



Tribal Culture And Tribe-Caste Nexus: A Study Among The Santals Of Ramnagar Village In Rural Bengal

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Abstract

A tribe is a self-controlled unit having a distinct name, dialect, common territory, customs, primitive occupation, religion, and culture. There are more than seven hundred scheduled tribes in India. Among them few are living isolated from the outer world but many of tribes in India are in continuous connection with nearby caste system. This article will address the tribe caste nexus and its consequences. There are lots of tribal groups who are indulged in this process. To understand this process of change, Santal tribe in Ramnagar village, of Birbhum district was selected. The main objective of this paper is to clearly understand about the tribe caste nexus which leads to the assimilation of Santals with local dominant Hindu caste and its impact on tribal culture, economy and the society. The study will focus on the transition of traditional tribal society to a modern society due to observation and imitation of other caste people. Change in food habit, clothing style, religious practices, customs, culture, and occupation made life easier or created identity crisis will be a focused area of the study.

INDEX TERMS: Tribe, Tribe- caste nexus, Santal, Assimilation, Dominant Caste, Sanskritization,

Introduction

According to the Dictionary of Anthropology, a tribe is a social group, usually with a definite area, dialect, cultural homogeneity, and unifying social organization. Tribes have a hierarchical social structure, with leaders, elders and other important figures. They have strong kinship system which plays important roles in social organization and decision making. Every tribal group has their own common language, religion, customs, traditions and belief system. They have strong spiritual beliefs and practices. They usually practice totemism, animism, shamanism which are ancestor worship, spirit worship and the worship of nature. Each tribal group have their own formal or informal political structure. Here the leaders make decision to resolve the community problems.

In India, tribal people are known by many names, such as 'Adivasi', 'scheduled tribes', 'tribes', 'janajati', 'girijan', 'vanvasi', 'vanyajati', adimjati, 'hill tribe', and indigenous people. Indian constitution covered all these names as 'Anusuchit Janjati' or Scheduled Tribe. Tribes of India have glorious history. Few tribes in India lives in the forest, hills and isolated regions but there are lots of tribal groups who cohabit with non-tribes also and it is very common in India. For example, Santal tribe in eastern India, Toda tribes in Nilgiri

hills have direct communication with caste system. As a result, these tribal groups undergone significant transformation adopting Hindu customs and rituals while retaining some of their traditional practices and they have combined elements of both tribal and caste system.

To understand the change in tribal culture due to the nexus with caste system some concept should be discussed. Sinha (1965) describes the gradual transformation of tribal communities into caste-based communities as 'tribe- caste continuum'. This process is also called as assimilation. Assimilation refers to the process through which minority or subordinate groups with different heritages acquire the basic characteristics, habits, attitudes, and mode of life of an embracing or dominant culture. In this process, tribal groups gradually adopt Hindu customs, rituals and caste system. It is a voluntary process. Due to living near with the caste-based communities' tribes are influenced by them. Trade, market and other economic exchanges can lead to cultural exchange and assimilation. Political factors and policies also accelerate this process.

Tribal Assimilation with Dominant Caste

According to Srinivas (1965), assimilation process as 'Sanskritisation' where lower castes and tribes emulating the culture of dominant caste (twice- born) to enhance their social status. According to Srinivas, "a caste is said to be dominant when it preponderates numerically over the other caste groups and yields high economic and political power". There are different social reasons behind assimilation of tribe or lower caste with the dominant caste, such as -abolishing stereotype, prejudice and discrimination towards them from the dominant caste. They believe that the change in their cultural practices, food preferences will help them to be accepted by the other caste and to elevate social position in social hierarchy or structure.

According to Ghurye (1980) tribal people are backward Hindus differing only in degrees from the other segments of Hindu society. Verrier Elwin (1939) argued for the recognition of separate social and cultural identity of tribal people. Government of India gives tacit recognition to this identity of keeping alive under article 342 of Indian constitution sanction their lists of Scheduled Tribe. In India there are few tribal groups who are totally living isolated, self- controlled from the outer world who are addressed as particularly vulnerable tribal groups,

Major tribal groups are assimilating with the other caste from long time. Bhil, Gond, Santal, Tharu all these tribes have history of assimilation. Tribal population in India can be divided into four types; the first one consists of tribes who are forest dwellers of an original forest habitat. Second type of population is of those practicing settled or shifting agriculture in rural areas. Third category of tribes refers to those who are semi assimilated with major dominated communities. The fourth one is the 'Assimilated tribal population'.

Objective of the study

Tribal assimilation with caste is a process which is happening from the long time in India. The objective of the study is to observe and demonstrate the change from traditional lifestyle to present lifestyle of the Santal tribe resided in village Ramnager of Birbhum district in West Bengal. Both the positive and negative impact on tribal culture, society and lifestyle due to nexus with the dominant caste will be discussed.

