of the Santhal Community in Tripura:

The Santhals have a communitarian lifestyle, organized under a village council led by a *Manjhi* (headman). Their economy is largely agrarian, supplemented by forest gathering and manual labour. Traditional houses are made of mud and thatch, and their festivals — such as *Sohrai*, *Baha*, and *Karam* — reflect deep ties with nature and agriculture.

Religiously, the Santhals follow Sarnaism, worshipping nature spirits (*Bonga*). Oral traditions, music, dance, and storytelling are vital components of their cultural identity, reflecting collective memory and social values.

5.10 Civilization Process and Cultural Transition

The term “civilization process” here refers to the transformation from traditional tribal isolation to participation in the broader socio-economic system. Among the Santhals in Tripura, this process manifests through several dimensions:

- **Education:** Government and NGO-led literacy programs have increased school enrollment, particularly among

children. Although dropout rates remain high, awareness of education as a means of upward mobility is growing.

- **Livelihood Transformation:** Santhals have diversified their occupations beyond agriculture, engaging in wage labour, small business, and government employment. Women increasingly participate in self-help groups and handicrafts.
- **Social and Cultural Change:** Western clothing, mobile phones, and mass media have influenced daily life. Yet, traditional dances, songs, and community gatherings persist, representing a form of cultural continuity amid change.
- **Housing and Health:** Modern housing under schemes like PMAY (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana) and access to rural health services have improved living standards.
- **Political Awareness:** Participation in local governance (Panchayati Raj) has increased, enhancing representation and empowerment.

5.11 Role of Government and Development Programs

Government initiatives such as MGNREGA, Tribal Sub-Plan, and Integrated Tribal Development Programme (ITDP) have improved economic security. The Department of Tribal Welfare, Tripura, has promoted education scholarships, livelihood training, and health awareness programs for Santhal families. However, challenges persist in the form of limited land ownership, lack of higher education opportunities, and insufficient market linkages for tribal produce.

5.12 Challenges in the Civilization Process

Despite progress, the Santhal community faces:

- **Cultural Erosion:** Younger generations are gradually detaching from traditional language (*Santhali*) and customs.
- **Economic Vulnerability:** Many Santhals still depend on low-income jobs and seasonal labour.
- **Educational Disparities:** Access to quality education and higher studies remains limited due to poverty and remoteness.
- **Identity Crisis:** Rapid modernization often conflicts with indigenous identity, creating social tension within the community.

6. Conclusion

The Santhal community of Tripura, one of the prominent tribal groups in the region, reflects a dynamic process of civilization that embodies both continuity and change. Traditionally, the Santhals maintained a close relationship with nature, adhering to their indigenous customs, social institutions, and belief systems that emphasized communal living, collective labor, and cultural identity. However, with the gradual influence of modernization, formal education, Christianity, and state-led development programs, the Santhal community has experienced significant transformation in their socio-economic and cultural life.

The study has identified various changes within the Santhal community over time. The field survey was conducted using a structured questionnaire developed in alignment with the study's objectives. It is important to note that the data collected from the field reflects only the conditions of the selected sample in the Bishalgarh and West Tripura may not fully represent the entire Santhal population across Tripura.

A total of 88 respondents were selected for the study from Bishalgarh and West Tripura, where the Santhal community forms a significant portion of the population. The community is also prominently found in Khowai. Their economy remains primarily dependent on agricultural labour, which continues to be their traditional occupation.

The study reveals that while many aspects of traditional Santhal life—such as their language, festivals, kinship patterns, and modes of subsistence—continue to be valued, there is a visible shift toward adopting modern occupations, education, and improved living standards. The integration of the Santhals into the wider socio-economic framework of Tripura has led to both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, greater access to education, health facilities, and employment has improved their quality of life; on the other, exposure to mainstream culture has contributed to the gradual erosion of traditional practices, rituals, and community cohesion.

Overall, the civilization process of the Santhal community in Tripura is not merely a story of cultural loss or assimilation but one of adaptation and resilience. The Santhals have demonstrated their capacity to adjust to changing social realities while striving to preserve their ethnic identity and cultural heritage. This dual process of transformation and preservation underscores the community's active role in shaping its own developmental path within the broader framework of rural and tribal development in Tripura. Ensuring sustainable and inclusive development thus requires recognizing and respecting the Santhals' cultural values while empowering them through participatory approaches that strengthen their socio-economic position in contemporary society.

Reference

1. Dey, A. (July - August 2015). An Ancient History: Ethnographic Study of the Santhal. *International Journal of Novel Research in Humanity and Social Sciences*.
2. Hembrom, T. (n.d.). A study of Santals as children of nature in the light of Santal folktales. *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities*.
3. Ronit Chakraborty, D. P. (2018). Cultural Communication Pattern of Santal Community in Bishnupur. *Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*.
4. Sahoo, J. R. (2016). Marginalisation, Communication and Media Life: An Explorative Study of Santal Community in India. *Global Media Journal*.
5. Samrat Mal, B. P. (March 2020). A study on educational status of Santal (tribal). *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*.

6. Saren, B. (June,2025). Socio-cultural and Traditional Practices of Santal Tribal Community in West Bengal. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research* .

7. Soren Priyanka, J. W. (2021). The Santhals: Their Culture and Traditions. *ResearchGate* , 79-82.

