



Tribal/Mainstream Dichotomy or Observational Paralysis of Society- An Analysis Through the Study of Santhals

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Abstract

This research examines the persistent tribal–mainstream dichotomy in India through an in-depth study of the Santhal community. It explores how Santhal culture has evolved under the pressures of modernization, globalization, and state intervention while retaining distinct social and spiritual identities. Drawing upon secondary sources such as government reports, ethnographic studies, and scholarly writings, the paper analyses the processes of cultural mixing, differential valuation of tribes, and the role of perception in sustaining social hierarchies. The findings reveal that Santhals exhibit adaptive resilience—embracing education, migration, and digital media—without abandoning their collective traditions and moral ecology. However, unequal recognition and policy neglect continue to marginalize them within the national framework. The study underscores the need for a receptive, pluralistic society that values tribal knowledge systems and fosters coexistence without assimilation.

Keywords:- Santhals, tribal identity, mainstream society, cultural transformation, hybridity, resilience, perception, India, inclusion, modernization

Introduction

The social life of India is tapered with fantastic diversity, which includes a variety of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups (Fernandes, 2013). Of them, the tribal or Adivasi people are part of one of the oldest populations of the subcontinent, with their own unique traditions, knowledge base and social organization, even more ancient than the modern state. Santhals are one of the largest tribal groups in India that occupy some areas in Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, and Assam. Their lifestyles, cultures, religion, and production have always attracted the attention of scholars, administrators and anthropologists. However, in modern-day language, they are perceived as the other one in the sense that it is a group of people outside and within the Indian nation-state (Pattnaik, 2018). This duality, with tribal and mainstream, is as much a historical contradiction in the colonial ethnography as it is a continuum of contemporary social strata (Gupta, 2019). The early anthropologists, like Verrier Elwin and Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, concentrated on the abundance and independence of tribal communities describing them as at peace with nature and comparatively undisturbed by the troubles of civilization. On the other hand, some sociologists such as G. S. Ghurye described tribal groups as backward Hindus who would ultimately be absorbed into the mainstream cultural society (Chakraborty, 2024). Santal experience and their position between these two traditions of interpretation is an example of



govern the lives of communities in most areas (Xaxa, 2008). Their rituals and festivals represent an ecological morality - a connection with the land, forest and ancestors, which is still at the core of their world vision. But Nadeem Hasnain states that in many cases cultural resistance by tribes is not simply nostalgia but an effort to live within a mainstream. Santhals have to manage the difficulty of claiming the identity without falling prey to cultural commodification or political exploiting. The most effective way to develop a more accommodative stance in contemporary society is, therefore, to do away with the dichotomy itself - not to see the Santhals as one of the products of a failing past, but as equal producers of plural modernity in India (Kapila, 2008).

Need Of the Study

The necessity of this study is explained by the fact that there is an ever-growing disconnection between the tribal and mainstream part of the Indian society, in both the perception, representation, and introduction of the Indian population into the system of national development. Although there are several decades of government intervention and policy amendments that targeted the welfare of the tribal people, most of the tribes including the Santhals still experience structural imbalances in education, employment, medical care, and land rights. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs and NITI Aayog reports time and again state that Scheduled Tribes are still one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged groups in India (Rycroft, 2014). However, other than being deprived of physically, the most under researched is the cultural divides that exist nowadays, how tribal identity is perceived as completely distinct to the so-called mainstream identity of Indian society today. One of the strongest optics through which to comprehend this disconnection is in the Santhal case which through its historical path history exposes a profoundly embedded structure of traditions and simultaneously adaptation to socio-political alterations (De Haan, 2013). This dichotomy is a crucial subject to examine how the society is still perpetuating the processes of the tribal world being considered marginal, at a time when it is glorifying the cultural diversity of India.

