

Original Research Article

Traditional Songs Among the Santals of West Bengal: An Ethnographic Study

Dr. Nizamuddin Ahmed

Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Haldia Govt. College, Purba Medinipur, West Bengal, India

Corresponding author E-mail: drnawbes@gmail.com

Received: 05 May, 2025 | Accepted: 09 June, 2025 | Published: 12 June, 2025

Abstract

Santals are one of the most dominant tribes in India. They are the third-largest tribal community in India after Bhil and Gond tribes. They have been described as the ‘most integrated and possibly the most resilient tribe in eastern India’. The origin of the Santals has remained a mystery, to date, the mystery is unsolved. Apart from the mystery of their origin, the other aspects such as their religion, their culture especially their traditional songs and dances are very rich than that of many other tribes in India. The Santals are well-known for their rich *serenj-enej*, or song-dance traditions. Music, dance, song, and poetry are integral parts of Santal culture, intimately related to the festivals, seasons, and rites of passage. In West Bengal, Santals are the largest tribal Community among the listed forty scheduled tribes communities, who have kept their heritage and identities almost unchanged which reflects in their different traditional songs and dances. I had the privilege of associating intimately with Santals over a number of years and was insensibly drawn to their songs and dances. Gradually, I started to collect the data relating to their traditional songs along with associated festivals or occasions by applying the ethnographic methodology. Sometimes I joined their different festivals and occasions and tried to take part in their festivals, and occasions to get more in-depth data about their traditional songs and dances. Traditional songs among the Santals of West Bengal may be categorized as Songs with Dance, Songs with Lesser Tunes, and Songs without Dance. From these different types of traditional songs among the Santals in West Bengal, we find a glimpse of the Santal folk culture. In this paper, an attempt has been taken to explore various types of traditional songs along with associated festivals or occasions among the Santal tribe of West Bengal.

Keywords: Santals, Traditional Songs, West Bengal

Introduction

Santals are one of the most dominant tribes in India. They are the third-largest tribal community in India after Bhil and Gond tribes. They spread out over a vast area of the country, mainly in the states of West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand and Assam. Some migrated to neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Nepal. They have been described as the ‘most integrated and possibly the most resilient tribe in eastern India’. The origin of the Santals has remained a mystery, to date, the mystery is unsolved. Apart from the mystery of their origin, the other aspects such as their religion, their culture especially their traditional songs and dances are very rich than that of many other tribes in India. The Santals are well-known for their rich *serenj-enej*, or song-dance traditions. They are very fond of songs and dances. Music, dance, song and poetry are integral parts of Santal culture, intimately related to the festivals, seasons, and rites of passage. It is said that amongst the Santals, there is no woman who cannot dance or sing and no man who does not beat the drum or play the flute. Musical knowledge is transmitted through a shared oral-aural, participative process, in which tradition and memory are the central principles. Music skills are acquired by listening and repeating, assimilating formulary materials, and participating in a kind of collective retrospection. Most Santali songs are accompanied by dance. As they form an overwhelming majority among the Santali songs it is proposed to take them up first. This will be followed by short notes on some lesser tunes. The role of traditional songs of any indigenous community from anywhere in the world is not only to identify the community itself but also it is expected to strengthen the heritage and development of the community concerning literature and culture and overall position in the society. Besides this, it is a medium to preserve traditional songs from the dangers of extinction. In West Bengal, Santals are the largest tribal Community among the listed forty scheduled tribes communities, who have kept their tradition and identities almost unchanged which reflects in their diverse traditional songs and dances. They celebrate their festivals and rituals throughout the year by wearing their traditional dresses. These celebrations are made with their traditional songs and dances in the open courtyard of the village with beating drums of various types. In spite of various obstacles, Santals are always tried to retain their tribal identity where, it is their age-old traditional festivals, religious practices, songs, dances etc. I had the privilege of associating intimately with Santals over a number of years and was inertly drawn to their songs and dances. In this paper an attempt has been taken to explore various types of traditional songs along with associated festivals or occasions among the Santal tribe of West Bengal viz.:

- a) Songs with Dance
- b) Songs with Lesser Tunes
- c) Songs without Dance

Objective

This paper is an attempt to present, highlight and analyze based on the following objective:

- To know the various types of traditional songs along with associated festivals or occasions among the Santal tribe of West Bengal.