Research Methodology and Data Collection

The study has been conducted in Ramnagar Village, which is 10 km away from Bolpur- Sriniketan Block. This village is selected purposefully due to its accessibility and number of tribal populations. Among the total 243 households, 105 households belong to the Santals in Ramnagar village. From the cluster of 105 tribal households, 50 tribal households are selected randomly. Primary data was collected through Observation, Interview, and Focus Group Discussion methods. From the beginning of the study people were interested to talk about their current socio-economic conditions. The older generation shared their brief history about their inhabitation i.e. where from they have come to the place and how was the struggle of their parents and grandparents when they shifted to this place. They also shared about their younger life, food, household, clothes and how they used to celebrate their festivals. On the other hand, the younger generation talked about current way of living. They have shared the details about the comforts they are

getting due to the change in their culture. For the secondary data Different books, journal articles and websites were followed to establish the objectives.

Data Collection and the Analysis

During the British Period and after the independence of India many tribal communities migrated from their native places, to escape from conflicting situation (Vidyarthi & Rai, 1985) and to get better livelihood. The Santals have golden history. They are one of the oldest tribes in India. Many of Santal population have moved from their native place for the search of job. Many of them have been brought by the Jamindars from different areas of Bengal as they are good agriculture laborers and gave them settlement outer most part of the village. And some have come to other places living their motherland like vagabond. Cultural differences, food habits, clothing style, source of economy drop them the lowest strata of the social structure. Discrimination and 'Purity and Pollution' was major reason to assimilate with the new culture (Dumont, 1970). Also living with new culture, interacting with the people of different culture inspires the Santals of village Ramnagar to adopt new culture. As a result, tribal people in this village adopt the culture, customs, rituals, and ideology of the dominant culture. Many cases, it has been found that the tribal people suppress their own culture and following dominant culture to enhance their social status. This leads to the loss of their own culture. They are following a hybrid culture, where the prevalence of dominant culture is more than their own culture. Through this study changing culture of the Santal tribe in Ramnagar village by the influence of the local dominant culture have been observed.

Nexus of Santal tribe in Ramnagar Village with dominant Hindu caste

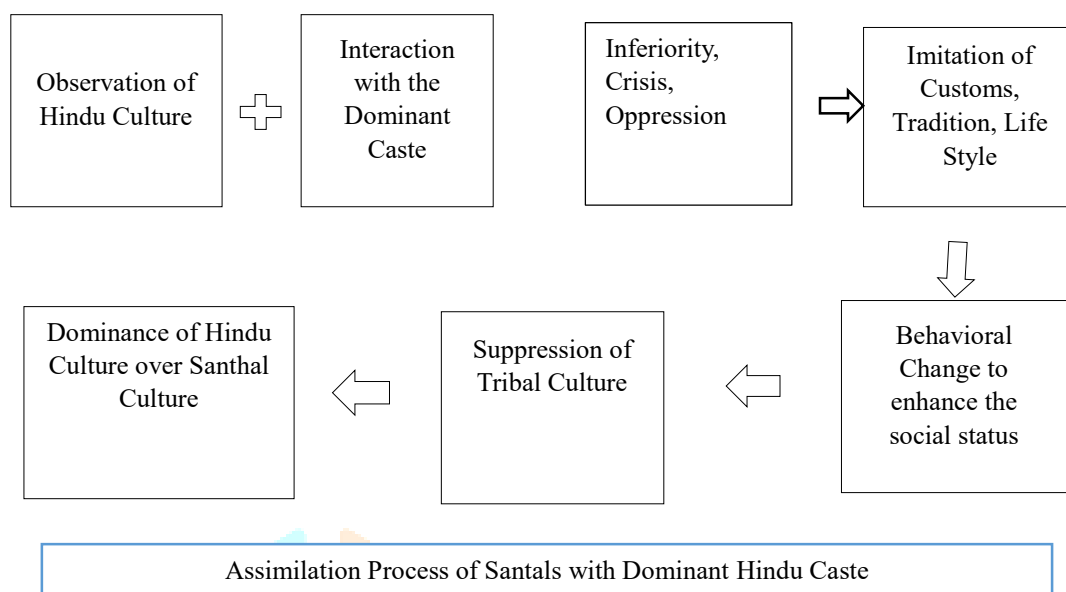
Village Ramnagar has almost 43% of Santal households. They came from Dumka District and Santal Pargana region. After the Santal Revolt of 1855, the Santals from that region started moving to other places. The Santals in Ramnagar village came here almost hundred years back. They came to this place from Santal Pargana for a better work opportunity and to save themselves from the turbulent environment of their native place. After settling to this place, they started working as agricultural laborers and house help in Hindu dominated households. Through this type of work, they have closely observed the cultural, social and economic practice of the dominant caste people. After they came to this place the Santals were introduced to Hindu Culture before it they were living isolated.