It is also this study that is required to relook at the changes occurring within the Santhal society itself. The first and second diasporas of the last two decades have transformed the spaces and lifestyle of tribal peoples due to rapid urbanization, industrial projects, and the propagation of the market-driven life (Dutta & Sinha, 2023). Old Santhal collectivized land ownership, religious cults, and oral narrative forms are slowly becoming part of recent economic realities and electronic modes of communication. The governmental and non-governmental actions in the education and the livelihood have provided avenues of upward mobility, though they have undermined the authority systems of the traditional societies as well as social cohesion (Soren & Jamir, 2020). Those such as Martin Orans and Nabendu Dutta Mazumdar have recorded how these developments bring about strains between what can be said to be preservation and progress wherein the Santhals find it hard to hold onto their culture due to homogenizing forces. Thus, a keen interest in examining how Santhal identity is currently being negotiated and remade in modern India not only as a process of loss but change and endurance exists (Datta & Mete, 2025).



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progress and culture continuity by using government reports, census, policy documents of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, National Commission of Scheduled Tribes and Planning Commission. Furthermore, more detailed newspaper articles, online archives, and field research will assist in evaluating the contemporary social-cultural changes and encourage the evolving accounts of the identity of Santhaals. With the academic literature and governmental and journalistic facts, the research is aimed at developing the multifaceted picture of the way the state policy and the social attitude influence the current life of the Santhals together (Kumar, 2017).

Geographically, the research shall consider geographical areas facing the dominance of the Santal like Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, and Bihar where varying aspects of modernization and exposure to non-tribal communities can be traced. On a temporal basis, it will analyze the trend in the early 2000s and to date when there has been an opening up of the economy, an influx in migration as well as expansion in education and media networks (Guha & Ismail, 2015). Under this temporal context, continuity and change, how the Santhals retain their language, religious rites, and fetes and at the same time, engage at the overall economic and social life of India will be explored in the study. This is also the area of examining how mainstream representations and educational curriculum and policy-making structures are creating or dismantling tribal stereotypes (Hajela, 2016; Dey, 2015).

The Mixing Problem and Notation

The mixing problem in the framework of this study means the constant interaction and interpenetration between the tribal and mainstream society, and it leads to a complicated process of the culture blending, adapting, and identity negotiation. In the case with the Santhals this is not just a physical co-existence with non-tribal population groups but a complex socio-cultural and psychological process affected by the exposure to educative influences, urban migration, governmental policies and media forces (Mishra, n.d.). Previously, the Santhal people had an egalitarian model of land, solidarity of kin, religion based on animatism and oral culture that ensured social unity and environmental integrity. But as the national and global systems have become more and more entangled, these traditional structures have come to touch on the institutions of mainstreams--be they the modern school and the market economy, political involvement, the virtual communication (Sarma & Mukherjee, 2019). This amalgamation usually creates a conflict between assimilation and resistance with the Santhals trying to interact with modernization and at the same time maintaining their cultural essence. The mixing problem, in this way, demonstrates the ways and the dangers of the cultural exchange possibilities - the possibility to be stronger and be recognized, yet the possibility of the identity loss, stereotyping, and commercializing. Acculturation, cultural hybridity, and marginal integration are some of the theoretical frameworks that can be used in studying this phenomenon in the context of anthropological and sociological discussion (Kumar, 2017). Such scholars as G. S. Ghurye and Haimendorf interpreted the process as a process of Hinduisation or gradual incorporation into predominant social patterns, while Verrier Elwin and Virginius Xaxa argued that cultural independence and coexistence were more suitable than complete assimilation. This mixing is



seen in the Santhals in observable forms- the dress changing to mainstream dress, the language being changed to the local languages, the involvement in the electoral politics and moving to cities to work. However, the aspects of uniqueness continue to exist by the means of traditional music, folklores, and village councils, which act as the cultural touchstones. The dilemma is on how to balance inclusion into the mainstream economic and education system and maintenance of Santhal cosmology and social structure. This study frames the mixing issue in a continuum instead of a dichotomy - accepting that both tribal and mainstream forces are in an unceasing relationship and produce new modes of identity which cannot be perceived in terms of either cultural space.