Methodology

I had the privilege of associating intimately with Santals over a number of years and was insensibly drawn to their songs and dances. Gradually, I started to collect the data relating to their traditional songs along with associated festivals or occasions by applying ethnographic methodology viz. participant and non-participant observation, interviews, focus-group discussion, etc. Sometimes I joined their different festivals and occasions and tried to take part in their festivals, and occasions to get more in-depth data about their traditional songs and dances. It is vaguely known that the Santals are very fond of songs and dances. But nobody has an idea about the poetic value of their songs and the artistic beauty behind their different dances. When I started my journey towards the exploration of their songs and dances, I also had little idea. But as the work proceeded, I was completely enchanted and spelt bounded by the poetic fancy and philosophic insight of their traditional songs. Besides that, the secondary data have been collected from different books, journals, research articles, and websites. This study was delimited to only the various types of traditional songs along with associated festivals or occasions among the Santal tribe of West Bengal.

Findings and Discussion

The findings along with the discussion on the traditional Santali songs along with associated festivals or occasions are given below through three domains i.e. I) Songs with Dance II) Songs with Lesser Tunes, and III) Songs without Dance:

A. Songs with Dance: There are mainly nine types of traditional Santali songs sung with dance, these are:

1. **Lagre Serenj:** This is the commonest dance tune and is suited for all odd occasions among the Santals in India. Santal dancers in their traditional songs do not dance in pairs. If both sexes dance together, the women kept together, the Santal men acting in front. In their most common songs with dance, the so-called *Lagre*, the women stand in one or more rows, keeping hold of each other, linking their arms, while the young men, generally only a few, are in front of the women, each with a drum.
2. **Pata Serenj:** This is also a plain tune and approximates *Jhumur* tune which is extremely admired all over Purulia district as the principal folk tune for Bengali songs. *Lagre* is the universal dance tune and *Pata* is the universal song tune among the Santals residing in West Bengal. The *Pata Serenj* literally means songs sung at *Pata* festival, but actually is not restrained to that occasion only. A good number of *Pata* songs are in the pure Bengali language. The explanation offered is that as these songs are mostly sung before a Hindu audience for their amusement the language has also been made understandable for them.
3. **Don Serenj:** Among the Santals in West Bengal it is one of the commonest types and is used at all social functions e.g. *Bapla* (Marriage) and *Chatiar* (Childbirth). It may be called handy song par excellence. This type of song is very trendy among the Santals due to its wide application on very essential occasions of the Santals.
4. **Sohrae Serenj:** This type of song is mainly sung at *Sohra* festival. *Sohrae*, a five days festival, is the greatest festival among the Santals. Songs and dances go on night and day during the festival, a considerable quantity of *haria* (rice beer) is drunk and some amount of laxity between young men and women is permitted.
5. **Dahar Serenj:** *Dahar* Songs have an atypical plead to the Santal mind. To recognize and understand this it is crucial to have a glimpse of the mythological background. *Pilchu Haram* and *Pilchu Budhi* got in course of time seven sons and seven daughters. The couple was afraid that they might form undesirable alliances. So *Pilchu Budhi* took charge of the girls and went to *Surkue* forest with them. *Pilchu Haram* took charge of the boys and lived along with them in *Khanderae* forest. One day the boys shot at a deer and pursuit of the deer chanced upon the spot where the girls were swinging on the pendulous roots of a banyan tree. The surprise of the girls on seeing living shapes similar to them yet dissimilar in pursuit of a deer with an arrow pricking on its back found expression in song and his song was in *Dahar* tune. The story goes on to say how they got united and the earth was populated with their children. *Dahar* dances are performed by women only and *Dahar* songs are, generally speaking, sketchy and are perhaps purposely put in an archaic language.
6. **Baha Serenj:** *Baha* is the second largest festival among the Santals and is considered to be the holiest festival. It is held shortly after *Dol Purnima* i.e. at the come within reach of the spring season. Neither *Mohua* flowers are collected nor are *Sal* flowers and leaves worn till Gods invoked in this festival. The festival lasts for a single day only. *Baha Serenj* is sung at various stages of the *Baha* festival. Most of them are ceremonial litanies, except a few which deal with secular topics such as hunting, fishing, and dancing. All *Baha* songs are in a lofty style and contain yummy tunes. It is a matter of regret that expert *Baha* singers are becoming rarer day by day among the Santals of West Bengal.
7. **Karam Serenj:** *Karam* festival is celebrated in the Bengali month of *Bhadra* (During August-September) and the entire village participates in the festival. The celebration is made in honour of *Karam Gosain*, the god who is supposed to have provided mankind with domestic animals. The *Karam* tree is his visible manifestation and a branch of the tree is planted at the centre of the village dancing ground. Circular

