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## **Tribal Communities in India: A Study of the Santals and Paharias of Jharkhand**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Jharkhand, a state in India, is home to tribal communities highly diverse in nature, offering a unique context for examining social diversity among populations. Santal and Paharia are two distinct tribal communities found there. The Santals represent the most significant tribal group, whereas the Paharias are relatively less advanced. Despite enduring numerous challenges across different eras, both tribes have persevered, retaining their distinct cultures. This paper highlights the diversity between these two tribes across various dimensions, including language, customs, traditions, rituals, gender roles and socio-economic status. The objective is to elucidate the cultural patterns of these two distinct tribal groups. Employing a descriptive approach, this study underscores the cultural differences through a thorough analysis of secondary data.

**Keywords:** Social Diversity, Santal, Paharia, Jharkhand.

### **Introduction**

India is a country that has a diverse population. The diversity is in their culture, language, food, and habitat. The geographical landscape of India is also very unique. The rivers, mountains, planes, plateaus, forests, oceans, and

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winds have a significant impact on life. At the same time, these effects reflect in the culture and practices. People move and migrate, change their habits, adopt new practices, and learn new ways of living. These reflections and characteristics are present in society. These reflections and their magnitude play a significant role in the differences between societies. In urban areas under the influence of dominant society, most people follow the same types of practices. We refer to it as mainstream society. They are responsible for driving the economy and are highly visible in political matters. However, a few communities are left behind in the race of development because of their socio-economic and political backwardness. Within these communities, few have a positive and acceptable attitude towards any change. The Santals, a prominent tribal group in Jharkhand, are embracing change and intertwining with the mainstream population. Despite this, a small number of communities still believe and practice their own age-old rites, rituals, and culture. They still reside in the forest and are isolated from mainstream society. We classify them as indigenous people based on a range of characteristics. For example, their population is very low, they live in isolated geographical areas, have a low literacy rate, and their population is declining and stagnating. Additionally, they have a traditional social structure, simple social institutions, and a distinctive culture. They were also categorized as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups. Despite the efforts of government and civil society, they are still hesitant to leave their place. They are still residing in areas with hilly terrain, plateaus, and deep forests. They love their own way of living and practicing their culture. Paharias are one of the significant indigenous populations of Jharkhand. Jharkhand is the 28th state of India and was established to support the development of the tribal population after years of constant struggle. One of the most incredible things about the country is how diverse groups of people can live peacefully together, despite all the differences. The paper emphasizes the cultural differences between these two distinct tribal communities in Jharkhand. These two tribal communities, Santal and Paharia, live in Santal Pargana. Santal Pargana is one of the important divisions of Jharkhand.

### **Population Distribution of Tribes in India**

According to the 2011 census, the tribal population is 104.3 million. It is 8.6 percent of the total population of India (Ahuja, 2021). So, it makes India the second largest tribal population in the world. There is a total of 705 individual ethnic groups listed as scheduled tribes. The states with the highest tribal population are Madhya Pradesh (15.3 million), Maharashtra (10.5 million), Odisha (9.6 million), Gujarat (8.9 million), Rajasthan (9.2 million), and Jharkhand (8.6 million). The majority of India's tribal population lives in these states, which reflects significant cultural diversity. Jharkhand's tribal