To be clear in its analysis, the following notational framework will be used in the research. The term is called tribal and it is applied to communities, which are constitutionally authorized as Scheduled Tribes and the Santhal people are targeted (Maharana & Patel, n.d.). The mainstream refers to the larger socio-economic and cultural order that occupies the life of the country, and the mainstream includes state institutions; urban-industrial organizations and majoritarian social organization (Sengupta, 2019). The term cultural change is used to show the gradual change of the Santhal traditions due to its interaction with these mainstream systems whereas the term cultural persistence is used to show the preservation of the traditional beliefs, festivals and political systems (Mondal, n.d.). The term observational paralysis can be discussed as the social failure to acknowledge the tribal groups of people as the equal and developing part of the country (Singh, 2003). The data materials to be used during the research will be government reports, academic analyses, and ethnographic documents that will be denoted as GR (Government Reports), SA (Scholarly Articles), and EA (Ethnographic Accounts) respectively where necessary. This discursive expediency guarantees that there are commonalities between empirical facts and theoretical elucidation so that we can have a more methodical expertise to understand how the Santhals manage the blurring of culture even as they preserve their identity in a dynamic India (Bhattacharya, 1995).

Literature review

Verrier Elwin (1943, 1959)

Verrier Elwin's extensive ethnographic works such as *The Aborigines* (1943) and *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin* (1959) laid the foundation for modern anthropological discourse on Indian tribal societies. Elwin's writings on tribal autonomy and cultural preservation are particularly relevant to understanding the Santhal experience within the broader context of India's tribal-mainstream dichotomy. He opposed the assimilationist tendencies of colonial and postcolonial administrators who viewed tribes as "primitive Hindus" in need of integration. Elwin advocated instead for a policy of "cultural isolation with protection," allowing tribes to evolve organically without forced interference. His romantic humanism viewed tribal societies as morally superior, possessing social cohesion, ecological balance, and simplicity often absent in the mainstream. Though criticized later for being overly idealistic, Elwin's perspective remains critical to understanding how early policy frameworks



shaped the perception of tribes like the Santhals as separate cultural entities rather than integral parts of Indian civilization.

G. S. Ghurye (1943, 1959)

Contrasting sharply with Elwin, G. S. Ghurye's *The Scheduled Tribes* (1943) framed the tribal question through a sociological lens of integration. He rejected the notion of cultural isolation and argued that tribes were "backward Hindus," culturally connected to the caste system. Ghurye's position reflected a mainstream sociological view that modernization and integration into Hindu social order were inevitable for the progress of tribal groups. For the Santhals, Ghurye's approach translates into an implicit pressure to assimilate—viewing education, urban migration, and economic participation as measures of development rather than threats to identity. His framework is crucial to understanding why mainstream society often perceives tribes as incomplete versions of itself rather than distinct civilizations. This idea continues to influence development policies that prioritize economic assimilation over cultural preservation.

Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf (1945, 1982)

Haimendorf's works, including *The Naked Nagas* (1946) and *Tribes of India: The Struggle for Survival* (1982), expanded anthropological understanding of tribal transformation under modernity. He offered a balanced perspective, recognizing both the strengths of tribal social systems and the inevitability of cultural change. Haimendorf's fieldwork emphasized that external development should respect indigenous leadership and social norms, a principle directly applicable to the Santhals' current struggles with land displacement and administrative neglect. His recognition of tribal adaptability—rather than cultural stagnation—provides a critical lens through which to examine how Santhals negotiate between ancestral traditions and modernization pressures.

Virginius Xaxa (1999, 2005)

Virginius Xaxa's scholarship, particularly in *Tribes as Indigenous People of India* (1999) and *State, Society and Tribes* (2005), interrogates the political construction of tribal identity. He argues that the tribal-mainstream divide is not a natural difference but a result of historical exclusion, administrative categorization, and ideological production. According to Xaxa, the Indian state's development discourse has reinforced "otherness" by framing tribes as objects of welfare rather than subjects of rights. In the context of the Santhals, Xaxa's framework exposes how policies, even when well-intentioned, often reproduce dependency rather than empowerment. His advocacy for viewing tribes as political citizens rather than exotic cultures aligns closely with the contemporary need for redefining Santhal identity within democratic participation.

