



Education and Empowerment of Santali Women in West Bengal

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Abstract: *Within Santali society, women are prohibited from holding elected positions, and from participating in public meetings or judicial court proceedings at the village level. Socially, Santali women are restricted from openly worshipping the Santal gods and spirits, from taking part in religious sacrifices, and from consuming fowl which has been sacrificed. The main focus of this paper is to explore socio-cultural, socio-political and socio-economic dimensions of the problems faced by Santali women and how education can play a crucial role in making them empowered and thus improving Santal lifestyle at large. It is to explore how far education has influenced Santali women's livelihood, their social stratification, culture, old-age rituals, view towards their own brethren. With the help of Education, Women's entry into the societal activities has increased. With their growing confidence, they managed to address situations of domestic violence in some circumstances. There is a general perception in India that women in tribal societies face fewer restrictions than Hindu women. This may be true to the extent that tribal women are permitted to travel to the market on their own, and as a result have greater control over their finances. Looking into the condition of education, culture, and other social issues involved with the women of a well-known tribal community, the 'Santal', a detailed analysis can be contextual and necessitating. The paper highlighted all the major issues concerned with the inclusion of Santal women in the mainstream education.*

Key words: *Empowerment, Economy, Education, Culture, Language.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

In India, different sects of scheduled tribes have been found as marginalized groups in the society. Deprivation is common to all. Illiteracy is curse to them and cause of their misery. A community with educated women can ensure its liberty from misery of life by adopting good culture, practice and beliefs and encouraging and involving future generation in participation to education. If the women are literate and educated, it is expected that assuming the role of a mother, they will be enthusiastic to engage their child to participate in education. Otherwise the 'Inclusive Education' in India will be in vain. So in this perspective, looking into the condition of education, culture, and other social issues involved with the women of a well-known tribal community, the 'Santal' can be contextual and necessitating.

The tribal lifestyle in tribal dominated areas in West Bengal indicated varied socioeconomic and socio-cultural problems. Lack of irrigation, electric power, lack of industries in the area, lack of interest and cohesiveness due to emergence of different political organization among the villagers for development work and some other similar constraints could be beyond the reach of government and needed long-term planning for overcoming them. In the rural areas of West Bengal educational backwardness had been one of the obstacles. All long term plans failed to improve the quality of life of the tribal communities. The Santals, most dominant tribal group in Eastern India and Bangladesh, are not bound to follow a fixed occupation. Hunting, fishing and collection of wild plants, fruits, honey, tubers, flowers etc. were their occupation from ancient time. In ancient period the Santals used to live a semi-nomadic life, always on the move in search of food. Now the Santals have the life of agriculturists and lead a settled village life. In reality, their social life, rites and rituals, thinking and philosophy basically centred on different agricultural activities. The Santals for any cultivation, they perform sacrificial rites to the different *bongas* at the *Jaherthan* (religious place of Santal). Daily labour in different works like agricultural work, wood-work, road-construction work, helper of mansion etc. was also their occupation and source of their income. Since women constitute nearly half of the population, modern societies give considerable emphasis on the development of women. The women in Santal community still face several hazards



in daily life and they are deprived of enjoying the human rights in all walks of life which makes them vulnerable to be marginalized and education is the main instrument which can improve the condition of the Santali women.

The problems and deprivation of Santal community and revolt against it has a history long back. The problem of the Santals in Jangalmahal has been intensified due to enforcement of Permanent Settlement Act, 1793. The Santals cleared the jungles for agriculture purpose, but they did not get the ownership of land and their traditional Mandali system declined. They were oppressed by the zamindars, moneylenders and of course colonial rulers which ultimately resulted in the Santal Rebellion of 1855. One of the factors which added fuel to the fire to the rebellion was rape of Santal women by the outsiders. This signifies that women were remaining always in a distressful condition historically.

2. SANTAL SOCIETY:

The Santals have been strictly maintaining a well-defined traditional judicial self-governing system. In the judicial system of the Santal community, three positions are generally reserved for women known as budhi hadam. The word Budhi means elder, not the old. These are the ex-officio posts reserved for Manjhi budhi, Jogmanjhi budhi and Naeki budhi, the wives of Manjhi, Jogmanjhi and Naeki respectively. But in reality these female officials play their vital role mostly in the social and cultural functions celebrated in the different occasions of the Santal life cycle along with various festivals and have nothing to do in the traditional governance system of the tribes. The women are not allowed to sacrifice and perform any task in the religious functions. Women also accept this conviction. As the Manjhi is the supreme of their traditional self-governing system and this self-governing system is intermixed with religion and faith, so entire community has faith in the post of the Manjhi. As such women normally are not accepted at the post of Manjhi. Accepting the woman Manjhi may cause inconvenience because the Santal women particularly are accustomed to the traditional governance system in the villages and do not dare to voice anything against the socio-religious system. Belief and practice of witchcraft among the Santals is very strong even today among the Santals. As per their belief most dreaded magical effects and incurable diseases are believed to be resulting from the practices of witchcraft. The Santals have always been obsessed by the fear of witchcraft. They believe that practice of witchcraft may destabilize society; causes harm to the life of human being and can be the cause of death. Kolean Haram remarks "The greatest trouble for us Santal is witches. Because of them we are enemies of each other. If there were no witches we would have lived happily". (Archer, 1984) So a suspicion is always present that witches may be at work when a sick person cannot recover. Among the Santals only women are believed to practice witchcraft in contrast to that of Mundas, Oraons, Bhils and other tribes in which both a man or a woman can practice witchcraft.. It is a deep rooted belief among the Santals that witchcraft empowers a woman to cause harm in a society. A woman of any age can acquire the magic power of witchcraft. They believe that the witches force girls to become their disciple so that the legacy continues after their death also. Their training is said to be done on very dark nights in a forest or an open plain, and it consists in the teaching of mantars, charms and songs. She is introduced to the bongas (malevolent spirit) only after a girl master over these things whose names she must learn. She is then married to a bonga from whom she learns the art of "killing". At the end of her training, she is commanded by her witch tutor to practice what she learnt upon one of her own relatives. If she refuses she is said to become mad and die. That's why women are always looked upon with a sense of suspicion.