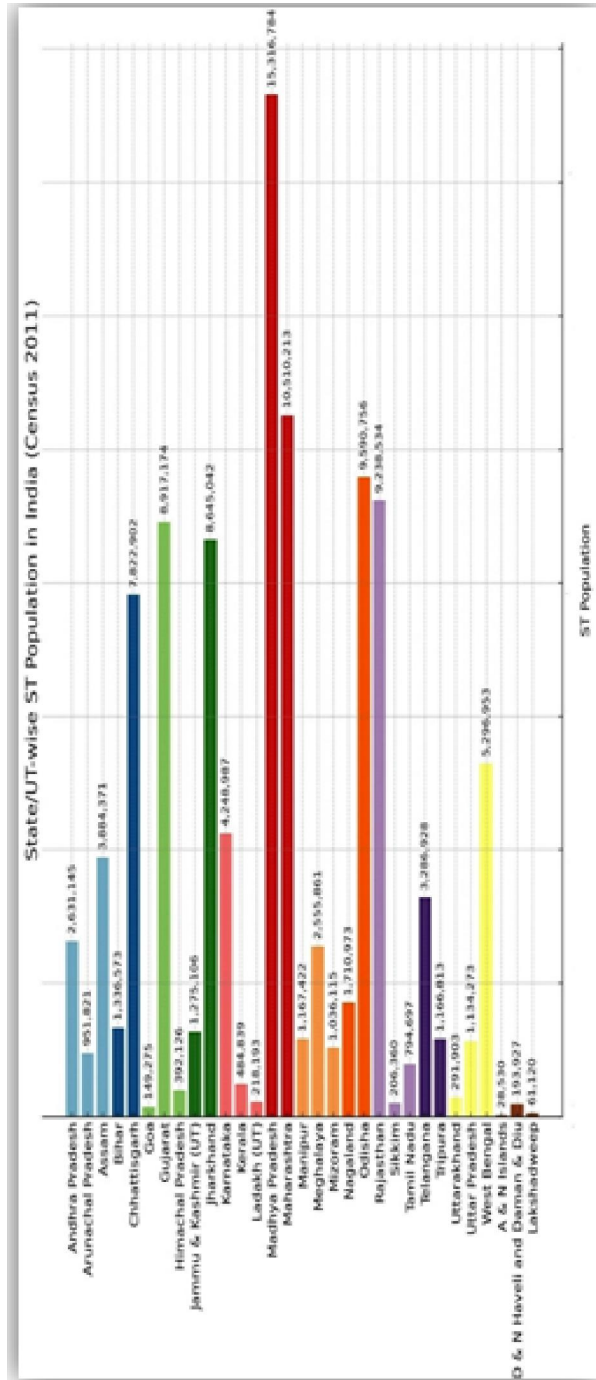


Figure 1: Total Population of Schedule Tribes in India (Census, 2011)

population stands at sixth place. In Figure-1, the number of Scheduled Tribes in each state and union territory of India is depicted according to the latest Census of India.

### **Tribal Culture and History of Jharkhand**

According to Bhowmick (2013), the main cause of these differences is the effect of their geographical setting on their lives, living habits, and action patterns. They all have their own unique identity, culture, and traditions. The region has a wide range of social diversity. This diversity is characterized by numerous linguistic, religious, and socio-economic variations among tribal populations. Thirty-two types of tribes inhabit in the state of Jharkhand. Anthropologist Lalita Prasad Vidyarthi grouped the tribes of Jharkhand by their cultural types. According to him, a few tribes are members of the Hunters and Gatherers group, such as Birhor, Korwa and Hill Kharia. Similarly, there are a few groups that are shifting agricultural people, like Sauria Paharia and Mal Paharia. Few tribal groups are simple artisans like Mahli, Lohra, Karmali and Chik Baraik, and few are settled farmers like Santal, Munda, Oraon, Ho and Bhumij. Santal Pargana, which is an administrative division of Jharkhand, was earlier referred to as Narikanand in ancient times. In Buddhist literature, the name of these areas was Kajangala. In the Mahabharata period, the areas were part of Anga Mahajanpada. So, this region holds great importance and historical significance.

### **Demographic and Administrative Division of Jharkhand**

The total population of Jharkhand is 32988134. Among the total population, the Scheduled Tribes (ST) is 8645042 (26.20%). There are 4315407 males (25.49%) in the Schedule Tribe, while there are 4329635 females (26.96%). This shows that there is a significant tribal population, especially among women (Primary Census Abstract, 2011, Jharkhand). There are twenty-four districts in Jharkhand, systematically organized into five administrative divisions. A description of these administrative divisions and their respective districts is provided in the table below (Roy, 2024).

**Table-1: Districts in Jharkhand Administrative Division**

<b>Division</b>	<b>Headquarters</b>	<b>Included Districts of Jharkhand</b>
North Chotanagpur	Hazaribad	Ramgarh, Bokaro, Dhanbad, Chatra, Hazaribagh, Koderma, Giridih
South Chotanagpur	Ranchi	Simdega, Ranchi, Khunti, Lohardaga, Gumla
Palamu	Medininagar	Latehar, Palamu, Garhwa
Kolhan	Chaibasa	Saraikela Kharsawan, East Singhbhum, West Singhbhum
Santal Pargana	Dumka	Pakur, Godda, Sahebganj, Jamtara, Deoghar, Dumka

## **Brief Description of the Santal and Paharia Tribes**

These two tribal groups majorly found in Santal Pargana. The culture of Santal is diverse and changing with time. Their traditions, customs and community practices have an important history. The Santals have a greater control over state political affairs (Jha, 2012). They are the largest and most significant community in Jharkhand.

