

Cultural Adaptation and Socioeconomic Change Among the Santal Community: A Qualitative Case Study on Birganj Upazila, Dinajpur, Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This study examines processes of cultural adaptation and socioeconomic change among the Santal community of Birganj Upazila, Dinajpur, Bangladesh. Drawing on a qualitative case study based on six in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions. The research explores how Santals negotiate livelihood insecurity, educational change, religious transformation, and shifting family and gender relations within conditions of persistent structural marginalization. The findings show that livelihoods remain largely dependent on agriculture and daily wage labor with the number of increasing labor mobility and educational aspirations signal gradual social change. Religious conversion to Christianity has functioned as an important strategy of social adaptation, facilitating access to education and institutional support while reshaping collective identity. At the same time, traditional cultural practices- such as music, dance, festivals, and communal solidarity- continue to play a central role in everyday social life. From a sociological perspective, the study demonstrates that Santal adaptation occurs through selective continuity rather than assimilation, within a context of adverse incorporation, land insecurity, and limited state support. The paper contributes to sociological debates on ethnicity, rural inequality, and development in Bangladesh by foregrounding indigenous agency alongside enduring structural constraints.

Keywords: Adivasi, Indigenous community, Conversion, Life & livelihood patterns.

INTRODUCTION

Groups classified as indigenous in Bangladesh occupy a position showing marginalization within the structure of the rural social system, and this occurs despite commitments to equality that appear in constitutional provisions. Groups identified as Plainland Adivasi, which include the Santals, show a pattern of exclusion from access to land ownership, from access to formal education, from access to welfare provided by the state, and from access to representation in political institutions, and these patterns reflect inequalities that relate to ethnicity and to class (Hossain, 2023), (IRI.org, 2020).

The Santals located in northern Bangladesh demonstrate dependence on agriculture that follows traditional patterns, on resources from forests, and on institutions that provide social support within the community. Changes in the structure of agriculture, processes involving dispossession from land, and the expansion of markets for labor that operate informally have produced effects that restructure the livelihoods of these groups and the relations that provide social structure. From a perspective examining social processes, these changes indicate processes that involve incorporation under adverse conditions, and these processes involve the integration of groups showing marginalization into the economy of rural areas, and this integration occurs under conditions that show inequality and insecurity (Shamsuddoha & Jahan, 2016).

Conversion relating to religion, and this conversion occurs particularly to Christianity, presents a dimension of social change that shows significance among Santals in Dinajpur. Studies conducted previously indicate that conversion functions as a pathway providing access to education, to healthcare, and to support from institutions, and conversion produces effects that reshape identity relating to the collective and practices relating to culture (Chowdhury, Vadevelu, Singh, Saad, & Hatta, 2024). However, rather than patterns indicating disappearance of culture, society among the Santals shows continuity that demonstrates selectivity, and groups maintain music,