3. EMPOWERMENT & EDUCATION OF SANTAL WOMEN:

Santali women go outside home to work as agricultural labourer, daily labourer, midwife, handicraft worker and so on. For this reason they used to lead a poor quality life without having sufficient money as income. Naturally they face the problems of food insecurity, malnutrition, lack of access to health care services and education. Being victim of domestic violence and rape is another threat to their lives. The Santal women are very much peace loving and kind hearted with cooperative nature. They hate quarrelling and slandering but like to remain self-contained with own responsibilities prescribed by the society. They are very much self-reliant and self-supporting by nature and always like to remain master of their own mind. Though the Santal women are recognized as laborious all through the year in the family, their economic worth is not estimated properly. More than 80% agricultural works are done by the womenfolk. Yet they are not the owner of the produce. They carry the produce on the head to the market but only at the desire of family headman.

There is no dowry system among the Santals but at the same time the divorces are very frequent and women are victimized very much. A Santal male has some specific traditional rites and celebrations on his behalf. But a female does not have such privileges. In the practice of witchcraft, only women are identified as witches and in many cases such identified women are brutally killed. "In the childhood, a girl gets little chance to play freely because she remains busy in looking after her younger brothers or sisters or helping her mother. In adolescence period, a girl's movement is very much restricted. She cannot move alone anywhere. A girl after 12 years remain unmarried seems something wrong



with her. Remarriage of a girl is more difficult than that of a boy, specially the girl having any issue or a girl child. A separated woman cannot have a best form of marriage or cannot marry a bachelor where as a Santal man can do so for several times.

Education among Santals: Most Santals are illiterate and unskilled landless labourers who earn a very meagre wage which is not sufficient to run a family. According to the Census of 2011, 45.37% of the Santals in West Bengal was literate. The Santals speak their own language Santali along with Bengali. They have script in the form of Al Chiki. In 2003 the Santali was recognized as one of the Indian language by the Constitution of India. At present the Santali has been introduced to the primary schools of tribal areas in India. The Santals faced many challenges to get their language recognized by the Indian Constitution. In tribal world, especially among tribal women, education has always been considered less concern due to excessive pressure of maintaining daily means of subsistence. In connection with this, Lewis and Lockheed (2007) confirmed the distress situation of tribal female education and wrote – “Among the tribal community, tribal girls form the most neglected group, and are least likely to be educated”. Beside this, over dependency on some of the superstition and ill cultural beliefs, such as witchcraft further have deteriorated the overall condition of tribal women and Santals are not exceptions. In this context, Dani (1979) wrote – “poverty and lack of education are very closely related ... the social and geographical isolation of the tribal communities is the cardinal factor responsible for the slow progress of education among them.” In a tribal society like Santal, the role of women is substantial and important and relatively more crucial for a New India of 21st Century and proper educational opportunities to the Santali women for their betterment of living standard is highly appreciable in this connection.

4. SANTALI WOMEN - MAJOR CHALLENGES:

Santali women are economically self-dependent and it is very important for the whole Santal community because the women play a very crucial role in their family in terms of caring and nurturing the family members. Education is the front door for empowerment. It can be an effective tool for women empowerment. For lack of education, most of the Santal women are compelled to engage in various ill-paid works and becomes the soft target of exploitations. Different programmes including training are being undertaken for the empowerment of the Santali women to make them self-dependent.

Shyness in contact, language barriers, psychological distance as well as cultural distance from people of non-tribal background are the major obstacles in the way of getting information for these tribal female students. One of the characteristics of a tribe is that they are shy in contacting with the outside world. They usually live in their own information ghetto. But the exchange of information between tribal and non-tribal people is always at minimum level. If, we are considering the gender of the population, it is female. In the male dominated society, female is always considered as dependent. The Santal tribe is no exception. They always hesitate in seeking information even in compelling situations. They have found out one way of battling it. They usually stay in groups. When they visit the library, they visit in groups initially.