Hamlets of the Santals were far from the Hindu settlement. As the village was Hindu-dominated, the Santals were considered as untouchable and in social structure; they were at the bottom level. Socially they were always inferior to the Hindus. To enhance their social status, Santal people started adopting the Hindu Culture. This involved change in language, religion, clothing, housing and other aspect of life. Initial years of settlement, the Santals of Ramnagar stuck to practicing their own cultural practices. Later on, they started practicing Hindu cultural practices with their own culture. Right now, Hindu Culture suppresses the tribal culture. Santals of Ramnagar village blindly follow the Hindu culture, customs, and lifestyle. Not only the culture but the Santals are also adopting their social and economic practices. In this way the Santals are changing their own socio-economic and socio-cultural practices.

Cultural Change due to assimilation with Dominant Culture

Every culture has some defined symbols, language, norms, values, and artifacts. The sociological term 'xenocentrism' explains when people of any culture feel their own culture inferior to other cultures and thereby desire to follow other culture. Here in Ramnagar village Santals are placed lower in the caste hierarchy. So for the upliftment of their status in society, they emulate the Hindu rituals and lifestyle. Their only aim is to upward mobility of their caste structure, which they feel that this enhances their social status. In the concept of "Purity and Pollution" Sociologist Louise Dumont explained the caste hierarchy in India, where he clearly mentioned that how the lower caste and tribes are treated. They are untouchable by the upper caste as because of their lifestyle and birth. Caste System is so rigid. There are no chance to indulge the caste system but through changing lifestyle one can enhance their social status. Keeping that in mind, the Santals of Ramnagar follows the Hindu Culture. Sociologist M.N. Srinivas (1965) addressed this urge of Tribe and lower caste people as 'Sanskritisation'. For the tribes it can be also called as 'Hinduization' of tribal society.

The below model will show the interaction and assimilation process of the Santals with the local Hindus.



The model showing how the Santals assimilate with the non-tribal groups. Observation and interaction with the local Hindus increase the urge of the tribals to become like them. Their urge leads them changing their behavior and life style and imitation of Hindu culture.

Before the Santals came to this village from Santal Pargana they were living in the isolated forest and the plateau areas. After reaching Ramnagar they were first introduced to Hindu Traditions and culture. They found that Hindus are influential in village. They have better positions in society. So, to mobilize upward in the caste structure, Santals of this village has taken dominant Hindu culture as a model. They conditioned their mind that this Hindu culture is superior to their culture. As a result, this new generation of Santals does not have any clear concept of their own culture. Their symbol of culture is changing. Their customs, lifestyle, food habit, passion, clothing, and occupation all are changing.

Change in Customs and rituals

Traditionally the Santals practice Animism. They don't believe in idol Worship. They pray to the divine God. They celebrate their festivals by singing, dancing, and consuming traditional food, mahua liquor, rice beer, etc. Due to assimilation with the dominant caste a hybrid culture is found in their traditional practice. The new generation of Santals replaced their traditional instruments Dhamsa, and Madal, with an electronic music system. They are replacing traditional Santal folk songs with other songs. The older generation complains that the new generation doesn't know how to play traditional instruments and sing their own folk song. The younger generation argues that if they will not hire a modern music system their celebration will be incomplete and their festival will not be up to date. Santals of Ramnagar celebrate Saraswati Puja and Durga Puja, Kali Puja, etc. with the Hindu community. Traditionally the Santals buys new clothes during Badna but currently they are also buying new cloths during Durga Puja which is a custom of the Hindus in West Bengal. They have replaced traditional drinks with foreign liquor. Santal women were not allowed to eat cooked food in the house of non-tribes although they were working the non-tribal households. Only men are allowed to in this custom. But currently the Santals women are having cooked food from the non-tribe's households. Santals and Hindus invite each-others in their family functions and festivals. Due to assimilation and the change of time, status barrier has reduced between the people of Ramnagar. Tribe-caste nexus is a gradual process which occurred with the time and continuous social exchange.

Change in Economy

Modern Occupations replacing the Traditional occupation system. As the Santals are using modern technology in agriculture so their productivity is enhancing and excess crops are sold in the market. Previously, the agricultural production was used only for own domestic consumption but now commercialization of agriculture took place in their economy. Barter systems are abolished. Here the Santals use money as the medium of exchange. Santal men and women sell excess vegetables, fish etc in the nearby Bolpur market. Women have more contribution in the betterment of their economic condition as they are more active in economic activities.

