

# The History of Santal Community in Bangladesh

Dr. Md. Azizul Alam

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, North Bengal International University, Rajshahi,  
Bangladesh

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100800341>

Received: 02 August 2026; Accepted: 24 August 2026; Published: 04 September 2026

## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the origin of the Santals, their conditions and experiences during the colonial period, Santal movements, morality in Santal society, the emergence of a new Santal identity, their culture and social organization, and the contemporary challenges and opportunities faced by the Santal community. The study looks at the Santals' origins, migration, colonial experiences, resistance activities, cultural practices, and current issues using secondary material from books, journal articles, census statistics, and historical documents. The results suggest that despite marginalization, land dispossession, and socioeconomic exclusion, the Santal community has demonstrated incredible resilience in maintaining its cultural heritage. This paper mainly discusses the history of the Santal community in Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** Santal, Indigenous Community, Bangladesh, History, Culture, Social Change

## INTRODUCTION

The Santal community is one of the important indigenous communities of Bangladesh. Their own history is ancient and closely connected with the broader social and cultural history of the Indian subcontinent. During the colonial period, many Santals settled in different parts of present-day Bangladesh for livelihood and employment opportunities. They have significant settlements particularly in Rajshahi, Naogaon, Dinajpur, Thakurgaon, and Joypurhat. Agriculture, forest resources, and wage labor have traditionally been important parts of their economic life. The Santals also organized various forms of resistance against colonial exploitation, land-related problems, and social discrimination. Their language, religious beliefs, culture, dance, music, and social organization have enriched the cultural diversity of Bangladesh. The Santal is a major ethnic community of Bangladesh, practice wildlife hunting as part of their traditions (Barkat, et. Al., 2021). So, the history of the Santal community is an important area of study for understanding the history, society, and culture of Bangladesh.

## Literature Review

Some researchers have studied the history and culture of the Santal community. Singh (1988) described the Santals as one of the major tribal groups of India and emphasized their distinct social organization and cultural practices. Ali (1998) documented the socio-economic conditions of the Santals in Bangladesh and highlighted their historical experiences of marginalization.

Debnath (2010) explored the migration patterns, cultural traditions, and contemporary challenges faced by the Santals in Bangladesh. Shamsuddoha and Jahan (2016) examined the socio-historical background of the Santal community and discussed issues related to land rights, education, and cultural preservation.

Although previous studies provide valuable insights into Santal society, there remains a need for a comprehensive historical analysis that integrates their origins, colonial experiences, and contemporary realities. This paper seeks to contribute to that objective.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper depends entirely on qualitative research methods and utilizes secondary sources of data. Information has been collected from academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, census publications, and historical documents related to the Santal community.

The collected data were analyzed through descriptive and historical methods to identify major themes and patterns in the historical development of the Santal community.

### Historical Origins of the Santals

The Santals are one of the oldest indigenous communities living in Bangladesh. They are part of the Austroasiatic linguistic and cultural group of South Asia. Over time, many Santal families migrated to different parts of present-day Bangladesh. Their migration was closely connected with the expansion of agriculture and the search for cultivable land and employment. During the British colonial period, many Santals settled in the northern and north-western regions of Bengal. In Bangladesh, significant Santal populations gradually developed in Rajshahi, Naogaon, Dinajpur, Rangpur, and Chapainawabganj. The Santal community preserved its own language, traditions, social institutions, festivals, and cultural practices. Their history is also associated with resistance to oppression and struggles for land and social rights. Santals belong to the proto-Australoid group (Chowdhury A.M, 2004)

Thus, the historical origin of the Santals in Bangladesh is linked to migration, settlement, agriculture, colonial experiences, and the preservation of their individual identity.

### The Santals Under Colonial Rule

The arrival of British colonial rule significantly altered the lives of the Santals. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, colonial authorities introduced new land revenue systems that disrupted traditional patterns of land ownership and resource management.

The expansion of commercial agriculture and the growing influence of landlords and moneylenders led to widespread exploitation of indigenous communities. Many Santals lost their ancestral lands and became indebted to local moneylenders. Economic hardship, forced labor, and social discrimination became common experiences for many Santal families. During British rule the Roman alphabet was established as the preferred written form of Santali (Cavallaro & Rahman, 2009).

