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## Cultural Continuation: Santal Rites of Passage in Modern Days

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### Abstract

**Aim:** The purpose of this paper is to study the cultural framework of Santal society by analyzing the stages of the rite of passage- separation, transition, and incorporation and interpret the Santal practices of birth, marriage, and death rituals in Jharkhand and West Bengal and to investigate how initiation ceremonies have performed in their society. This paper emphasizes the importance of safeguarding cultural traditions while adapting to shifting social realities.

**Methodology and Approach:** Using the theoretical framework of Van Gennep's Tripartite Model, where he talks about pre-liminal stage, liminal stage, post-liminal stage, along with insights from cultural continuity, modernization, and globalization studies. A hermeneutic analysis is employed to interpret the symbolic meanings embedded in rituals and their roles in sustaining cultural identity.

**Outcome:** The study enhances understanding of how rites of passage function as a vital process for socialization, cultural transmission, and human development. It provides detailed insights into Santal rituals – birth, marriage, and death- revealing their symbolic and social significance. The study underlines the importance of preserving cultural heritage and the traditional rituals within changing social contexts.

**Conclusion and Suggestions:** Now in modern times Santal identity that face major challenges, so the efforts should be made to involve younger generations in ritual practices so that knowledge and traditions are passed on through lived experience, not only through texts.

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Rites of Passage are global cultural phenomena that mark significant transitions in human life, encompassing the journey from birth to death. These transformative rituals play a crucial role in facilitating individuals' movement from one social status to another, thereby ensuring continuity and cohesion within societies. Their significance lies in their ability to bridge the division between biological development and social identity, fostering a sense of belonging and community among participants. Anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep identifies three distinct stages inherent in Rites of Passage: the preliminary stage of separation, liminal stage, the liminal stage of incorporation. Each stage functions as a guide for individuals undergoing significant life transitions, highlighting the cultural role of rituals in shaping both personal and collective identities. This structural approach serves as a basis for examining the complexities of initiation practices across cultures, particularly among the Santal tribes. The paper further traces the transformation of rites of passage from traditional to contemporary societies, with special attention to the Santals of Jharkhand and West Bengal. Their cultural practices provide valuable insights into birth, marriage, and death rituals, underscoring the crucial role these ceremonies play in defining social norms and values.

The rites of passage among the Santal tribes, whose cultural practices exemplify how rituals function simultaneously at multiple levels of social life. Drawing on Van Gennep's model of Rites of Passage – separation, liminality, and incorporation – the Santal ceremonies of birth (Janam Chatiar), marriage (Bapla), and death (Bhandan) demonstrate the macro – level formalization of collective life transitions. For instance, the Santal marriage ceremony, often extending over several days, incorporates music, dance, offerings to spirits, and public feasting, thereby creating what Durkheim in his book *The Rules of Sociological Method* describes how ritual generate “collective effervescence”, a reinforcement of social solidarity through shared ritual experience (216).

At the macro level, elaborate community-centered rituals such as marriage and funeral ceremonies involve collective participation, symbolic offerings, and music, reinforcing solidarity and cultural continuity. At the meso level, interpersonal rituals such as the exchange of gifts between kin groups during weddings, the ritual drinking of handia (rice beer) in festivals, or the participation

of neighbors in funeral arrangements foster social cohesion within the community. These practices, while less elaborate than macro-rituals, serve as everyday enactments of cultural values that bind individuals into networks of reciprocity and obligation. Here, Turner's notion of *communitas* is instructive, as such interactions blur social hierarchies and reaffirm a sense of equality and unity among participants. At the micro level, rituals become more individualized and adaptable. Ancestral reverence in domestic spaces, small offerings to Marang Buru (Supreme Deity) before a journey, or habitual practices of purification before participating in festivals illustrate the personal dimensions of Santal religiosity. These micro- rituals reflect what anthropologists describe as the "everyday sacred" where ordinary acts are infused with symbolic significance. They are often informal, easily adjusted, and woven into rhythms of daily life, thereby sustaining cultural identity in subtle yet profound ways. Through these three levels of ritual action, the Santal rites of passage not only mark individual transitions but also reinforce broader social and cosmological order.

The Santal tribes who are one of the largest indigenous groups in India. Their rituals and ceremonies are deeply rooted in their worldview, spirituality, and connection to nature, reflecting their values and beliefs. When a child is born, the household is regarded as ritually impure, and this state of uncleanness extends to the entire village. The bongas, or sacred spirits residing in the grove, are believed to become tainted by this event. As a result, no festivals or bonga worship take place within the village, and residents abstain from eating or drinking in the home of a new family until a purification ceremony is conducted, this initial ceremony, held on the day of birth, serves to safeguard both the mother and the child. Met Halam, in this ceremony the mother and the midwife sit facing each other on the floor of the house. The mother then fills a leaf cup with rice beer and gives it to the midwife who throws away its contents on her left side. This is repeated three times and delivered to render both the child and mother immune from any imminent danger to protect the baby from the evil eyes. Most important birth ritual is Janam Chatiar. Janam means 'birth' and Chatiar is a word connected with the Hindi word Chut which means 'polluting'. By performing this ceremony, the Santal tribal people incorporate the child into the tribe. This ceremony also plays a notable role to purify the family and the village from

defilement caused by the birth of the child and gives a child a name, thus formally admitting it into its father's clan and subclan, giving it the protection of its father's spirits.