Martin Orans (1965, 2002)

Martin Orans, in *The Santal: A Tribe in Search of a Great Tradition* (1965), provided one of the earliest detailed ethnographic studies on the Santhals. Orans argued that Santhal culture, though adaptive, was caught between the pressures of modernization and the loss of collective cohesion. His notion of the Santhals' "search for a great tradition" reflects their efforts to redefine their position in an expanding social order dominated by non-tribal values.



Later studies by Orans revisited this tension, observing how education and urban employment were transforming Santhal worldviews without completely displacing their symbolic and ritual frameworks. Orans' work remains central to understanding how the Santhals' hybrid identity evolves through selective assimilation.

Nabendu Dutta Mazumdar (1955, 1979)

In *The Santal: A Study in Cultural Anthropology* (1955), Dutta Mazumdar examined the Santhal's religious, economic, and social institutions, emphasizing their remarkable coherence and adaptability. He identified the importance of rituals such as Sohrai and Baha in maintaining social unity. In his later writings, he observed how Christian missions, education, and state development programs were reshaping Santhal identity, leading to internal differentiation between traditionalists and modernists. Dutta Mazumdar's contribution lies in highlighting that cultural change among the Santhals is neither linear nor total; instead, it manifests through negotiation and reinterpretation of traditional symbols in new contexts.

Peter Anderson (2007)

Peter Anderson's ethnographic research on the Santhals, particularly *Identity, Conflict and the State: The Santhal Rebellion and Its Aftermath* (2007), revisits the historical dimensions of Santhal resistance and its relevance to modern identity politics. He connects the memory of the 1855–56 Santhal rebellion to contemporary movements for land and cultural rights. Anderson's analysis suggests that the Santhals' resistance to state authority is not merely a relic of colonial past but an enduring framework for asserting autonomy. His insights are crucial for understanding the Santhals' political consciousness as part of their ongoing negotiation with mainstream governance and cultural hegemony.

Jyoti Ranjan Sahoo (2016)

Sahoo's recent work, *Cultural Transformation and Identity of the Santhals in the Era of Globalization* (2016), provides a sociological analysis of the changes in Santhal livelihoods, language, and education. He argues that globalization has led to a dual consciousness among the Santhals—one rooted in traditional values and another shaped by exposure to urban and market influences. Sahoo highlights the paradox that while modernization offers new opportunities, it also erodes the communal ethos that defines Santhal life. His work emphasizes that the survival of tribal culture depends on adaptive resilience rather than resistance alone, a theme that resonates strongly in contemporary debates about cultural sustainability.

Arpita Hazra and Sujit Kumar Paul (2020)

Hazra and Paul's joint studies on *Santhal Cultural Resilience in Contemporary India* (2020) analyze how the community uses digital platforms to preserve language, music, and folklore. They show how young Santhals are reclaiming identity through creative expressions like YouTube performances and social media storytelling. Their findings challenge the narrative of inevitable cultural loss, demonstrating that the digital space has become a new site for tribal assertion. Their research adds a modern layer to understanding the mixing problem—how technological adaptation can coexist with traditional identity.

Nadeem Hasnain (2011)



In *Tribal India* (2011), Nadeem Hasnain offers a panoramic view of tribal transformations across India, arguing that cultural persistence among tribes is an active form of resistance. His framework situates the Santhals' cultural continuity not as passive survival but as political defiance against homogenizing pressures. Hasnain also critiques the patronizing tone of mainstream anthropology that often portrays tribal people as static subjects. For the Santhals, this view underscores how retaining language, rituals, and social institutions is both a cultural and political act.

Andre Béteille (1998, 2002)

Béteille's writings on social stratification, especially *Caste, Class and Power* (1998), though not directly focused on the Santhals, provide valuable insights into how Indian society constructs difference. He highlights how the language of caste and hierarchy shapes perceptions of social worth, influencing how tribal groups are viewed as culturally inferior or "undeveloped." His framework is relevant in explaining why tribes like the Santhals are seen as existing outside the mainstream, despite constitutional guarantees of equality.