The colonial administration often failed to protect indigenous communities from exploitation. Consequently, dissatisfaction and resentment grew among the Santals, laying the foundation for organized resistance against colonial authority.

### The Santal Rebellion (1855–1856)

The most significant event in Santal history was the Santal Rebellion, commonly known as the Santal Hul. The uprising began in 1855 under the leadership of Sidhu Murmu and Kanhu Murmu, who called upon Santals to resist British rule and the oppressive practices of landlords and moneylenders.

Thousands of Santals participated in the rebellion, which quickly spread across large areas of eastern India. The movement represented a struggle for economic justice, political autonomy, and cultural survival. The rebels sought to restore control over their lands and protect their traditional way of life.

Although British military forces eventually suppressed the rebellion, the movement remains one of the most important indigenous resistance movements in South Asian history. The Santal Hul continues to inspire contemporary indigenous rights movements and serves as a symbol of courage and collective identity.

## **Morality in Santal Conception**

For the Santals, morality refers to right conduct and proper living, along with remaining faithful and loyal to their tribal identity. Morality among the Santals is closely connected to matters related to sex. They consider sex to be sacred, associated only with marriage, and permissible only in private. The Santals do not discuss sex openly; instead, they use metaphorical language to address sexual matters.

In most Mañjhi Council meetings, sexual issues (kuṛi-koṛa dorbar) are given priority for resolution. The Santals often hold lengthy sessions to settle such matters, even if it takes more than a day. Since the family and village community serve as the primary settings for moral education and development, it is evident that Santal morality is transmitted from one generation to the next through the living expression of the people's culture.

## **The Santals' quest for a "new identity"**

Every ethnic group or community has its own distinctive traits, including culture, customs, traditions, language, religious beliefs, mores, and life views. It approaches life and death, illness and disease, community and individual, and most importantly, identity in a unique way. Anyone who visits a Santal hamlet or an area where the bulk of the population is Santal will quickly recognize the distinction and identity of the Santals. The characteristics of solidarity and individuality are defined by this feeling of identification or cultural self-image, which also looks for distinctions with other groups in the greater community (Murmu, 2004).

However, the Santals of Bangladesh are currently experiencing an identity crisis for a number of reasons. They haven't been able to work together to deal with the quickly evolving circumstances. The majority of the Santals who live in the rural communities dispersed throughout the countryside are not affected by any changes that appear to have occurred as a result of outside pressure, education promotion, and some Church activities. Santals are getting more and more ostracized as time goes on; they are fighting to survive without knowing how to improve their lot in life.

The forces of modernization and change, symbolized by the socio-political and socio-economic aspects associated with these developments, are evidently at odds with the ritual-based notion of traditional culture. The Santals are actually caught between the mythical past of magnificent customs and the present, which is characterized by constant poverty brought on by ignorance, exploitation, and oppression by their neighbors.

## **The social structure of the Santals**

1) Santal village: The Santal village is the most traditional and old institution that embodies the entire system of social, political, and ritual institutions. It is a pattern of Santal living. It is created by the bonga's unique dispensation and made holy by their blessings. The diversity of clans within a village exemplifies the beauty of communal life, and the democratic nature of the village government itself is undoubtedly an indication of the extraordinary depth of Santal social interactions and daily life. In order to prevent evil spirits from interfering from the outside, a Santal village is marked with an implied boundary. The Santals believe that an imbalance between the forces of good and evil is what leads to disputes between families and groups in the village, natural disasters, illness, epidemics, etc (Murmu 2004).

2) Santal village's Social structure: The "Manjhi Council," or the village council led by a manjhi (headman), is the main characteristic of every Santal community. Manjhi, Paranik (a deputy headman), Jog Manjhi (a village overseer on moral matters), Jog Paranik (Jog Manjhi's assistant), Godet (a messenger), Naeke (a village priest), and Kudeam Naeke, his assistant, make up the village council, which serves as the community's representative body (Archer, 1974). These authorities have a completely functional role and are actually the village's servants rather than its owners. The Mænjhi continues to be the village council's overall leader and presides over village meetings while upholding the widely acknowledged rule that no one can overrule another. On the other hand, in order to prevent any overlap, the council's responsibilities are clearly distributed among its members. The council members carry out their duties in compliance with the traditions and customs of their tribe.