The name-giving is an important part of the Janam Chatiar ceremony, the giving of the name the child as his own. The child thus acquires a definite status in the village and its kinsfolk. It is Santal. The name-giving also emphasizes the social obligations to its new addition. The second important stage in the life cycle of a Santal is marked by a purificatory rite called Caco Chatiyar. The word Caco literally means 'a toddler'. The ceremony is performed in a grown-up age, for this ceremony there is no fixed time, but this ritual must be held before marriage. Through this ceremony, an individual enters a new relationship with the bongas whom he can now approach with sacrificial offerings and share in the sacrificial meal. All these rituals work as a supporting factor to socialize a newborn baby, and in this way that baby can take part of the Santal world. Here a baby goes through personal transformation which Jung explored the symbolic significance of initiation rituals in personal transformation. Van Gennep's three stages of Rites of Passage are very prominent in the birth rituals of Santal tribes, pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal. Before the Janam Chatiar a baby is in the pre-liminal state, when the baby is separated from the Santal tribal society, liminal stage is the transition period in this period a baby is getting ready for the social acceptance, and in post-liminal stage a baby gets the social identity. Turner built upon his framework, emphasizing the liminal phase's role in shaping social identity. But the birth rituals may vary place wise in Jharkhand and West Bengal. Where the family of the newborn baby has given the bitter rice made of the leaf of nim tree to the villagers. In West Bengal they perform 'ekusha'. All these rituals are the part of rite of passage, according to Goffman analyzed rituals as dramaturgical performances, illustrating their role in social roles identities.

Santal marriage rituals unit two individuals and their families, 'Horok Cikhna' is the first ceremonial event in this marriage Rituals, it means 'putting on of a sign' in token of agreement. In this ritual the bride to be is brought out by a married woman to pay her respects to the visitors. When she makes a low obeisance before the bridegroom's father, he invests her with the "sign". This is either a necklace, a piece of cloth or a pair of bangles. When he bows before him,

she places at his feet a small brass vessel full of water, and in it he drops two rupees. Same process happens in grooms house also. In the conversation that follows, all outstanding details of the wedding arrangements are completed. First there must be agreement about the bride price. The First term, ‘Gonon’, is from a root meaning to count or calculate, and the second, ‘Pon’ is from a root meaning earnest-money or a pledge. Thirty years ago, seven rupees used to be considered a high figure, whereas now the sum varies from eleven to twenty-one rupees. The jog Majhi of the bridegroom’s village asks the bride’s father to declare his wishes. He does so, not in words, but by placing the correct number of cowrie shells in leaf cups, whereupon the cups are passed over to the visitors. Another important ritual is water-marriage. By performing this ritual in bride’s house, they purify the bride by bathing. Same process happened at the groom's house also. one of the young man digs a small hole at the water side into which the water can keep, and three arrows are planted round the hole. Vermilion is placed on the arrows, while at their base are placed some cowrie shells and hen’s egg. One of the women shoots at the water with an arrow, while another strikes it with a sword, generally a stick. Then libations of beer are poured out to Marang Buru and the ancestors before all present partake. Again, when they reach the courtyard, another hole is dug, the arrows are placed round it and the water is poured into the hole. The ‘anointing girls’ are tied to the arrows by a thread fastened to their left wrists, and they must husk a grain of rice in their fingers without breaking it while the bridegroom is shaved and bathed preparatory to being anointed.

The anointing ceremony is carried out in the evening by unmarried girls who anoint the assembled company with a mixture of oil and turmeric. The village priest and then his wife is first anointed, after which the remainder of the officials, then the villagers, then the father and mother of the bridegroom, and lastly the bridegroom himself. Initiation rituals as rites of passage that mark significant transitions in individual’s life, such as adolescence, marriage, or entering adulthood. A.R. Radcliffe- Brown states in his book *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, “Continuity in forms of social life depends on structural continuity, that is, some sort of continuity in the arrangements of persons in relation to one another” (10). We see social relationships, which constitute social structure, are shaped by social processes rather than random

connections. In this marriage ceremony one can find how the Santal people are governed by norms and rules that guide individual behavior and create mutual expectations. Such established norms of conduct are known as institutions, recognized by particular social groups as defining specific forms of relationship.