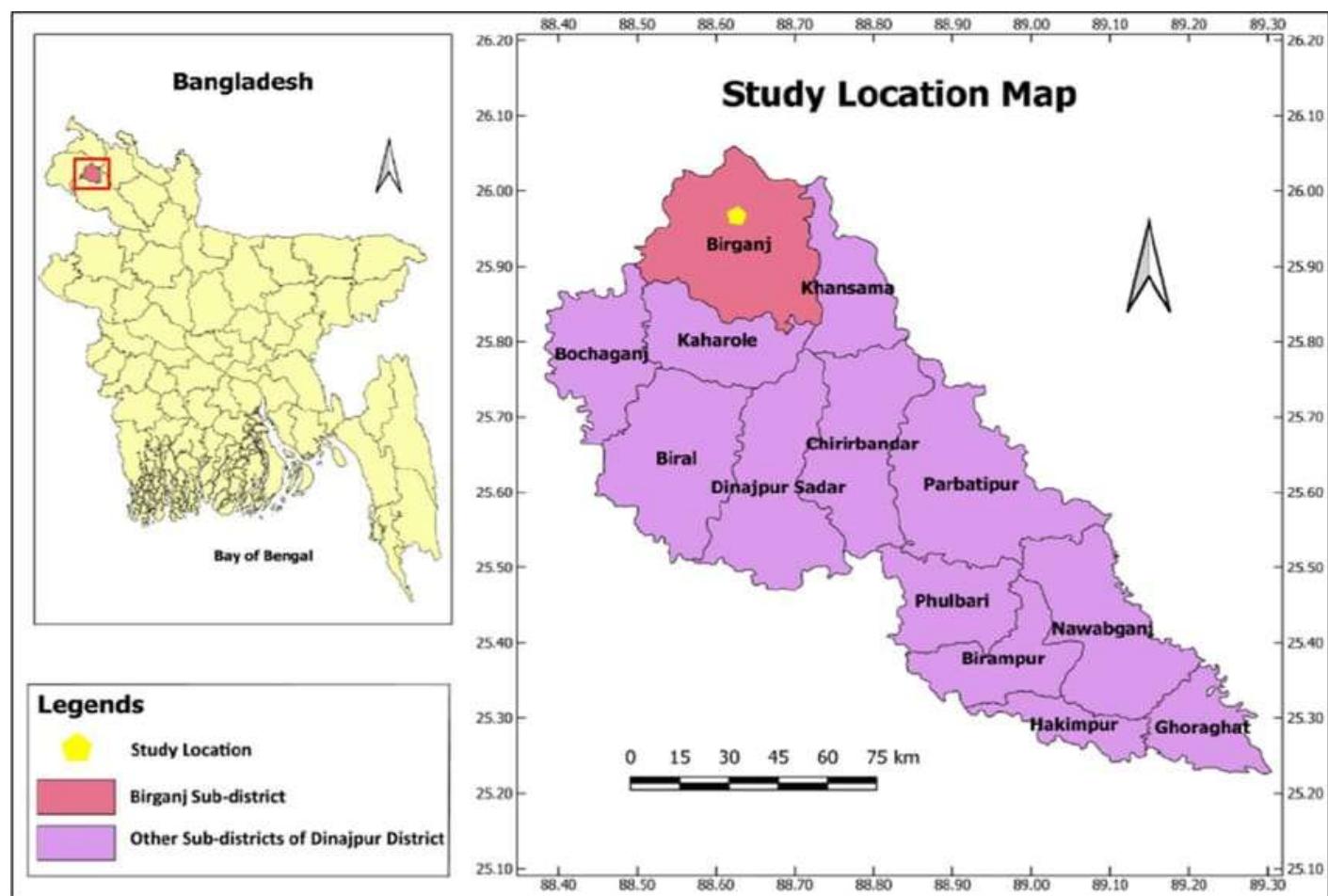
maintain dance, maintain festivals, and maintain solidarity within the community, and these occur within structures provided by new religious frameworks (Karim & Eftakhar, 2019).

Research examining social processes relating to peoples classified as indigenous in Bangladesh shows expansion, but the literature that exists focuses predominantly on communities in hill areas or on analysis examining policy at the level of the state, and this focus results in limited examination of transformations in social patterns that occur in the everyday experience of Santals in plainland areas (Hossain, 2023) (Shamsuddoha & Jahan, 2016).

This study that uses an approach examining features in a case provides examination addressing that gap, and the study examines patterns showing how adaptation relating to culture and change relating to socioeconomic conditions occur together in the experience of the Santal community in Dinajpur, and findings from the study provide contributions to discussions showing broader scope that examine inequality in rural areas, ethnicity, and development in Bangladesh.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of the Santal community. Data were collected from Birganj Upazila of Dinajpur district using six in-depth case studies and two focus group discussions (FGDs).



Birganj was purposively selected because it is the largest upazila in Dinajpur district, and Dinajpur is the largest district in Rangpur Division—one of the two divisions (along with Rajshahi) where the Santal community is predominantly concentrated in Bangladesh. Birganj was purposively selected because it is the largest upazila in Dinajpur district, and Dinajpur is the largest district in Rangpur Division—one of the two divisions (along with Rajshahi) where the Santal community is predominantly concentrated in Bangladesh. This geographical and demographic significance makes Birganj a relevant and information-rich field site for understanding the social realities of the community.

Data collection took place during in-person meetings; interview sessions and group discussions were recorded only after getting permission. Transcripts were made exactly as spoken, then switched to English when needed. A thematic approach guided analysis - codes were applied step by step to spot common ideas and insights. The research followed ethical rules closely: people agreed openly, identities stayed hidden, and everyone knew they could leave anytime. Information was used just for scholarly work, keeping privacy intact while supporting honest inquiry.

FINDINGS

This section presents the key findings of the study based on qualitative data generated through six in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions conducted among members of the Santal community in Dinajpur. A thematic analysis approach was employed to identify recurring patterns and meanings within participants' narratives. The analysis resulted in six major themes that reflect processes of cultural adaptation and socio-economic change in everyday life. An overview of these themes is presented in Table 1, followed by a detailed thematic discussion supported by illustrative quotations from the participants.