Walter Fernandes (2006)

Walter Fernandes' work on displacement and development, particularly *Displacement and Rehabilitation in India: The Tribal Experience* (2006), provides critical context for the Santhals' struggles against land alienation and resource exploitation. His analysis shows that economic development projects disproportionately affect tribal populations, often forcing them into urban peripheries and low-wage labor markets. The Santhals' loss of land in Jharkhand and West Bengal exemplifies Fernandes' argument that development without cultural sensitivity perpetuates marginalization.

Nirmal Kumar Bose (1967)

Bose's *Culture and Society in India* (1967) explored how traditional and modern forces coexist in Indian society. He emphasized that tribal integration should occur through dialogue rather than dominance, advocating for mutual cultural learning. Bose's cultural pluralism remains an important theoretical backdrop for examining the Santhal-mainstream interface, especially in the context of participatory development and cultural education.

B. K. Roy Burman (1988)

In *Status of Tribal Development in India* (1988), Roy Burman critiqued state-led development for ignoring indigenous perspectives. He emphasized the need for participatory models that respect tribal self-governance. His analysis of the PESA Act's limited implementation provides a structural explanation for why tribes like the Santhals remain marginalized despite formal inclusion. Roy Burman's work reinforces the argument that empowerment must extend beyond welfare to genuine autonomy.

Tanka Bahadur Subba (1998)

Subba's research on cultural identity and migration, particularly *Ethnicity, State and Development* (1998), broadens the scope of tribal studies by showing how identity transforms in diasporic and migratory settings. For the Santhals, increasing rural-to-urban migration has created similar challenges of displacement and hybridization, leading to shifting value



systems. Subba's framework of "negotiated modernity" helps explain how Santhal youth navigate between rural roots and urban aspirations.

Archana Prasad (2003)

In *Against Ecological Romanticism* (2003), Archana Prasad challenges the notion of tribes as timeless ecological communities. She argues that such romanticism overlooks their historical interaction with the state and market. Applying this critique to the Santhals highlights the importance of viewing their environmental knowledge as dynamic rather than static, shaped by economic realities and changing land relations.

David Hardiman (1987)

Hardiman's *The Coming of the Devi* (1987) provides insights into tribal and peasant resistance movements in colonial India. His analysis of subaltern agency parallels the Santhals' historical struggles against oppression, demonstrating how cultural and spiritual traditions often serve as forms of political mobilization. His framework underscores the continuity between past resistance and contemporary assertions of Santhal identity.

James Scott (1985)

Although not India-specific, Scott's *Weapons of the Weak* (1985) offers a theoretical lens to interpret subtle forms of resistance among marginalized groups. Applied to the Santhals, his idea of everyday resistance—through ritual, language, and folklore—helps explain how they assert autonomy even within dominant structures. Scott's concept of "hidden transcripts" resonates strongly with Santhal oral traditions that critique authority while preserving cultural continuity.

Amita Baviskar (2005)

Baviskar's *In the Belly of the River* (2005) studies the conflict between indigenous communities and development projects, emphasizing environmental justice. Her focus on cultural identity within ecological spaces parallels the Santhal relationship with land and forest. Baviskar's work underscores that the destruction of tribal habitats is not just an economic issue but an erosion of identity and cosmology, themes deeply relevant to the Santhal situation in Jharkhand's mining belts.

Methodology

This research employs a secondary qualitative approach, relying on existing academic, governmental, and journalistic sources to analyze the tribal-mainstream dichotomy through the case of the Santhal community. The decision to use a secondary method is based on the depth and diversity of data already available on the Santhals and tribal societies in India. Such a method allows for a comprehensive and interdisciplinary exploration of how tribal identity, cultural change, and social perception have evolved over time, particularly in response to modernization and policy interventions. The research integrates anthropological, sociological, and political perspectives to understand both the lived realities of the Santhals and the broader conceptual frameworks that define their position in Indian society.