The Paharias are another distinct group. They live on hilltops as well as other plane areas. They have been identified as the oldest recorded inhabitants. Their living conditions are still simple. Many aspects of this population remain unexplored. Paharias is less progressive than Santals. Paharias claim to be a Dravidian warrior race, and they were the rulers of Shankara state, which had its capital in Gando (Dumka district). The state and kingdoms were destroyed by the British. The British employed the Santal tribe people to push the Paharias up the hills where they lived in isolation (Marandi & Patel, 2022). They faced many challenges in keeping their traditional way of life, just like many other tribal groups worldwide. Paharias tried to manage and preserve their distinctive cultural heritage despite the effects of colonialism and modernization. British colonization and industrialization have had an important impact on the socio-economic landscape of the area. Despite this, tribal communities have consistently maintained their traditions and lifestyle.

## **Social diversity in Santals and Paharias**

There are numerous ways and parameters to observe the diversity of Santals and Paharias. A few parameters have been discussed to highlight the clear distinction between them.

### **Language and Communication**

The language plays a significant role in influencing the social diversity of tribal populations. Language not only facilitates communication but also plays a vital role in maintaining cultural identity and heritage. Despite the promotion of mainstream languages, many tribal communities still value and promote their native languages, which enhance the linguistic diversification of the area. Hindi is the official language of Jharkhand. Hindi is a language that many people speak and understand. There are many other tribal languages. There are three languages belonging to the Indo-Aryan branch: Khotha, Nagpuri, and Kudmali. Paharias uses the Khotha language. It is a popular and similar language to Hindi.

At the same time, there are four language groups in the Austroasiatic branch. These are Mundari, Santali, Ho and Mundas. Santals are very familiar with these languages (Minz, 2022).

### Cultural Practices, Tradition, Arts, and Citizenship

Tribal communities adhere to customs and traditions, as seen in their profound cultural values and beliefs. Tribes have different and unique customs. It can be seen in their rituals for birth, marriage, death and harvest. The richness of culture in Jharkhand can be seen in the diversity of customs, which also fosters a sense of identity and belonging among the tribes.

**Table-2: Similarities and differences between General/Bedins<sup>1</sup> and Christian Santals**

General/Bedin Santals	Christian Santals
Main festivals are Magh, Baha, Erok, Janthar, Hariyar, and Bandhna. Festivals are associated with different stages of the agricultural cycle.	Christmas, Eastar. They do not participate in Bedin festivals.
Their belief system is based on the existence of both good spirits like Marag Buru, Moreko, Turui Ko, Jaher Era, and bad spirits like witches and dains.	Jesus
The places of worship are Jaher Than (sacred grove) and Manjhi Than (place of worship of the village head).	The church and home have a cross and a photograph of Jesus and Mary. There are Christian denominations where photographs and idols are not present.
Santals hold the belief that Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Buri, and their seven children were the originators of them.	Pilchu haram Pilchu Buri
The use of liquor and animal sacrifice is ceremonial.	Consume wine, but refrain from sacrificing animals. Pentecostals avoid drinking alcohol.
Nimdak mandi is a ceremony for names, Chacchu chattier is a ceremony for initiation into adulthood, Bapla is a ceremony for marriage, and Bhandan is a ceremony for post-funerals. Their beliefs include burning dead bodies, believing in telpatta (forecasting), dain (witches), and animal sacrifice.	In certain areas, bride's prices are still practiced, the priest is substituted for the raybar, and death is done by burial. Dain, animal sacrifice, and telpatta are not part of their beliefs.
The names of children are determined by their paternal and maternal grandparents.	Grandparent's names are utilized, but Christian names are also provided.
Santal law is a means of resolving village-level disputes, marital and social issues, inheritance problems, petty disputes, and religious matters.	Santal laws govern disputes at the village level, and both Santal and Christian customs govern marriage and divorce.
Social taboos are present, such as women not touching or tiling the roof, etc.	Social taboos are present, such as women not touching or tile the roof, etc.