Table 1: Major Themes and Analytical Focus of the Study

Theme No	Major Theme	Analytical Focus	Data Source
1	Livelihood patterns and economic transformation	Dependence on daily wage labor, small and fragmented landholdings, gendered wage disparities, labor migration	Interviews (1–6); FGD (1–2)
2	Educational Aspirations and Access	Generational shift toward schooling, role of mission and government schools, financial barriers to educational continuation	Interviews (1–5); FGD (2)
3	Religious Transition and Identity	Conversion to Christianity, decline of indigenous and Hindu rituals, formation of collective Christian identity	Interviews (1–4); FGD (1)
4	Cultural Practices and Social Life	Music, dance, festivals, weddings, alcohol use, communal solidarity	Interviews (2–4); FGD (1)
5	Changes in Family Structure and Gender Roles	Shift from joint to nuclear families, family planning awareness, women's participation in income-generating activities	Interviews (1–3); FGD (2)
6	Housing, Land, and Structural Constraints	Predominance of mud housing, limited land ownership, historical land loss, restricted access to state support	Interviews (4–6)

Each of these themes is discussed in detail below, drawing on participants' narratives to illustrate the nature and implications of socio-economic and cultural change within the Santal community.

Livelihood patterns and economic transformation

The findings indicate that the majority of Santals in Dinajpur depend on agriculture and daily wage labor for survival. Most households possess small or marginal landholdings, while many work on others' land as agricultural laborers. Participants consistently described their livelihoods as insecure and labor-intensive. As one respondent noted:

"I work as a day laborer and earn around 300 taka a day. My sons also work and earn 400–500 taka. All this money is spent on rice, lentils, and clothing" (Interview 1).

Both interviews and FGDs revealed that women's participation in wage labor has increased, particularly in agricultural fields, although wage disparities persist. A focus group participant explained:

"Men earn about 400–500 taka a day, but women earn 100–200 taka less even though they do similar work" (FGD 2).

Migration for work has become an important livelihood strategy. Several respondents mentioned seasonal or long-term migration to urban and semi-urban areas such as Dhaka, Cumilla, and Sylhet. Compared to previous generations, participants perceived modest economic improvement, primarily due to increased work opportunities rather than structural change:

“Earlier our fathers worked only in others’ houses. Now people go outside the area to work, and income has increased a little” (Interview 3).

Overall, economic change among the Santals appears incremental and uneven, marked by increased labor mobility but continued vulnerability and dependence on daily wages.

Educational aspirations and access

Education emerged as one of the most significant areas of social change. Participants emphasized a clear generational shift from widespread illiteracy to growing educational participation among children. While older respondents frequently reported having no formal education, most stated that all children in the community now attend school:

“I myself never studied, and I could not educate my children. But now all children go to school, and my grandchildren also attend school” (Interview 1).

Christian missionary schools and government primary schools play a key role in expanding access. Several participants linked educational change to religious conversion:

“After becoming Christian, our children started going to mission schools. Now we understand the value of education” (Interview 3).

Despite increased enrollment, economic constraints remain a major barrier to educational continuity. Many children drop out after primary or lower secondary education due to poverty:

“I studied up to class six, but I had to stop because of money problems” (Interview 2).

FGD participants confirmed that higher education remains rare among Santals, though aspirations are rising. Education is widely perceived as the primary pathway to social mobility and dignity.

Religious transition and identity

A major finding of this study is the widespread conversion of Santals in the study area from traditional and Hindu belief systems to Christianity. Almost all participants identified as Christian and described a gradual but profound transformation of religious life:

“Earlier we worshipped Durga and Manasa. Now we are Christians and celebrate Christmas. We do not perform Hindu rituals anymore” (Interview 1).

Conversion was often associated with access to education, health services, and material support provided by missionary organizations. Participants also emphasized the social acceptance and collective identity fostered through Christian practices:

“Now all houses here are Christian. Christmas is our main festival” (FGD 1).

However, respondents acknowledged that this transition has altered traditional religious practices, leading to the decline of indigenous rituals. Christianity has become a central marker of contemporary Santal identity in Dinajpur, symbolizing both cultural adaptation and socio-economic aspiration.

Cultural practices and social life

Despite religious change, many traditional Santal cultural practices continue, particularly music, dance, and communal celebrations. Participants described singing and dancing as integral to weddings, festivals, and social gatherings:

“We Santals love music and dance. During weddings and Christmas, men and women all dance together” (Interview 2).