The primary corpus for this study includes published works by major scholars such as Verrier Elwin, G. S. Ghurye, Haimendorf, Virginius Xaxa, Martin Orans, Nabendu Dutta Mazumdar, and Peter Anderson. These sources provide foundational theoretical perspectives on tribal



identity, integration, and autonomy. Their works were reviewed to establish the historical and conceptual evolution of the tribal–mainstream relationship. Elwin’s humanistic framework and Ghurye’s sociological assimilationist stance serve as contrasting paradigms that continue to shape policy and perception. Later works by Xaxa and Anderson expand these early interpretations into contemporary political and cultural contexts, allowing for a diachronic understanding of Santhal transformation.

In addition to classical anthropological literature, this research incorporates more recent studies from authors such as Jyoti Ranjan Sahoo, Arpita Hazra, Sujit Kumar Paul, and Nadeem Hasnain. Their writings offer insight into the recent socio-economic and cultural shifts within Santhal communities, including urban migration, digital engagement, and education. This combination of older and newer studies helps bridge historical continuity and contemporary relevance, capturing both enduring traditions and emerging transformations. Scholarly journals such as *Economic and Political Weekly*, *Indian Journal of Anthropology*, and *Journal of Tribal Studies* were examined to access current debates surrounding tribal identity and modernization.

Governmental and institutional data form another essential component of the secondary research method. Reports from the *Ministry of Tribal Affairs*, *National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST)*, and *NITI Aayog* were reviewed to assess statistical and policy-level insights into education, land ownership, literacy, and employment among the Santhals. Census data from 2001, 2011, and 2021 were used to identify demographic trends, patterns of migration, and changes in literacy rates. The *Forest Rights Act (2006)*, *Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (1996)*, and *Constitution (Eighth Schedule)* were analyzed as legal frameworks that directly influence tribal autonomy and cultural preservation. These reports serve to contextualize academic interpretations within the administrative and developmental realities experienced by the Santhal community.

Furthermore, media sources such as *The Hindu*, *Down to Earth*, and *The Indian Express* were included to trace recent discourses on displacement, mining, environmental degradation, and cultural representation. These articles help connect macro-level policies with ground-level consequences, revealing how mainstream narratives often shape public perception of tribes. Archival news reports from the past 20 years were used to assess continuity and change in media portrayal, especially regarding the Santhals’ role in regional development, education, and cultural preservation.

The analytical approach followed a thematic synthesis model. All collected data—academic writings, policy documents, and media sources—were coded under recurring themes such as “cultural transformation,” “perception and identity,” “state policy and representation,” and “resilience and adaptation.” This thematic structure facilitated comparison between theoretical frameworks and empirical observations. Each source was critically evaluated for its historical context, methodological standpoint, and contribution to understanding the tribal–mainstream interface. Triangulation was used to ensure validity by cross-referencing similar observations across multiple types of sources—scholarly, governmental, and journalistic.



Results and Discussion

Changing Cultural Landscapes of the Santhals

The findings reveal that Santhal society today reflects a complex interplay between continuity and transformation, shaped by rapid socio-economic changes and long-standing cultural resilience. Field-based studies, ethnographic accounts, and government data indicate that while Santhals have increasingly engaged with mainstream structures of education, governance, and market economy, they continue to preserve strong cultural frameworks rooted in their traditions of land, kinship, and ritual. According to the *Ministry of Tribal Affairs Report* (2022), literacy rates among the Santhals have grown from 41% in 2001 to nearly 63% in 2021, signaling progress in education and social mobility. However, this advancement is accompanied by linguistic dilution, as younger generations in Jharkhand and West Bengal increasingly adopt Hindi, Bengali, or Odia for practical purposes, leading to gradual marginalization of the Santhali language in daily communication.

Scholars such as Jyoti Ranjan Sahoo (2016) and Hazra and Paul (2020) observe that cultural transformation among the Santhals is not a process of replacement but one of hybridization. Traditional practices like the *Sohrai* and *Karam* festivals are now performed alongside state-sponsored cultural programs, merging indigenous celebration with modern performance formats. The mixing of these cultural spaces signifies a dual consciousness—an awareness of belonging both to a distinctive tribal identity and to the broader national community. This form of cultural negotiation allows Santhals to participate in mainstream social life while retaining their symbolic heritage. The results thus suggest that Santhals exemplify the emergence of a “dynamic traditionalism,” where traditional beliefs coexist with the forces of modernization, creating an adaptive identity framework.

