

Cultural Silencing: A Qualitative Exploration of Santali Women's Experiences

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Abstract: Bangladesh has a long history of cultural diversity, with the Santals representing a prominent indigenous group within its borders. The cultural silence of Santal women is a topic that this qualitative study addresses explicitly. In a society where Santal women confront discrimination and marginalization; the study investigates their cultural identities through in-depth interviews as well as focus group discussions. The status of women in the Santal community is exceedingly lamentable. They face widespread discrimination within a patriarchal, largely male-run social structure in many areas of life. Often, they believe that their unfortunate predicaments are exclusively attributed to the workings of the natural world. Even in the national policy, acts and laws, their needs and priorities are not adequately addressed. The study aims to amplify Santal women's voices, shed light on the nuances of their lived experiences, and contribute to a better understanding of cultural silencing in communities. The findings might help shape treatments and policies that empower Santali women and promote cultural diversity.

Keywords: Indigenous group, Santali Women, Cultural Silencing

Introduction

Historically, Bangladesh has been a land of cultural and multi-ethnic countries with more than 54 ethnic groups. Recently, the Bangladesh Government officially recognized most of its ethnic groups through the 15th amendment of the Constitution 2011. However, several sources claim that there are more than 54 ethnic groups (IWGI, 2019) divided into plainland and highland (CHT region) ethnic communities (BBS, Census, 2011).

Each ethnic group is distinct in its culture, language, history, and geographical setting. Notwithstanding their noteworthy contributions to the socio-cultural milieu of the region, they often encounter discrimination and marginalization, which stem from a convergence of socioeconomic factors M. (2015). Research shows that, like in many other countries, ethnic groups of

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Bangladesh experience extreme forms of exclusion, discrimination, harassment, exploitation, and violation of human rights at the societal and institutional levels. Bangladesh's national policies, laws, and legislation do not consider their priorities.

However, the Santals representing a prominent indigenous community within its borders. Still now, they are going through an 'othering' process. According to many studies, Santal women are very often 'ignored socially and politically, deprived legally, exploited economically' (Hadi, 2005). They experience a dual burden. Firstly, as tribal individuals, they face socio-cultural discrimination. Secondly, as women within the tribal group, they also endure gender-based inequalities. The concept of "gender" refers to the societal or cultural distinctions associated with the binary categorization of individuals as either male or female. From culture to culture, gender disparity is different.

In Santal community, the patriarchal familial structure dominates Santal women. Women are in a worse situation than men regarding social, biological, and cultural variables (Schuler, Hashemi & Badal, 1998). In Santal society, men typically take on the role of primary breadwinners, while women are often assigned domestic responsibilities. They are viewed within informal social, cultural, and religious traditions as obedient daughters, wives, and mothers who depend on others. The prevailing socio-cultural norms and expectations pressure women to rely on their male counterparts and limit their participation in political and economic spheres. Moreover, urbanization and industrialization threaten their language, music, and culture, impacting men and women differently (Haque & Kusakabe, 2005). Sociocultural factors ease adaptation for men but complicate women's lives, resulting in educational disparities. Santal women often leave school due to poverty, lack of awareness, an unsupportive learning environment, cultural hostility, discrimination, and limited opportunities. The issue of socioeconomic discrimination has posed a significant obstacle to attaining fairness and progress for all members of humans. The way they are raised differently can block fair social progress. This differential socialization process creates barriers to equitable social development. Elimination of this inequality is necessary for equitable social development. Its remedy is essential for equitable social development. And for that, it is necessary to identify the dimensions of existing discriminatory attitudes and tendencies towards women, to determine their status and position, to analyze the nature of social differences and to determine the reasons.

Objectives

1. To know the perceptions of the Santal women about discrimination.
2. To find out the discrimination exist towards Santal women in different aspects of family, society, and culture.

3. To explore the root causes of gender discrimination in the Santal community.

Methodology of the study

It is qualitative study in nature. The study was conducted from March to June 2022.

Study Setting and Sampling

Adarpara village in Kakonhat Thana of Godagari upozila, under Rajshahi District, were selected purposively. There are diverse respondents involved in the study are the primary sources of information for the study.

There are 273 people live here in 63 households. The researchers have selected purposively a married or single female respondent from the 63 houses involved in the study. 15 women [based on age, gender, occupation, education and marital status (married and unmarried)] have been selected as respondents based on the research topic using purposive sampling. Females under the age of 15 were excluded as respondents because of concerns about their capacity to grasp complicated topics such as discrimination.