Change in Occupation

Hunting, Gathering, fishing, and small farming was the traditional occupation of the Santals. Their economy was mainly forest-based. Their agriculture system was traditional. They were dependent on nature and climate. Traditionally it was completely true because these were the only options they had due to their geographical area of living. There was no modern accessibility and knowledge about modern technology. But those Santals who are living in the plain areas and watching other communities using new technology are using modern technology in agriculture. Santals in Ramnagar are using High Yielding Varieties, Chemical Fertilizers, tractors, harvesters, and modern water facilities which enhance productivity. Their economy transits from a traditional to a Modern economic system. Forest based economy such as hunting and gathering has been stopped due to government rules. There are few tribal men who works under mason, plumber and few runs their own Toto. Some Santal males migrated to Kolkata as migrant workers. A few widows work as household help at Kolkata. Their occupation is changing from primitive to modern. Modern needs of the families and neighborhood effect are encouraging them to choose other occupation.

Change in Life Style

Traditionally Santals had a very vulnerable situation. After independence government of India has taken an enormous number of programs for the development of the Scheduled Tribe. So, their economic condition is far better than pre-independence. Their households' condition is also better than before. Many of tribal houses in Ramnagar are brick made with modern cattle shade and water facility. Except the religious and traditional functions, Santals do not wear their traditional clothes. They prefer to wear modern clothes. Men wear shirt, trousers, for regular basis they are using track pants and Bermuda, aged men wear Dhoti Kurta, Married women loved to dressed up like Bengali Hindu married women. They wear Sankha, Pola Sindoor as the symbol of Marriage. Unmarried women prefer to wear salwar suit, Jeanes, top etc. They use modern technology such as television, mobile phones, music systems, etc. for entertainment. They prefer to consume spicy fried food instated of old traditional boiled and roasted food. Traditional liquor has been replaced by modern alcohol. The literacy rate is becoming higher. The literacy rate of Santhal women is also becoming higher and their initiative toward their children's education is commendable. Due to excessive modern liquor consumption the tribal men are facing different health hazards. Death rate of Santal men in Ramnagar is higher than the women.

Change in Social System

The traditional social system has been changed. There is no clear distinction among the households among the tribals and Hindus. In the beginning, the Santals used to live outside of the village but now there is no clear borderline between the houses of tribes and non tribes. Currently many Santal men doesn't work. They stay at house and consume alcohol all day long. Due to high liquor consumption after the age forty maximum men are suffering from different diseases. They are dependent on their wives. Maximum of the earnings of the wives is snatched by their husbands to buy alcohol. Rice beer, Mahua are the traditional liquor of the Santals. They used to consume it during festival but nowadays alcohol consumption of the Santal men is enhanced. This creates problem to the women in Ramnagar in joining the festival. The women feel unsafe and do not want to dance or participate in their own function. The incident of misbehaviour happened previously.

Women's condition in Society

Tribal women are very hard-working. They participate highly in livelihood making. If the daily routine of Santal women will be followed it will be found that women work from dawn to dusk. They work inside and outside of the house. They do household work, work on their land, and work as agricultural labor, work as house help, work under different conductors. In free time they go to collect dry leaves and branches of trees as fuel and stitches cloths. The maximum number of Santal households are run by the women. They take the decisions of the family. Santal women of Ramnagar are connected with different Self-Help Groups. They borrow loans from SHG to buy livestock and other necessary items. They are very strong physically and mentally. But still, they face domestic violence and sexual and moral violence from men. Many of santal women have complained that their alcoholic husbands beat them and snatch their earring to consume more alcohol.

Conclusion

Assimilation is a result of tribe- caste nexus. Assimilation of tribe is a gradual transformation of tribes due living nearly with the caste-based societies. Santals of Ramnagar have undergone significant transformation and adopted Hindu customs and culture while retains few of their own traditional culture. Tribe-caste nexus impact the social, economic, cultural area of tribal livelihood. There are lots of positive and negative change is visible in local Santal society. Their economic status has been improved. Access to the resource and opportunities are more available which was may not available due to their marginal status. Education, healthcare facilities are improved. Lots of social stigmas are removed from their society. But the major negative impact is on cultural aspect and traditional practice.

Loss of cultural identity is one of the most significant negative impacts on tribal culture. Their culture became inferior to them. That results suppression of traditional languages, customs, beliefs, practices which leads to the loss of cultural identity. These new adoptions of culture sometimes create psychological trauma for the older generation. New generation is blindly following the dominant culture. Still, they continue to face discrimination and marginalization from the dominant Hindu caste. Alcohol consumption of men is identified as the major problem of current tribal society. It has enhanced severely among men. During the festival and regular basis consumption of foreign liquor impact their health, economy and results domestic violence. Among the women there is very less consumption of alcohol. Senior citizens are scared of losing their cultural identity. But they are also happy about their improved financial condition. The process of assimilation has both positive and negative impact that is clearly visible among the Santals of Ramnagar village.

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