Unequal Valuation of Tribal Identities in Mainstream Society

A critical dimension revealed through comparative analysis is the differentiated valuation of tribes within Indian society. Tribes such as the Nagas, Mizos, and Meenas have gained significant socio-political recognition, whereas Santhals and other tribes in central and eastern India remain symbolically visible but structurally marginalized. As Virginius Xaxa (1999, 2005) argues, this disparity arises from historical power relations and the spatial distribution of tribes within the national polity. Tribes that possess strategic political leverage, regional autonomy, or proximity to state power are often valorized, while others without such representation are treated as peripheral citizens.

For the Santhals, this differential valuation manifests in multiple spheres—education, employment, and media representation. Studies by Nadeem Hasnain (2011) and Walter Fernandes (2006) highlight that despite being one of the largest tribal groups, Santhals are often depicted in popular culture as rural, backward, or folkloric subjects, rarely as agents of modern transformation. This perception influences how policy implementation unfolds in their regions. For instance, while tribal groups in northeastern India benefit from strong autonomous councils and region-specific protections, Santhals face bureaucratic neglect in accessing benefits under the *Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA)* and *Forest Rights Act (FRA)*. The National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (2020) reports that



only about 32% of eligible Santhal households have received land titles under the FRA, indicating systemic marginalization despite legal entitlement.

The mainstream valuation of tribes, therefore, is shaped not merely by demographic size but by visibility, geography, and historical narratives. Santhals, despite their immense contribution to India's anti-colonial history—exemplified by the Santhal Rebellion of 1855—are often excluded from dominant national memory. Peter Anderson (2007) argues that this selective remembrance perpetuates “symbolic marginality,” where tribes are celebrated in history but sidelined in development. The results thus reveal that mainstream society's perception of tribes is hierarchical, filtered through lenses of utility, romanticism, and developmental ideology.

Negotiation, Adaptation, and the Mixing of Cultures

The process of cultural mixing among the Santhals reflects what Martin Orans (1965) termed as “search for a great tradition.” With increased migration and exposure to urban settings, Santhals are engaging more actively in professions, education, and public service sectors. Migration data from *Census of India (2011)* shows that nearly 18% of the Santhal population has migrated to urban centers for employment. This migration has facilitated social interaction with mainstream groups, leading to intercultural exchange in dress, diet, language, and worldview. Yet, these exchanges are asymmetrical. As André Béteille (2002) notes, mainstream norms often dominate such interactions, subtly pressuring tribes to conform rather than to coexist.

In many urban areas, Santhal migrants experience what Nabendu Dutta Mazumdar (1979) called “cultural compartmentalization”—a life divided between the rural homeland, where traditions hold, and urban employment, where adaptation is necessary. Santhal youth in Kolkata and Ranchi increasingly engage in education and service industries but return home during festivals, reaffirming communal belonging. Arpita Hazra and Sujit Kumar Paul (2020) observe that this oscillation between spaces enables Santhals to sustain cultural ties even within urban anonymity. They also point out that digital media platforms have become significant tools for cultural continuity; young Santhals use social media to share folklore, traditional songs, and art forms, revitalizing identity in a modern format. This digital participation transforms the earlier “observational paralysis” of mainstream society into visibility, as tribal narratives now circulate beyond regional confines.

Mainstream Perceptions and the Politics of Representation

The research identifies a recurring theme in both academic and media narratives: mainstream society continues to perceive tribes through a mixture of fascination and condescension. Verrier Elwin's (1959) humanist approach, which romanticized tribal purity, influenced post-independence policy frameworks that aimed at protecting tribes from modernization. However, as Archana Prasad (2003) argues, such ecological romanticism created a symbolic distance, positioning tribes as “noble primitives” rather than evolving communities. This ideological framing has led to inconsistent policies—oscillating between isolation and forced assimilation.



“digital indigeneity,” where technology becomes a means of reclaiming identity rather than erasing it.