Source: [https://www.pria.org/knowledge\\_resource/drc.pdf](https://www.pria.org/knowledge_resource/drc.pdf)

<sup>1</sup> Santal who still adhere to their traditional beliefs and customs are called Bedin. The Bedin Santal is the original and traditional Santal community. There is no connection between Hinduism or any other religious beliefs to Bedin Santals.

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Cultural and religious factors significantly influence ideas of citizenship. There are various concepts of personhood that are involved in certain dimensions. Religious diversity is an important aspect of the Santal society. There are many Santals who follow Hindu religion. On the other hand, there are Santals who still follow their traditional tribal beliefs and customs. A large number of Santal individuals converted to Christianity. Religious conversion is a crucial matter in the state. Christian Santals are further divided into Roman Catholics, Santal Mission of Northern Church, North Eastern Lutheran Church, Seventh Day Adventists and Pentecostals, along with Hindu Santals (Sen, 2004). Table-3 presents the specifics discussed earlier to gain a better understanding of the characteristics and lives of different Santal communities.

The roots of cultural heritage lie in vibrant rituals, folk dances, music, and oral traditions that are passed down through generations. The shaping of social identities and community cohesion among Santals are greatly influenced by cultural practices. Sohrai, Baha, and Sarhul are festivals that mark agricultural cycles, seasons and life celebrations. Sohrai is very famous in Santals. This is a typical harvest festival. It is celebrated just after the famous Hindu festival of Diwali. Women in the village celebrate this festival by worshipping cattle and livestock. There is also a painting usually drawn outside the house called Sohrai painting (Picture-1). Santals decorate their mud houses during the Sohrai festival after ensuring proper cleaning and dusting. Other important festivals include Kali Puja, Bichi Erai, Gangi Erai, Erai, Ghaghra Puja, and Osri Erai. Some income-generating artistic works are very popular in Santals and Paharias, such as Paitkar, which is painting, Dokra, which is metalwork, and Kantha, which is embroidery. It is also a means of preserving their cultural heritage.

**Picture-1: Sohrai Painting**



Source: <https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/maatighar.jpg>

There is a popular art form in Paharias. The name of the art form is Kohbar<sup>2</sup>, which is usually used during weddings to decorate houses and floors. Kohbar paintings (Picture-2) have themes that relate to fertility, man-woman relationships, and witchcraft. The use of symbols like husbands, animals, birds, and sorcery is a mark of this tradition. It is believed that symbols like bamboo, elephants, tortoises, fish, peacocks, snakes, lotuses, and other similar animals make it possible for descendants to grow (Bhatnagar, 2020). Sohrai and Kohbar paintings have been handed down from mother to daughter as part of the matrilineal tradition (Kumari, 2023).

Picture-2: Kohbar Painting



Source: [https://maatighar.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/DSC\\_0717-768x511-1.jpg](https://maatighar.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/DSC_0717-768x511-1.jpg)

### Socio-economic Dynamics

Socio-economic factors have a significant impact on the social diversity of tribal communities. Many tribal groups in these areas still struggle with poverty, unemployment and a lack of basic amenities. That leads to an increase in socio-economic disparities between them. Santals are gradually gaining political control in the state. Their contribution to the separation of the state from Bihar has given them supremacy and control in decision-making. They are highly visible in both the state machinery and various administrative positions. Thus, their socio-economic status is good. But in the case of Paharias, they are hesitant to interact with the mainstream population. Compared to the Santals, their socioeconomic status is very low. Due to marginalization and alienation, they lack adequate access to education, healthcare and livelihood opportunities.

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<sup>2</sup> The name Kohbar was derived from the combination of 'Koh' and 'Var'. Koh refers to a cave, while Var refers to grooming. Kohbar is used to describe the bedroom of the groom. Kohbar is still a well-known name and is written and made magnificently in these regions.

### **Social Structure, Family, and Marriage**

According to sociologists, social structure is a term that describes the pattern of people's interactions and relationships in a way that is largely repetitive and predictable. The matrix of social positions and their distribution is how it manifests itself. Social structure implies that life is characterized by organization and stability (Zanden, 1996). The main characteristics of the social structure of the Santal include family connections and clan affiliations. The primary social organization is the family, which maintains a patrilineal descent system. Social interactions, economic activities and decision-making processes within the community are significantly shaped by kinship relations. The Santals are committed to adhering to endogamy and exogamy rules, which involve controlling marriage alliances and ensuring the continuity of familial relationships.

