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The Santal Tribe and Regional Politics: Challenges and Possibilities

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Abstract

The tribal communities of India form a distinct and significant social group with their own unique cultural heritage, history and way of life, which sets them apart from the mainstream society. Although they have inhabited various regions of India since ancient times, they have long been politically and socio-economically marginalized. However, in recent times, their active participation in regional politics has become particularly noticeable. They are no longer just voters but also representatives at various political levels, playing a role in policy making. This article primarily analyzes how the Santal Scheduled Tribe has established its presence in the political arena, detailing their participation, representation and the challenges and opportunities they face in regional politics. Constitutional safeguards, democratic frameworks, and awareness initiatives play important roles in facilitating their political empowerment, yet they encounter numerous obstacles such as lack of education, poverty, displacement in the name of development, linguistic barriers and administrative neglect, all negatively impacting their political and social status. Often, tribal leaders are compelled to follow party directives rather than prioritize their community's interests, leading to the neglect of real grassroots issues. Moreover, under the pretext of development, land grabbing and eviction of tribal populations from forest areas have caused discontent, sometimes resulting in extremist reactions. Nonetheless, with the expansion of education and technology use among the new generation, political awareness is growing, fostering a new progressive leadership. Particularly, their direct involvement in local governance (Panchayati Raj) and the decentralization of power have opened new avenues of opportunity for tribal people. Overall, this article discusses how the Santal tribal society is gradually emerging as a significant force in regional politics, overcoming historical marginalization and the various challenges and prospects that lie ahead on their path of progress. The article is based on information collected from various books, journals and internet sources.

Keywords: Tribal Communities, Regional Politics, Political Participation and Representation, Political Awareness

Introduction

India is a diverse country where people of various languages, religions, ethnic groups and tribal communities live together. Among this diverse population, the Santals are recognized as a significant tribal group. They belong to the Munda ethnic community and primarily reside in the states of Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha and Assam. The presence of the Santal community is noticeable not only in India but also in other countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh. Just like in West Bengal, the Santal Scheduled Tribe is also considered one of the largest Scheduled Tribe communities in Eastern India. The districts in West Bengal where the Santal population is found in the highest numbers include Paschim Medinipur (17.5%), Jalpaiguri (16%), Purulia (11.3%), Bardhaman (9%) and Bankura (8.2%). According to the 2011 census, Scheduled Tribes constitute 8.6 percent of the total population in India, of which a significant portion, about 5.1 percent, resides in West Bengal. In West Bengal, the Santal population is approximately 2,512,331, which is nearly half of the total Scheduled Tribe population of the state. In other words, the Santals are considered the largest Scheduled Tribe in West Bengal (Census Report, 2011). They have their own language, known as the Santali language. This language was included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 2003. Additionally, to represent the Santali language in written form, Pandit Raghunath Murmu created a unique script called 'Ol Chiki,' which is recognized as their own script. Even after being included in the Eighth Schedule, only a few schools or

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colleges and universities have started teaching in that language. Although the Santals reside across a vast region, a clear sense of unity is still evident in their culture. They actively and conscientiously work to preserve their cultural heritage (Bandyopadhyay, 2012; 44-45). They are one of the most prominent tribal communities in India, with a long-standing traditional way of life. Their exceptional skills and talents are clearly evident in the fields of musical instruments, mat weaving and crafting of mats (Rathee & Sarkar, 2021; 117-118) [7].

At the beginning of the study on the Santal Scheduled Tribe, it is important to understand the origin of the word 'Santal.' It is believed that the word 'Santal' is a corrupted form of the word 'Saontar.' In ancient times, a part of Medinipur was called 'Saont,' 'Satbhumi,' or 'Samantabhumi.' The Bengali word 'Saontar' and the Hindi word 'Santal' are likely derived from the words 'Sat' or 'Samanta.' On the other hand, according to linguist Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay, the word 'Santal' may have originated from the Sanskrit word 'Samantapal,' meaning a border protector. The word 'Santal' was later derived from this term. Additionally, it has also been suggested that the word 'Santal' is formed from the combination of 'Santha' (meaning peaceful) and 'Ala' (meaning people) (Ota & Patnaik, 2020, 4) [4].

Agriculture serves as the main source of livelihood for the Santal community. They earn money by working in agriculture and use that income to meet their daily essential needs. The majority of the Santal tribal community residing in rural areas are marginal farmers and small cultivators. Among them, only a few are actual farmers. They generally rely on the monsoon season and practice traditional methods of farming. Besides agriculture, the Santals engage in various occupations to sustain their livelihoods. Those who are well-educated are employed in government and private sectors. Being physically capable of hard labor, many Santals work as laborers in tea gardens, coal mines, road construction and maintenance, as well as in the building of permanent houses and different types of bridges. Additionally, they also work as bidi (hand-rolled cigarette) workers to earn their living. Through their heritage, culture and language, they have secured a unique place in the social and cultural landscape of India. This community is not only important from a social and cultural perspective, but their contributions and movements also hold significant importance in the political history of India.