3) Marriage and Family : Family serves as the fundamental building block of human society. Among the Santal community, the family structure can be described as biological, joint, and extended in nature. A nuclear or biological family typically consists of a husband, his wife, and their unmarried children. A joint family typically includes a husband, his wife, their married and unmarried sons and daughters, and occasionally his elderly parents, brother, and the brother's family.

According to the Santals, marriage is a socially acknowledged bond between a man and a woman. Culturally and religiously, it permits the couple to live together as a family. A Santal marriage can also be understood as a formal transfer of the bride's dependency from her father's household to the groom's household

Through this transfer, the groom's family not only takes on guardianship but also gains authority over all aspects of her life. Upon marriage, the bride loses her legal identity tied to her father's family and adopts that of her husband's family. From an institutional perspective, marriage is a partnership between a man and a woman governed by customary laws that formalize a legal union between the sexes. These laws outline the procedures for establishing the husband-wife relationship, define their mutual responsibilities, and set accepted boundaries for those involved. Marriage among the Santals is usually arranged by the parents and by the close relatives of the couple. Yet, in present days, there is much relaxation on this traditional practice and the candidates do have their say for arranging their marriage.

4) Annual Festivals : The Santal community is characterized by its vibrant feasts, festivals, and ritual ceremonies. A key term frequently used by the Santals is *raskā*, which signifies happiness or joy—a concept that is not only close to their hearts but also an integral part of their daily existence. Consequently, dancing and singing play a central role in every festive occasion, helping a Santal set aside the worries and stresses of everyday life. In the social framework of the Santals, feasts and festivals hold immense importance as they are the living embodiment of a deep longing for joy and happiness, while also fostering a sense of community and solidarity that is naturally woven into the Santal identity. Many of these traits find expression through songs, music, and dance. In fact, the Santals leave little room for individualism, and it is primarily during feasts and festivals that an individual discovers their place within the community and their future role in communal life. While most of these festivals may outwardly seem like simple gatherings of close friends, relatives, members of the same sub-clan, or only village residents, there are also events that involve multiple villages such as weddings, where participation is almost always unanimous.

## Santals in Bangladesh

The presence of Santals in Bangladesh dates back several centuries. Today, they are mainly concentrated in Rajshahi, Naogaon, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Joypurhat, and neighboring districts. Many migrated to these areas during the colonial period in search of agricultural employment and settlement opportunities.

Following the partition of British India in 1947 and the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the Santals continued to face challenges related to land ownership, education, employment, and political representation. Many Santal communities remain economically disadvantaged and experience limited access to social services.

Land disputes have emerged as a major issue affecting the livelihood and security of Santal households. Despite constitutional commitments to equality, indigenous communities often struggle to secure legal recognition of their traditional land rights. According to the census report 2011, there are 1586141 ethnic populations living in Bangladesh who cover 1.10% of its total populations (BBS,2011).

Table (1): District wise Distribution of Santals in Bangladesh

| Name of the Districts | Santal Population |
|-----------------------|-------------------|
| Dinajpur              | 49861             |
| Rajshahi              | 26469             |

|              |        |
|--------------|--------|
| Nawabganj    | 6228   |
| Natore       | 2496   |
| Naogaon      | 24409  |
| Sirajganj    | 621    |
| Joypurhat    | 2689   |
| Bogra        | 881    |
| Gaibandha    | 3087   |
| Nilphamari   | 9      |
| Panchagarh   | 920    |
| Rangpur      | 5645   |
| Tagoregaon   | 6382   |
| Hobigonj     | 6450   |
| Moulavibazar | 6245   |
| Meherpur     | 8      |
| Chuadanga    | 590    |
| Satkhira     | 105    |
| Total        | 143425 |

Source: Sarker(2014)

### Culture and Social Organization

Santal culture is rich and diverse. Music, dance, folklore, and festivals play central roles in community life. Traditional festivals such as Sohrai, Baha, and Karam celebrate agricultural cycles, community solidarity, and spiritual beliefs.

The Santali language belongs to the Austro-Asiatic language family and is one of the most widely spoken indigenous languages in South Asia. The development of the Ol Chiki script by Pandit Raghunath Murmu in the twentieth century contributed significantly to the preservation and promotion of Santali literature.