Life-cycle rituals such as birth and marriage retain strong communal elements, including collective feasting and gift exchange. Even as religious symbols have changed, the underlying values of social solidarity and collective participation remain resilient.

Alcohol consumption, especially homemade rice liquor, was frequently mentioned as part of ceremonial life. While some participants expressed concern about excessive drinking, it continues to hold cultural significance:

“Drinking happens mostly during festivals and weddings. It has been part of our culture for a long time” (Interview 3).

Thus, Santal cultural life reflects both continuity and adaptation, blending traditional expressive forms with new religious frameworks.

Changes in family structure and gender roles

The findings reveal a gradual transition from joint to nuclear family systems. Participants noted that economic pressure and changing aspirations have contributed to smaller household sizes:

“Earlier all brothers lived together. Now each son lives separately with his own family” (Interview 1).

Family planning awareness has increased significantly. Most respondents reported having one or two children and expressed a desire for smaller families:

“Now people try to have one or two children. Everyone understands family planning” (Interview 3).

Gender roles are also changing, though unevenly. Women increasingly participate in income-generating activities while continuing to bear primary responsibility for household work. Educational aspirations for daughters were widely expressed, signaling a shift toward greater gender inclusion.

Housing, land, and structural constraints

Housing conditions among the Santals remain modest. Most houses are made of mud with tin roofs, and only a few families can afford brick structures:

“Most of our houses are still mud houses. Only those with money can build tin or brick houses” (Interview 4).

Land ownership remains limited and a source of vulnerability. Participants described historical experiences of land dispossession but noted some improvement due to increased awareness and documentation:

“Earlier locals took our land because we had no papers. Now people are more aware and keep documents” (Interview 4).

Despite these improvements, access to government assistance was widely perceived as inadequate. Many respondents reported exclusion from social safety net programs and development schemes.

Taken together, the findings illustrate a community undergoing gradual socio-economic and cultural transformation. While education, religious affiliation, and livelihood strategies are changing, these shifts occur within persistent structural constraints such as poverty, limited land ownership, and inadequate state support. The Santal community of Dinajpur demonstrates resilience and adaptability, negotiating continuity and change in response to broader socio-economic forces.

DISCUSSION

This study examines the processes of cultural adaptation and socioeconomic transformation among the Santals of Dinajpur through the lens of development studies and rural sociology. According to the qualitative interviews and FGD, the findings highlight how the community navigates structural constraints while adapting livelihoods, education, religion, cultural practices, family structures, and gender roles. This discussion synthesizes participants' experiences with empirical literature to demonstrate that adaptation occurs within incremental, constrained, yet resilient pathways (Murmu, 2024) (Shamsuddoha & Jahan, 2016).

The Santals depend in large degree on work for wages each day and on farming at small scale, showing conditions of vulnerability that result from structure. Most households hold land that is marginal or divided into separate parts, and this requires many to work on farms that others own. This pattern shows incorporation that is adverse into markets for work in rural settings, and in these settings' movement between locations and work for wages are strategies that allow response, but conditions of poverty continue (Roy P. K., 2025), (Sarker & Davey, 2009). Movement to centers in urban areas for periods in seasons or for time that is longer, such as movement to Dhaka and Cumilla, has increased income to a degree that is modest but has not changed the conditions of precarity that are underlying in the economy (Majumder, Rahman, Sarkar, & Dilanchiev, 2021).

Participation of women in work has increased, but differences in wages continue to be significant, and this is consistent with evidence from the region on processes that increase the role of women in work in rural settings (Ujjaini, 2023), (UN, 2015). Work that women provide contributes to survival for households but does not in a necessary way increase capacity to make decisions or increase empowerment (Ujjaini, 2023), and this shows inequalities in structure that continue in relation to land and to employment that is formal.

Overall, changes in the economy for the Santals are changes that develop in small steps and that are uneven, showing improvement that is limited in conditions that are material even though movement in work is greater (UN, 2015).

Education provides a main context for change across groups. A difference between generations appears in the data, with findings that show children in current conditions attend school, but individuals from previous generations received limited formal education or no education. Schools that include institutions from religious organizations and government organizations have increased access, and this pattern indicates the role that organized approaches provide in supporting change among groups that experience marginalization (Sarker & Davey, 2009), (Soren, 2022).