The political struggle of the Santal community, their efforts to secure their rights and their role in establishing social justice continue to be an important aspect of India's political landscape. The article presents a detailed analysis of the role of the Santal Scheduled Tribes in the regional political landscape of West Bengal, focusing on their participation, representation and the various challenges and opportunities encountered on the path to political empowerment.

For any community in India, the primary medium for realizing their essential needs and demands is the political sphere. It is within this sphere that citizens engage in mutual discussions, express their opinions and raise their demands, thereby influencing the ruling groups to make decisions in their favor. Moreover, the political arena is a space where the Scheduled Tribes have consistently occupied 100 percent of the reserved seats. In this way, political reservation has emerged as a primary source of political empowerment for the Scheduled Tribes (Ambagudia, 2021:

53) [6]. Article 330 of the Indian Constitution provides for the reservation of seats for Scheduled Tribes in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of Parliament) and Article 332 provides for the reservation of seats for Scheduled Tribes in the legislative assemblies of the respective states (Constitution of India).

Santal Politics and Struggles in Pre-Independent India

The role of the Santal community in the history of India is extremely significant. Their political struggle began primarily during the British colonial period. After the establishment of British colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent, the Santals participated in various forms of protests and movements to protect their traditional land and way of life. The largest and most significant among these struggles was the Santal Rebellion (1855–56), which was carried out to establish the rights and justice of the Santals. This rebellion was primarily against the oppression of the Santals by the landlords and the rule of the British government. The main leaders of this rebellion were four brothers named Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand and Bhairav. This movement marked the beginning of the Santals' historical political consciousness and struggle. Although the British rulers suppressed the rebellion, the Santals played a historically significant role in defending their rights. The Santal uprising against the British rulers served as a powerful inspiration for other tribal communities in India. Moreover, references can be found to movements like the Safa Hor Movement and the Meli Movement, which emphasized changes in the Santals' traditional culture, rituals and religion. In other words, a politics of religious conversion can be observed. Additionally, the active participation of the Santals in India's freedom struggle is also notable (Raghavendra & Gangadhar, 2024; 480) [12].

The Position of the Santals in Post-Independence Indian Politics

After India gained independence, the political struggle of the Santal people took a new turn. Following independence, the Santals emerged as an important part of mainstream Indian politics. Political awareness grew among them and they became involved with various political parties. Some regional political parties also emerged among them, working specifically on their rights and issues. In states like West Bengal, Santal political representatives have been elected and have played active roles in addressing their problems. Like other tribal communities, the Santals have sought the assistance of political parties to secure their constitutional rights, land rights and special provisions in education, healthcare and employment. Various political parties have ensured reserved seats and special opportunities for the Santals. After independence, the Indian Constitution, in 1950, made provisions for special rights and reservations for tribal communities so that they could participate in politics, education, employment and access various government-provided opportunities. Elected representatives from reserved seats can

raise their community's issues and rights in the Parliament and Legislative Assemblies and contribute to the process of law-making.

At present, the Santal community is exerting significant influence in the politics of various Indian states. In West Bengal and Bihar, the growing popularity of tribal leaders and the increasing importance given by political parties like

the Trinamool Congress, CPI(M), BJP and Congress to the tribal vote bank have further consolidated their role. A list of Santal candidates along with their respective

constituencies and political parties from the West Bengal Assembly elections of 2011, 2016 and 2021 is provided below:

Name of the ST reserved constituency		2011 (List of Santal Candidates & Party in west Bengal assembly Election)		2016 (List of Santal Candidates in west Bengal assembly Election)		2021 (List of Santal Candidates in west Bengal assembly Election)	
Alipurduar	Kumargram	-----	--	-----	--	-----	--
	Kalchini	-----	---	-----	--	-----	--
	Madarihat	-----	--	-----	--	-----	--
Purulia	Bandwan	Besra susanta	CPM	Rajib Lochan Saren	AITC	Rajib Lochan Saren	AITC
	Manbazar	Sandhyarani Tudu	AITC	Sandhya Rani Tudu	AITC	Sandhya Rani Tudu	AITC
Dakshin Dinajpur	Tapan	Bachchu Hansda	AITC	Bachchu Hansda	AITC	Budhray Tudu	BJP
Jalpaiguri	Mal	-----	--	-----	--	-----	--
	Nagrakata	-----	--	-----	--	-----	--
Maldah Uttar	Habibpur	Khagen Murmu	CPM	Khagen Murmu	CPM	Joyel Murmu	BJP
Darjeeling	Phansidewa	-----	--	-----	--	-----	--
Bankura	Ranibandh	Debalina Hembram	CPM	Jyotsna Mandi	AITC	Jyotsna Mandi	AITC
	Raipur	Upen Kisku	CPM	Birendra Nath Tudu	AITC	Mrityunjoy Murmu	AITC
Paschim Medinipur	Keshiary	Biram Mandi	CPM	Paresh Murmu	AITC	Paresh Murmu	AITC
Jhargram	Nayagram	Dulal Murmu	AITC	Dulal Murmu	AITC	Dulal Murmu	AITC
	Binpur	Dibakar Hansda	CPM	Khagendranath Hembram	AITC	Debnath Hansda	AITC
North 24 Parganas	Sandeskhali	-----	--	-----	--	-----	--

(Source- Statistical Report on General Election; Election Commission of India)

In the West Bengal Legislative Assembly elections, the participation of Santal community candidates in tribal reserved seats has gradually increased over the past few decades. Analyzing the data from the 2011, 2016 and 2021 elections reveals that in certain districts of the state, Santal candidates have consistently contested and won in tribal reserved constituencies. The political activity of the Santal community is particularly evident in the electoral landscape of Purulia, Paschim Medinipur, Malda, Jhargram, South Dinajpur and Bankura districts. In Purulia's Bandwan Assembly constituency, Besra Sushanta contested as a CPI(M) candidate in 2011, but in 2016 and 2021, the Trinamool Congress fielded Rajib Lochan Saren, who won both elections. This indicates a strategic shift among political parties, with the Trinamool Congress showing increased interest in electing representatives from tribal communities, especially the Santals. Similarly, in Manbazar constituency, Trinamool Congress fielded Sandhyarani Tudu in 2011, 2016 and 2021 and she won every time. This reflects both party stability and growing popularity and acceptance within the local Santal society. In South Dinajpur's Tapan constituency, Trinamool's Bachchu Hansda contested in 2011 and 2016, but in 2021, BJP's Budhray Tudu contested and won, highlighting the volatility of the Santal vote bank and the strategic competition among parties in nominating tribal representatives. In Malda's Habibpur seat, CPI(M)'s Khagen Murmu contested in 2011 and 2016, but in 2021, BJP's Joyel Murmu competed, showing a clear political shift from left-wing to right-wing tribal representation. In Bankura's Ranibandh constituency, CPI(M)'s Debalina Hembram contested in 2011, but in 2016 and 2021, Trinamool Congress's Jyotsna Mandi won consecutively. In Raipur constituency, CPI(M)'s Upan Kisku contested in 2011, Trinamool's Birendranath Tudu in 2016 and Mrityunjoy Murmu in 2021—all Santal candidates—demonstrating the sustained presence and political representation of the Santal community in tribal politics. In Paschim Medinipur's Keshiari seat, CPI(M)'s

Biram Mandi contested in 2011, while Trinamool Congress's Paresh Murmu contested and won in the subsequent two elections. In Jhargram's Nayagram seat, Trinamool Congress's Dulal Murmu was the candidate in 2011, 2016 and 2021, winning all three times and contributing to a stable political equation. In the same district's Binpur seat, CPI(M)'s Dibakar Hansda contested in 2011, followed by Trinamool's Khagendranath Hembram in 2016 and Debnath Hansda in 2021, indicating internal party changes in candidate selection. These shifts underscore both the evolving strategies within political parties and the continuous political representation of the Santal community in West Bengal's tribal reserved constituencies.

However, in contrast, no Santal candidates were seen in three elections from the Alipurduar district constituencies of Kumargram, Kalchini and Madarihat; the Mal and Nagrakata

constituencies of Jalpaiguri district; the Phansidewa constituency of Darjeeling district and the Sandeshkhali constituency of North 24 Parganas. This clearly indicates that the Santal population in these areas is comparatively low, or due to party strategy, other tribal groups have been given preference.