Death is essentially an interruption of the normal processes of living. The nature of the tie that binds *jivi* and *hormo* (body) together remains obscure. *Jivi* is in a sense identified with the breath which departs from the body at death, but the identification is not complete, for the *jivi* may also leave the body during sleep and unconsciousness. Ancestors worship serves to keep the memory of the dead alive and welds the community of the living into one with those who have lived in the past. The dead go on a journey; but although they join the ancestors they are not far away, and their welfare is bound up with that of the tribe even as the well-being of the tribe is closely associated with theirs. Santal death rituals ensure the deceased's safe passage to the afterlife. Death rituals involve ritual purification, offering to the ancestors, and prayers for the deceased's soul. *Bhadan*- post-funeral rituals, honoring the deceased's memory. These rites often involve a series of challenges or tests, symbolizing the death of the old self and the rebirth of the new self. Through this process, individuals can confront their fears, integrate different aspects of their psyche, and emerge transformed. Huntington and Metcalf observed in *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*, "In all societies, regardless of whether their customs call for festive or restrained behavior, the issue of death throws into relief the most important cultural values by which people live their lives and evaluate their experiences" (2).

Santal rites of passage hold deep significance for individuals and the community, serving various essential functions-The Santal rituals surrounding birth, marriage, and death serve as vital mechanisms for integrating individuals into the community, upholding social norms, and nurturing collective harmony. Through these rites, traditions, values, and beliefs are transmitted across generations, safeguarding cultural heritage. They also provide spiritual protection, blessings, and a sacred bond with ancestors and divine powers, maintaining balance between the material and spiritual worlds. These ceremonies not only offer comfort and communal strength during life's major transitions but also

shape personal and collective identity, fostering a strong sense of belonging and cultural continuity.

Rites of Passage of the Santal community hold profound cultural significance, with a strong emphasis on reverence for ancestors whose guidance and influence are honored in these ceremonies. They reinforce family bonds and community solidarity underscoring collective responsibility and mutual dependence. Deeply spiritual in nature, these rituals reflect the interconnectedness of life and acknowledge the presence of divine forces. Even amid modernization and external pressures, these practices endure, preserving the cultural identity of the Santal people. By engaging in these shared traditions, the community nurtures unity, cooperation, and common values.

Santal rituals of Passage are facing significant challenges in the Modern era, threatening their continuity and cultural significance. The forces of modernization, globalization, and social change have contributed to their decline, raising concerns about cultural preservation. Decline of Traditional Practices now-a-days very common to the Santal people, most of them has been shifted from traditional way of life to urban lifestyles and busy schedules have led to decreased participation in traditional rituals, weakening their role in community life. Cultural homogenization due to exposure to global cultures; those are diluting Santal cultural identity, making younger generations less inclined to follow ancestral traditions. Sometimes blending traditions can be enriching but it may also result in the loss of cultural authenticity and the dilution of Santal heritage. Migration and the dispersion of Santal communities across different regions disrupts the natural transmission of cultural knowledge and rituals. Rational look out to the traditional vision of the Santal rituals and rites as well as the scientific worldview challenges the belief systems that underpin Santal rituals, leading to skepticism and reduced participation. To counter these challenges, the Santal community has been actively working to preserve its traditions:

There is a necessary of Cultural Revitalization of the Santal tradition. Efforts are being made to document, revive, and pass down traditional rituals to future generations and need Community Engagement; Encouraging active participation in cultural events sustain the communal spirit. Education and Awareness among policy makers should be



integrated cultural education into schools and community programs, which can reinforce the value of Santal cultural heritage. Through adaptation and innovation one can protect the Santal traditional value systems, utilizing technology, such as digital archives and online platforms, can help disseminate cultural knowledge and engage the younger generation.

The decline of Santal rites of passage has far-reaching consequences: Cultural loss- The erosion of Santal rituals leads to weakening of cultural identity and heritage. Community Disintegration- As traditional rituals fade, social bonds and communal cohesion may weaken. Spiritual Disconnectedness, the loss of rituals results in diminishing spiritual connection to ancestors and indigenous beliefs. While modernization presents challenges, proactive measures such as cultural education, community involvement, and digital innovation can help preserve Santal rites of Passage. By adopting to contemporary realities while staying rooted in tradition, the Santal people can ensure their cultural heritage endures for future generations. Santal rituals of passage are vital components of Santal identity that face substantial challenges in today's rapidly changing world. Issues such as the decline of traditional customs, cultural homogenization, and the process of rationalization threaten the very essence of the Santal community. To safeguard these invaluable rituals, it is essential to engage in cultural heritage preservation through comprehensive documentation and the revitalization of traditional practices. The preservation of Santal rituals requires a collaborative effort among community leaders, educators, policymakers, and youth. Community leaders must take the initiative to champion cultural revitalization, while educators incorporate cultural education into their teaching methodologies. Policymakers should actively support initiatives aimed at cultural preservation, and young people must embrace and engage with their traditions. In conclusion, the Santal rites of passage represent a core aspect of Santal culture and identity. Their preservation demands a united commitment to cultural continuity, ensuring the vitality of Santal heritage and its invaluable contribution to the rich tapestry of human experience.



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