Factors relating to economic conditions limit continuation in education, and this limitation appears particularly for levels that follow initial education, and the pattern suggests a difference between aspiration and achievement (Shah, Shahidullah, & Sultana, 2023): children and families assign value to education, but conditions of limited resources produce constraints on progression (Soren, 2022), (Sarker & Davey, 2009). Education is perceived as a means for upward change in position and for social recognition across groups, but differences in structure affect the degree to which it produces transformation (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

The study shows how combining education with religious conversion provides institutional support networks. Missionary schools that provide education also allow access to literacy, health, and community resources. This demonstrates the relationship between education and social adaptation (Soren, 2022).

Religious conversion from traditional belief systems to Christianity is a main feature of social change in the community. Christianity provides access to education, healthcare, and social support. It also provides a collective identity that strengthens social cohesion (Murmu, 2024).

This shift produces selective decline of indigenous rituals (Karim, 2012). It reflects adaptation that combines different cultural features, where traditional practices are reconfigured within new religious frameworks. Conversion functions as a strategy for adaptation. It relates identity formation, social solidarity, and socioeconomic aspiration.

The Santals retain main cultural practices despite religious change. Music, dance, communal celebrations, and life-cycle rituals that sustain social cohesion and community solidarity remain important (Scott, 1976), (Turner, 1966). Cultural continuity amidst religious change demonstrates resilience. Ceremonial practices provide moral, social, and symbolic functions even in contexts of socioeconomic adaptation.

The form of the family in this area shows change from the pattern that includes multiple related individuals to the structure that contains fewer individuals, and this change follows from factors relating to work, movement to different locations, and understanding of methods that limit the number of children. The roles that relate to being a woman or a man also show change, and this occurs as women participate in activities that provide income but also continue to conduct the work that occurs in the home. The desire that parents show for the education of daughters indicates that thinking about the inclusion of women in opportunities develops, but conditions relating to social structure and to the beliefs of the community still limit this inclusion.

The structures that provide shelter show limited quality, and these structures often use materials such as mud and tin. The extent of land that individuals possess remains small, and this condition increases the degree of risk that these individuals experience. The loss of land that occurred in the past limits the security that relates to economic outcomes over time (Roy P. K., 2025). Understanding of the process that provides documentation of land has increased, and this increase improves the security relating to possession of land. However, the support that comes from government sources and from programs that provide social protection remains limited, and this reflects that the structures of the larger society fail to recognize the communities of indigenous individuals who experience disadvantage (Shaha, 2025).

The Santals of Dinajpur deal with conditions that involve the continuation of cultural practices, the change in religious beliefs, the adaptation of the methods that provide livelihood, and the experience of being excluded from the structures of the larger society. The experience that this group shows indicates that the ability to respond to difficult conditions operates within limits that the structures of society establish, and this understanding has important implications for the study of development and for the study of rural communities. Work that follows should examine the effects over time that relate to education, to movement between locations, and to the work that involves differences between women and men. This work should also examine the policies that support development that can continue and that includes all groups, particularly the communities of indigenous individuals (Roy P. K., 2025).

CONCLUSION

The study shows that the Santal group in Dinajpur reveals change that occurs over time in social and economic conditions. This change develops within limits that continue to affect the group. Work that provides income remains in forms that include farming and daily labor. Ownership of land shows limited patterns, and this produces conditions that maintain economic problems (Rabbani, 2019) (Hossain, 2023). Access to education indicates improvement, and this appears more in younger individuals. However, poverty and exclusion from social participation limit movement to different economic levels (Ali, et al., 2024).

Change in religious practice operates as more than change in belief. It also functions as an approach that allows adaptation, and this provides access to resources. The change also supports identity that the group shares. At the same time, traditional practices that continue show that social life in the Santal group demonstrates the ability to persist. These patterns challenge models that suggest cultural change follows a single direction. The group shows movement toward families that include fewer individuals. Women also show increased participation in work that produces income. These patterns indicate social change, but differences based on gender and ethnic identity continue to show strong effects (Roy, 2022) (Alam, Sen, Islam, & Dewan, 2015).

The findings from the analysis suggest that adaptation in the Santal group occurs in conditions that allow only partial inclusion. Structural change that would alter main limitations does not appear in the data. The group uses everyday practices and connections between individuals to manage change. However, limits remain that relate to land and support from the state. These results extend understanding in the study of groups that experience marginality and change in rural contexts in Bangladesh. The analysis also indicates that development approaches require recognition of rights, identities, and work forms that indigenous groups maintain (Chaney, Sahoo, Punnoose, & Haneefa, 2025).

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