Data have been collected from in-depth interviews, Observation, and Focus Group discussions (FGD). Every IDI was carried out in accordance with the guidelines for a face-to-face interview at the household level. A thematic analysis was conducted after themes were identified by repeatedly analyzing the qualitative data. In addition, project documentation, log frames, Gannet charts, and other academic and grey literature have been evaluated and used as secondary sources in the study.

Perception and dimensions of Discrimination

Respondents were asked if they have experienced or heard about discrimination in their society. Most respondents knew about the widespread discrimination in society. They contend that all levels of discrimination exist in families, communities, and cultures. When a girl child is born into the family, discrimination begins, and it persists in various forms until her death. Respondent Tula Saren asserts that,

Girls experience discrimination against boys as long as they live with their parents. But girls, too, experience a change in their lives following marriage. They experience discrimination in their husband's family in a different way after marriage. Moreover, they experience higher discrimination in terms of education, property, employment, food, and partner preference when compared to male.

In Bengali society, the family is traditionally responsible for covering the cost of school and finding work for the children. Families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are falling behind in their educational pursuits. In our nation, the majority of poverty is hereditary. Due to the lack of access

to formal education, discrimination is more common in impoverished households, which exacerbates discrimination against male and female children.

Regarding education discrimination, Shyamoli Hasda stated that

Parents have differing opinions on the goal of education. In general, parents prioritize their son's education so they can enter the workforce after receiving a high level of education. On the other hand, in the case of girl children, most parents educate their daughters to get a decent marriage rather than to establish themselves in their future lives. It is one of the main reasons that boys and girls receive different levels of education. It is evident that attitudes regarding girls differ, and this has an impact on their education.

More than half of the respondents said that when it comes to mobility, including visiting relatives' houses, they have different mobility opportunities than boys. According to social norms, activities such as venturing outside the home, aimlessly wandering, or visiting the market are predominantly associated with males. The perception persists that females will remain indoors while boys venture outdoors due to this longstanding discrimination. Additionally, parents are concerned that if their daughters freely venture outdoors when they are young, they will maintain that behavior as adults, which is detrimental to the family's honor. Therefore, parents also prefer that their daughters develop the habit of remaining at home from an early age. For this reason, females are subject to various restrictions on their mobility, which contributes to gender-based discrimination.

Most of the married respondents mentioned that discrimination in society based on marital status, but their views on discrimination within their households differed. In comparison to single women, married women felt discrimination at the home level comparatively more. In Santal society, married women face more discrimination at home because they are expected to take on more gender-specific tasks compared to single women. Additionally, they experience discrimination based on their food or meal, partner preference, and mobility. As a daughter-in-law, she may receive distinct treatment, such as being required to wait to eat until after she has served the entire family. It is customary for the daughter-in-law to eat the leftover food after the rest of the family has finished their meal. In terms of education, they typically do not have much time to study since they are too occupied with housework. In Santal society, arranged marriage is common, and girls often do not have the opportunity to choose their life partner or decide when they get married.

Causes of Discrimination

The reasons of discrimination may be roughly divided into two groups, namely Internal factors and External factors.

Internal Factors

➤ **Culture of Silence:**

The culture of silence contributes significantly to discrimination against girls. Parents desire their daughters to develop resilience beginning in infancy. Protesting or preventing any form of injustice or irregularity is primarily the responsibility of men, not girls. One who can endure everything in silence embodies a humble girl. Raised with such attitudes, the girl eventually lacks the guts to rebel. As a result, a culture of silence emerges in it. It thus develops a culture of silence. Injustices grow in the absence of protest or opposition, which fuels equity.

➤ **Individualism**

Individualism sets Santal women apart from other women. Bengali mainstream people are at the top of Santal women's thought domains. After that, they give precedence to the males of their clan. Santal women, therefore, view themselves as being at the bottom or last level. They regard their position as the most inferior or final tier. We refer to this as the third or lowest level. Their limited sense of identity causes them to feel cut off from their authority and social structure. As a result, the fundamental underpinnings of individuality are compromised. According to Tula Kisku-

We are not wealthy individuals. Since most of us lack education, we perform menial tasks. We are forced to labor for Bengalis since we lack employment prospects and our land. They view our job as "degrading" and "petty." Bengalis don't think of us as 'humans' for menial jobs. Thus, we are inferior and useless as humans. As a result, they say anything they want, make fun of us and harass us in whatever way they choose. They treat us as 'you' (Tui) without regard, regardless of age. On the other hand, their own societal customs expect males to be the leaders and heads of the household. Men, therefore, have greater dignity than women.