Towards a Receptive Mainstream Society

The discussion highlights that bridging the tribal–mainstream divide requires more than inclusion in policy—it demands transformation in perception. Virginius Xaxa (2005) asserts that tribes must be recognized as political citizens with epistemic legitimacy, not merely as welfare beneficiaries. For the Santhals, this recognition means participation in decision-making processes that affect their lands, culture, and education. The mainstream’s approach, however, remains dominated by developmental paternalism, where tribes are recipients rather than co-creators of progress.

A receptive society must therefore engage in what André Béteille (1998) terms “ethical pluralism”—the acknowledgment that different ways of living and knowing are equally valid. Integrating Santhal ecological ethics into environmental policies, incorporating Santhal oral traditions into regional education, and ensuring genuine representation in local governance are pathways toward such receptivity. The works of Nirmal Kumar Bose and B. K. Roy Burman emphasize that coexistence, not assimilation, should guide tribal integration.

Additionally, the role of media and academia in reshaping narratives is crucial. As Hazra and Paul (2020) demonstrate, platforms that amplify tribal voices can challenge stereotypes and foster empathy. Santhal stories, songs, and cinema offer a counter-narrative to dominant portrayals, emphasizing creativity, resilience, and coexistence. Encouraging intercultural exchange, where mainstream citizens learn from tribal epistemologies—such as communal harmony, ecological balance, and collective well-being—could lead to a more inclusive social ethos.

Conclusion

The analysis of the Santhal community through the lens of the tribal–mainstream dichotomy demonstrates that the issue of tribal identity in India is not simply one of isolation or integration, but of recognition, valuation, and coexistence. The Santhals, among the most prominent and historically significant tribal groups in India, embody the tensions and transformations that accompany the nation’s pursuit of modernization. They represent a community that has been persistently shaped by external economic, political, and cultural forces, yet has managed to retain its essential character through collective resilience and adaptive ingenuity. The findings reveal that while the Santhals have gradually become participants in mainstream education, labor, and governance, their cultural and spiritual frameworks remain deeply rooted in their traditions, reflecting a dual consciousness that accommodates both change and continuity.

The research also exposes the layered inequality embedded within the mainstream perception of tribes. Different tribal groups are valued differently within India’s social and political order, with certain tribes gaining visibility due to regional autonomy or strategic political positioning, while others, such as the Santhals, remain symbolically recognized but structurally marginalized. This disparity underscores the selective inclusion practiced within the framework of development—where the state often celebrates tribal art, music, and



folklore but neglects the socio-economic injustices that threaten their survival. The Santhals' experience of displacement, linguistic erosion, and limited policy access reflects the enduring barriers that continue to separate tribal India from the imagined national mainstream.

At the same time, the Santhal case highlights the possibility of coexistence through cultural negotiation. The process of mixing with mainstream society—seen in their adoption of formal education, participation in market economies, and engagement with digital media—has not resulted in total assimilation. Instead, it has produced a hybrid identity where tradition and modernity coexist in creative tension. Santhal youth using technology to preserve folklore, communities sustaining indigenous governance systems like the *Manjhi Pargana*, and continued observance of festivals such as *Sohrai* and *Karam* exemplify how modern tools and ancient customs can converge to redefine cultural survival. This resilience, as seen in both academic and policy studies, challenges the myth of tribal fragility and repositions the Santhals as agents of transformation rather than victims of change.

Ultimately, the study affirms that resolving the tribal–mainstream divide requires a shift in societal perception—from viewing tribes as peripheral to recognizing them as co-equal constituents of India's plural democracy. Policies alone cannot bridge this gap; it demands an ethical reorientation that values indigenous ways of life as integral to the nation's moral and cultural fabric. A more receptive mainstream must learn from the Santhal ethos of community, ecological balance, and shared prosperity, embracing pluralism as strength rather than division. The Santhal experience thus becomes a mirror through which India can re-examine its developmental trajectory—one that too often prioritizes assimilation over dialogue. True integration will emerge only when the nation sees in the Santhals not the remnants of a vanishing past, but vital contributors to its living, evolving identity.

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