Traditionally, Santals follow the Sarna religion, which emphasizes respect for nature, ancestral spirits, and village deities. Although some Santals have adopted Christianity or Hinduism, traditional religious beliefs continue to shape cultural practices and community identity. UNO stated indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages (UNO ,2009).

Social organization is based on family, clan, and village institutions. Village councils play important roles in maintaining social order, resolving disputes, and organizing community activities.

### Contemporary issue and prospects

The Santal community in Bangladesh faces several contemporary challenges, including land insecurity, poverty, limited access to higher education, unemployment, social discrimination, and cultural marginalization. Education is another major challenge because poverty, language barriers, residential problem, inadequate institutional support, and discrimination contribute to school dropout, particularly at the secondary and higher levels. The protection of the Santal language, traditions, customs, music, and cultural identity is also increasingly important in the face of social and cultural change. However, there are significant prospects for

the Santal community. Improved access to quality and culturally appropriate education, stronger protection of land rights, employment opportunities, women's empowerment, social inclusion, and government and NGO support can contribute to their socio-economic development. Recognition and retention of Santal language and culture, together with greater participation in decision-making, can further strengthen their identity and ensure a more inclusive and equitable future in Bangladesh.

## CONCLUSION

The Santals are one of the oldest ethnic communities in Bangladesh. They came to Bengal in the hope of finding a better future. The Santals of Bangladesh have a long and distinctive history. Historically, they have experienced various forms of oppression and discrimination. During the colonial period, they were often exploited and oppressed by the colonial rulers. Even in the post-colonial period, exploitation and discrimination against them have continued in different forms. For various reasons, they have gradually become vulnerable and socially isolated. At present, significant changes are taking place in Santal society. Despite these changes, they are trying to preserve their traditional culture in various aspects of life, including family, society, marriage, administration, religion, festivals, education, customs, and beliefs.

Research findings indicate that the Government of Bangladesh and some national-level NGOs can play an important role in preserving and sustaining their traditional culture.

## REFERENCES

1. Ali, A. (1998). Santals of Bangladesh, Calcutta, India, Institute of Social Research and Applied Anthropology.
2. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. (2011). Population and Housing Census 2011. Government of Bangladesh.
3. Barkat, A.I., Liza, F.T., Akter, S., Shome, A.R. and Rabbe, M.F. (2021). Wildlife hunting practices of the Santal and Oraon communities in Rajshahi, Bangladesh. *Journal of Threatened Taxa*. 13, 11 (Sep. 2021), 19484–19491. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11609/jott.7260.13.11.19484-19491>.
4. Cavallaro, F., & Rahman, T. (2009). The Santals of Bangladesh. *The linguistics Journal, Special Education*, 201.
5. Debnath, A. (2010). *The Santals of Bangladesh: Their History and Culture*. Academic Publishers.
6. Shamsuddoha, M., & Jahan, R. (2016). Santal community in Bangladesh: A socio-historical analysis. *Asian Journal of Humanity, Art and Literature*, 3(3), 203–214.
7. Singh, K. S. (1988). *Tribal Society in India*. Manohar Publications.
8. Sarker, M. A. (2014). *The Livelihood of the Santals in the Context of Declining CPR in Dinajpur*. A Dissertation for Master of Arts Degree, BRAC University, Institute of Governance Studies, Dhaka.
9. Troisi, J. (1979). *The Santals: A Classified and Annotated Bibliography*. Manohar Book Service.
10. Murmu, M. (2004) "The Santals: Their Traditions and Institutions in Bangladesh." *Santal Resources Page*. <http://srpbypst.blogspot.com/2009/05/the-santals-their-traditions-and.html>
11. Chowdhury, A.M. (2004). Ancient Bengal. In A.f. Ahmed, & B. M. Chowdhury (Eds.), *Bangladesh National Culture and Heritage* (p.54). Dhaka: Nouroj publication.
12. Archer, W. G. (1974). *The Hill of Flutes: Life, Love and Poetry in Tribal India: A Portrait of the Santals*. London: Allen & Unwin. Social Affairs.
13. UNO (2009). *Department of Economics and Social Affairs*. New York: United Nations publication.