On the other hand, life, birth, marriage, and death are seen as significant and special events in Paharias. The institution of marriage is of very importance. Fathers search for a bride when their children are eligible to marry, relying on a middleman named Sidhu<sup>3</sup> (Sidhudar) to help find a match. There are multiple ways to get married in Paharia. The typical and popular way to marry is by paying the bride's price. Divorce exists in Paharias. It is a common practice in Paharia to remarry widows. They believe that birth is a significant event in life. Pregnant women receive a lot of attention before their children are born. Visiting forests, waterfalls, or water sources is not permitted for pregnant women. Because they believe that these places are haunted by ghosts and evil spirits (Vikram, 2015).

### **Gender Roles and Religious Beliefs and Practices**

The roles of women in Santal communities are pivotal, including household management, agricultural contributions, and the preservation of cultural traditions. Whereas women in the Paharia tribe have a greater presence and involvement, they play a significant role in community activities. But in the changing socio-economic and political scenario, the dominant tribal groups also influence them. However, women of Paharias have better conditions in terms of gender roles. The religious rituals and beliefs of Santal enrich their social life and help them understand their worldview and values. According to Santal, the world is surrounded by a large number of spiritual beings, known

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<sup>3</sup> Match-making and smooth communications between both families are made easier by a village marriage middleman. Sidhu or Sidhudar is a middleman who plays a crucial role in traditional matrimonial arrangements in Paharias.

as Bonga<sup>4</sup>, who are directly responsible for the well-being of specific individuals or groups. Their comprehension of the individuality of supernatural beings or Bonga is extremely imprecise. Their interactions with supernatural beings are characterized by taboos, mystery, secrecy, and fear (Kochar, 1966). At the outset, Santal was solely associated with Thakur<sup>5</sup> and did not worship any Bonga (Skrefsrud, 1887). Similarly, the Paharias are associated with Dharmer Gosain<sup>6</sup>, a solar deity. (<https://www.trijharkhand.in/en/mal-paharia>). Basumati Gosai and Beru Gosai are other names of the Dharmer Gosain (Vikram, 2015).

### Challenges and Opportunities

While the landscape of Jharkhand, especially in Santal Pragana, enhances social diversity, challenges such as community conflicts, cultural erosion and identity crises persist. Changes in lifestyle and value systems have occurred as a result of rapid urbanization and globalization, resulting in a decline in their traditional practices. Despite these challenges, there are opportunities to foster intercultural conversation, support community initiatives and empower tribal youth through proper policy formation and implementation. It is necessary to understand and maintain diversity in order to create policies that are inclusive and promote social cohesion in the region.

### Conclusion

The population of Santal Pargana is diverse in terms of language, culture, social structure, traditions and economy. The region's uniqueness, which is rooted in centuries-old traditions and customs, makes it a more dynamic and resilient region. There are numerous tribes and subtribes present here, and each has distinct customs, rituals and dialects. Differences between major tribes and indigenous tribes exist in various aspects, such as marriage, family structure, religious practices, socio-economic dynamics, and arts and culture. The social status of Santal, one of the major tribes in this region, is higher than that of other tribes. They are more prominent in politics and governance in the state. At the same time, the life of Paharias is filled with struggles and difficulties. Their affinity for the hills and the natural environment remains

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<sup>4</sup> The Santal Tribe worships different classes of gods. Marang Buru or Bonga is the Supreme Deity. Most devotion is directed towards spirits (Bonga) who are responsible for different aspects of life. To avoid harm, these spirits are appeased with prayers and offerings. They operate at village, family, ancestor and subtribe levels, alongside harmful spirits that cause illness and inhabit village boundaries, mountains, water, tigers, and forests.

<sup>5</sup> Their benevolent Supreme deity, also known as Dharam or Thakur, represents the sun and is revered as the creator of the universe.

<sup>6</sup> The Paharias follow animistic practices and honor a court of spirits called Dharmer Gosain. Dharmer Gosain is the sun god, and their priests are called demano.

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strong. A significant number of their population lives in hills or on the slopes of hills in these regions. Their shyness and lack of intensity in interactions with the outside world make it difficult for them to develop. There are many variations and differences among the Paharia tribes in this region. They are not a part of state and central politics. However, it is evident from the above discussion that both tribes successfully maintain their cultures and customs, and these diversities make the state a culturally rich center of the nation.

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