Their poverty, lack of nutritious food and mal-nourishment lead to a high percentage of child mortality among the Santals. In such poor families, the education of the children is neglected. Parents are not motivated enough or they do not have sufficient economic means to educate their children. Many children drop out even before they finish their primary education. In the school, they are exposed to an alien language which is not their mother tongue and so they are thrown into an inferior status in front of the students and teachers who come from the mainstream non-tribal communities. The government runs schools for children and adults in the villages. Many schools are only in the paper and in reality they do not exist and the non-availability of motivated teachers is also another perennial problem to create an abnormal vacuum in the educational sector among the Santals. The attitude of the government towards the tribals is a strange mixture of manifest paternalism and diffused indifferentism, and even downright antagonism in some sections of the administration. This is explicit in the government policies with regard to tribal education. The syllabus is prepared in the cities by a non-tribal in alien language and it is forcefully dumped on the innocent rural tribal children and as a result, these children are not able to learn from the alien education which is unpleasant in the childhood itself. So, one find a small number of Santal students get through in going through these hurdles. Moreover, the vibrant tribal elements could be included in the syllabus for the educational institutions in the tribal areas. As Hasnain (2005) observes, “Certain tribal activities like agriculture, dancing, hunting, tribal games and archery must be allowed to find fullest expression in the extracurricular activities of the school, thus providing some continuity of the traditional values and forms of organization.”

5. OVERCOMING THE OBSTACLES:

The major challenges in education of the Santals that needed to be overcome are as follows:



- (1) Language problem in school: Medium of instruction, language of the classmates and books, and the teachers are different from their home language. So the Santal children face problems in following lessons and participating in class work.
- (2) Lack of desired School environment: Santal children find school environment unfriendly. They feel neglected, abused and isolated in the school. Most teachers and non-Santal peers should not engage in this behavior in primary school.
- (3) Lack of supportive home environment: Most parents are not knowledgeable or informed about what they can do help their children to be ready for school. Schools also don't have much communication with parents, especially with those from the ethnic community.
- (4) Lack of parents' awareness of child education: Hembram (1982) found that most of the parents are not aware of their role and responsibility about guiding and helping their children's growth and development and creating an appropriate environment at home for this purpose and to prepare their children for school. Even if some parents have a little understanding about children's education, most of them are without formal education or even literacy and are not able to take care of and supervise their children's education properly.
- (5) Poverty: Poverty is one of the main barriers to education, creating obstacles in the way of access to and retention in school. Poverty affects Santal children's education adversely in different ways.
- (7) Early marriage: Early marriage of Santal girls (adolescents) is another impediment to their continuation in school.
- (8) Alcoholic addiction: Home-made alcohol preparation and drinking regularly is an addiction that creates an adverse environment in family and in discharging parental responsibility.
- (9) School distance: The distance of school from home requiring children sometimes to walk for several miles is also noted by the respondents as one of the reasons why Santal children do not want to go to school.

Language barrier is a very strong barrier in the access of information not only regarding the language of the content of information but also about the language of expressing the information need. Santali students, due to their isolation and preference in staying within their own homogeneous group, used to interact in their own language – Santali. They, like all human beings, are quite easy in their mother tongue. They can express their information requirement in that language easily than in any other language. According to the definition provided of tribe in various sources, it is common that they are psychologically isolated from non-tribal people as well as from people belonging to other tribes. This isolation can be attributed to the geographical habitat, cultural difference, lifestyle etc. they feel psychological obstacle from expressing their information requirements to people of other non-tribal background – which are predominant in the college as well as in the library. Interaction builds a sense of trust and personal relation which can be termed as social network thereby forming social capital. Language barrier is a real problem for the students. To make the students at their ease, teachers should learn the language Santali – at least learn to understand what she speaks of. Through these efforts, the teachers should try to serve the multicultural class. It has been seen that bringing these Santali female students in the main stream study, and allowing them to mix with the general population has been properly fulfilled by the above continuous effort of the teachers who are the main stakeholder.

6. CONCLUSION:

The Santal women are still under the shadow of darkness. Through the influence of Christianity and awareness towards education has contributed a lot to educate the Santal women and to engage them chiefly in educational and medical field as teachers and nurses but still miles to go to empower them to reach a dignified status in their tribal society. It is evident from studies that Santals community is changing rapidly towards their health, political awareness, social customs and beliefs due to impact of education. The life-style of the Santali women are changing gradually as a result of spreading of education and technology in their community. Adoption of new method of agriculture, cooking style and food habits are occasioning among the Santali women. They have started to understand the need of education for their children and get exposed to modern health practises and could doubt sorcery performance by the priests and ojha. The Santali women are now showing logical behaviour against various superstitions and social maladies. The inclusion of Santal women and giving them a stake in every facet of mainstream efforts to alleviate poverty and mitigating social exclusion and discrimination is essential as much for the deprived Santal children and youth as for society as a whole. This is the way to build the just society that India as a nation aspires. The government, civil society and all agencies all have a role to play to promote and support necessary policy, objectives, priorities and programs in education, skill development and creating a favourable environment for these efforts to succeed. A better future for the Santal women is an inalienable part of building a better life for all children and youth in India.



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