dances go all through the night around the tree. The next morning the branch is pulled out, carried in a procession to a neighbouring stream or tank and thrown into it. The songs which are sung at the *Karam* festival are known as *Karam* songs. The language of the songs is profoundly mixed with Bengali words.

8. **Dasae Serenj:** These are songs sung during *Dasae* festival, which is the most mournful festival among the Santals. The word '*Dasae*' is a corruption of *Dasami* and means the Bengali month of *Aswin* in Santali. *Dasae* festival is observed by the Santals, especially who are residing in the Indian State of West Bengal during the *Durga Puja* festival of Hindus when they are mourned for the killing of *Asur* by *Durga* goddess of the Hindus. Among the Santals, *Dasae* dance is the only dance performed by the Santal men alone with very mournful music through the musical instrument called '*Buyang*' by the Santal.
9. **Bir Serenj:** The word '*Bir Serenj*' literally means 'Forest Song'. They are the vilest songs conceivable, contained in the language of gross barbarity and accompanied by dances equally uncouth and ribald. As the name indicates the songs are not sung in the neighbourhood of human habitation but in forests. The songs are sung particularly during *Disom Sendra* festival, an annual hunting festival of the Santals which is generally held during the month of February-March though there is no fixed date. This is organised at different places on different dates. The whole programme is for three days and during this hunting festival where women have no access.

B. Songs with Lesser Tunes: There are mainly four types of traditional Santali songs which are sung with lesser tunes, these are:

1. **Golwari:** This is very much akin to *Lagre Serenj* and may be considered a sub-variety of it.
2. **Danta:** This is a sub-variety of *Sohrae* tune. Songs in this tune are sung mainly during *Karam* festival.
3. **Matwar:** This is also a sub-variety of *Sohrae* tune. Songs in this tune are also sung during *Karam* festival.
4. **Ganjar:** This is also a sub-variety of *Sohrae* tune. Songs in this tune are also mainly sung during *Karam* festival.