From the above analysis, it is evident that although the political participation and presence of the Santal community vary across different regions of West Bengal, their political significance has been steadily increasing, especially in tribal-reserved constituencies of Purulia, West Medinipur, Malda, Jhargram, South Dinajpur and Bankura districts. The Trinamool Congress has consistently nominated candidates from this community, which has translated into electoral success. This reflects the party's strategy as well as the political support within the Santal population. In this context, the political awareness, democratic participation and party affiliation process of the Santal society are highly significant for sociological and political studies. Through this participation, the Santal community is shaping its

political identity and exerting influence in the state's policy making arena. Their involvement is not merely symbolic but a concrete form of power-sharing, becoming an important aspect of social justice, rights, and representative democracy. A thorough analysis of these political dynamics will help build a foundation for better understanding the future political journey, demands and identity consciousness of the Santal society. However, it can also be said that although Santal candidates participate in elections and often win, they frequently fail to independently raise their community's demands or issues beyond party control. Despite increased political participation, their decision-making power remains limited.

To facilitate the political empowerment of tribal communities, constitutional safeguards, democratic frameworks and awareness programs play important roles; however, tribes face various challenges in participating in regional politics. Firstly, the lack of education means that tribal people cannot adequately acquire knowledge about their constitutional rights, government policies and political processes, which prevents them from becoming aware of and organizing for their rights. Secondly, issues related to land rights and displacement arise as development projects—such as hydropower plants, thermal power stations, mineral extraction, roads, railways and industrial zones—are often implemented in tribal areas, requiring large tracts of land. As a result, many tribal families are evicted from their homes and sources of livelihood. After displacement, they frequently become marginalized from mainstream society, leading to financial hardship and loss of social status, which reduces their political participation and excludes them from important discussions and decisions. Thirdly, linguistic problems are also evident, as the influence of dominant languages and cultures often marginalizes tribal languages and cultures. The lack of recognition of their language and culture in education and government affairs leaves them behind and hinders their ability to express their views clearly in political discourse, negatively impacting their political and social status. Additionally, many tribal leaders, under the influence of mainstream political parties, often have to follow party directives instead of prioritizing their community's interests, causing the core issues of their people to be neglected. Fourthly, a large portion of the Santal community still lives below the poverty line. Although mostly engaged in agriculture, most do not own land or have insufficient cultivable land, forcing them to work as agricultural laborers, mine workers or contract laborers. This financial insecurity leads to a lack of enthusiasm for political engagement. Lastly, due to the absence of independent political identity and tribal leadership, the Santals are compelled to remain under the shadow of mainstream political parties. In West Bengal's assembly and parliamentary elections, candidates from Santal-dominated areas generally contest under the banners of parties like Trinamool Congress, BJP or the Left Front. Consequently, their distinct social, cultural and linguistic demands are often ignored. For

example, although political parties repeatedly promise to use the Santali language in education and administration, actual progress is minimal. Government pamphlets, healthcare and court documents in Santali remain inadequate. Although tribal issues are used by mainstream parties as political tools, the tribal community's distinct political position

remains weak. In this context, lessons can be learned from Jharkhand, where tribal parties and leadership have succeeded in creating a distinct tribal identity. Similarly, in West Bengal, it is crucial to build an independent political organization and leadership for the Santals to effectively represent their own interests, culture and rights (Ghosh, 2022; 139-150).

Conclusion

The role of the Santal tribe in the regional politics of West Bengal is significant on one hand, yet in reality, they still remain marginalized. Their political consciousness began with the historic Santal rebellion of 1855, which was a major protest against colonial rule and laid the foundation for political awareness among the Santals. Their struggle was not only to protect their own rights but also became a symbol for the rights of other tribal communities across India. However, after independence, their participation in mainstream politics did not rise to the expected level. Although they reside predominantly in districts like Bardhaman, Birbhum, Bankura, Purulia and Jhargram, they are often neglected in terms of political representation. This is due to economic hardship, lack of education, reduction of rights over land and forest resources and administrative mismanagement. The Santal language and culture have not received due respect and the absence of a definite place for the Santali language in the education system has created cultural alienation, which has hindered their political activity and development of self-identity. Most political parties regard them merely as a vote bank and remain indifferent when it comes to genuine representation, which has fostered an atmosphere of distrust towards politics.

However, progress in education among the new generation, digital awareness and efforts to build local leadership indicate a new horizon. If the government and private sectors ensure the expansion of education, healthcare and employment opportunities and if recognition is given to the Santali language and culture along with support for local leadership development, the Santals will be able to play a more significant and active role in regional politics. Moreover, political parties need to play an important role in enhancing their political consciousness by not only building awareness but also boosting their confidence and helping them move beyond introversion to express their rich cultural identity openly. This includes giving them priority in political programs, opportunities to deliver speeches, arrangements for participation in political discussions, bringing them to the forefront of election campaigns and providing more chances to become electoral candidates. Indeed, increasing their participation in politics will enhance their political awareness and make them more confident. At the same time, effective implementation of conservation policies, rights to self-governance, and issue-based political recognition will make the broader political framework more inclusive and just.

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