C. Songs without Dance: There are five principal varieties sung without dance, these are:

1. **Bapla Serenj:** The word '*Bapla Serenj*' literally means 'Marriage Song' in Santali, where '*Bapla*' stands for 'Marriage' and '*Serenj*' stands for 'Song' or 'Music'. It has already been stated that *Don Serenj* are freely used during marriage occasion among the Santals. This is however a song with dance. Few songs without any type of dance are also performed during marriage occasions in the Santal society which are popularly known as *Bapla Serenj*.
2. **Binti Serenj:** These are, as the name indicates prayers to gods and goddesses.
3. **Gam Serenj:** It is also called *Kahni Serenj* i.e. ballads. During the summer season, these ballads are sung at nightfall. The singer takes a seat and goes on singing.
4. **Jharni Serenj:** This type of song is sung by a traditional ethnomedicine man to cure a sick person.
5. **Morna Serenj:** The word '*Morna*' means 'funeral' and '*Serenj*' means 'song' or 'music' in Santali, so as a whole '*Morna Serenj*' stands for 'Funeral songs'. It is also called *Rak Serenj*, where '*Rak*' means 'Lamentation' in Santali. These types of songs are sung after death as well as at the funeral ceremony.

Conclusion

From these traditional songs among the Santals in West Bengal, we find a glimpse of the Santal folk culture. These are the songs which are varied in type and sung on different occasions and festivals in the Santal society of West Bengal. Nevertheless, no matter what occasion or festival they may be sung for, they deal with every aspect of the Santal life, besides that these different types of songs reveal the simplicity of the Santal society. Among the Santals of West Bengal, traditional songs and dances of their own are indispensable in their social life and economic structure. The music and dance are accustomed to nature and are also associated with the popular beliefs and customs of their society. To quote Indian first Prime Minister late Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, "They are extremely disciplined people who sing and dance and try to enjoy the life and not people who sit in the stock

exchanges and shout at each other and call that civilization.” In spite of educational and economic backwardness among the Santals, their songs and dances have managed to continue blossoming for centuries. With the very speedy expansion of communication facilities, internet and communication technology, different types of social media, and contacts with the outside world, the introduction of modern movies and songs and their easy access over the internet based on different social media and as well as gradual decaying of old values, the sophisticated Santal culture is fading out gradually. Sometimes in this present time, the younger generation of Santals feel shy and deny exhibiting their traditional songs and dances. My own experience is that majority of my Santals students and friends and the Santals living in cosmopolitan cities for the last 10/15 years are either forgetting or have forgotten their own language and what to speak of song and dance. It is necessary to promote, encourage, and endorse the traditional song and dance of the largest tribal community in West Bengal i.e. the Santal people who account for about 25, 12,331 people, and share about 47.43% of the total tribal population residing in the Indian state of West Bengal (Census Report: 2011) not for the sake of preserving them as museum pieces but for the good qualities they have as stated earlier. In conclusion once again to quote our country’s first Prime Minister late Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, “When I look at the progress of what is called modern civilization in India, I see many good things. I also see the lack of many good things. Some of the things lacking here which I find in the tribal folk, are the spirit of song and dance and enjoyment of life.”

References

1. Ahmed, N. (2020). Festivals among the Santals in West Bengal: An Ethnographic Study. *International Journal of Research Culture Society*, 4(4), 218-221.
2. Bhattacharya, S.S. (1962). Santal Songs: Different Types. *Bulletin of the Cultural Research Institute*, Government of West Bengal, 1 (2).
3. Bhattacharya, S.S. (1964). Woodland Verses. *Bulletin of the Cultural Research Institute*, Government of West Bengal, 3 (3 & 4).
4. Bodding, P.O. (2007). *Santal Folk Tales*, Vol. II (Reprint Edition). New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House.
5. Campbell, A. (1891). *Santal Folk Tales*. Pokhuria: Santal Mission Press.
6. Census Report, 2011 (Retrieved from <http://adibasikalyan.gov.in/html/state-data-2011.php>) on April 10, 2022 at 23:25 IST.
7. Dalton, E.T. (1872). *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*. Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing.
8. Mukherjee, A. (1982). Tribal Folk Dance and Folk Song. *Bulletin of the Cultural Research Institute*, Government of West Bengal, 15 (1 & 2).
9. Raha, M.K. (1974). Folksongs of the Tribal West Bengal. *Journal of the Sangeet Natak Academy*, 31.
10. Risley, H.H. (1891). *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vol.II. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press.