➤ **Traditional female norms practice:**

Boys' and girls' children are born into the world with the same potential. Only a few variations in bodily structure and physiological functioning are normal. Because of this anatomical difference, girls may conceive and give birth, but boys help to create embryos. The distinction between boy and girl, or woman and man, is natural, everlasting, and unchanging. Because of this fundamental difference between boys and girls, or men and women, society has assigned boys and girls distinct duties and rights. Various sorts of discriminating social roles and behaviors have emerged. Monika Hembrom stated that

Although her mother-in-law often reminds her that women should not pursue careers in education, she still wants to graduate and become a teacher. Instead, she needs to handle the family's tasks with caution. The male will be doing outdoor jobs, and it is their task. Monika has since lost interest in

working outside the home due to the family's strict discipline. In her heart, she also thinks this may be the norm.

➤ **Domestic violence against women**

Women are employed more both within and outside the house in Santal culture. Even still, a lot of women experience violence at the hands of men. It is evident from (FGD-3) that many households in Adarpara village do not have male family members actively engaged in the economy. Most of them put in two or three days a week at work. They still have more influence on the women in the household, though. In this regard, Shyamli Saren claims that-

Every night, my husband physically abuses me." The neighbors are all aware of that. He drinks frequently. He used to abuse me, beat me, and drink. But I have a family and have been with him for a long time. When she questioned his spouse, he responded, "What's wrong with that? I've seen my father to beat my mother since I was a youngster. It demonstrates that in the Santal civilization, violence against women was a common occurrence.

➤ **Family Code**

Men inherit property and are legal guardians, according to Santals' norms and custom. It is fascinating that women are mostly viewed as belongings or objects in their society. During a conversation about marriage, 80-year-old Rita Kisku stated that

Husbands are expected to take their wives with them when they leave. When a girl marries, her house costs nothing because she is a valuable asset. She's going to work and make money wherever-she goes. She won't remain at home all day. Giving women to them is akin to giving them an expensive item. They feel at ease considering women as servants or maids.

➤ **Traditional Roles**

The social norms of Santal society dictate the boundaries of women's mobility. Their village and clan belong to them. Movement across the community is, therefore, easy and unimpeded. However, they only travel once the market is in dire need of them. The majority of mainstream Bengali people in the market, according to Minti Hasda, are Bengalis. Their perspective is negative. They look down on us and laugh at us. As a result, fewer ladies are at the party when we visit the market or the city. In this regard Joti Hembrom said that-

Work has been organized and separated since the inception of time. Women are responsible for domestic duties, while men are employed outside the household. Families are happier when women stay at home and men work to earn more money for the family. We now also think about this. We now also hold this belief.

➤ **Lack of Education**

According to Santal tradition, boys carry the family name and assume parental responsibilities as they grow older, while girls typically do not it. After marriage, female move to their husbands' homes, relying on them for support. This reliance often leads to limited decision-making ability and less investment in girls' health and education by low-income parents. Consequently, girls face neglect in areas like healthcare, education, and nutrition, which hindering their potential success.

Women's participation in higher education is declining in Adarpara village due to prevailing priorities and a fear-based culture. Financial constraints hinder the Santal family from affording further education for their daughters, while sons have access. Despite this, two boys from the village are attending Notre Dame College, one of the famous colleges in Bangladesh which is in Capital city Dhaka. Moreover, some others are enrolled in famous universities like Rajshahi University. However, only one girl from Adarpara attends Rajshahi College. It is also known from the fact that Santal males have an intense fear of women pursuing higher education. According to Kisku Tudu,

Males in our community believe that ladies who receive more education will turn insane and rebel against their husbands and families. Girls who have an education will not labor in the fields anymore. Thus, girls do not require an excellent education. According to Deepa Kisku, women are not taught how to be independent since they are incapable of being separated in any way.

➤ **Excluded from Decision-Making Roles**

Men believe that women and men should not share equal leadership roles. Consequently, society views women's leadership, management, decision-making, and problem-solving involvement as superfluous. There are no ideals designed to promote women's independence and self-control. These women are materially and emotionally dependent on men according to prevailing values. Not only do Santal women face discrimination in Bengali and other cultures inside their cultural institutions, but they are also disregarded. The Santals have seven people in their panchayat. This panchayat is responsible for resolving various conflicts or arguments. However, Santal women are not allowed to carry out any obligations here. Not even the Majhi Parishad, the Santals' main political body, admits women due to the perception that women are less intellectual. Consequently, males tend to lead in resolving family conflicts or proposing political solutions. In this regard Riya Tudu said that-

Women are not represented in the critical positions of our political organization's organogram, despite the fact that they have educated backgrounds. Furthermore, it is forbidden for girls to perform any religious rites.

➤ **Traditional view over work and livelihood**

There is no discernible infrastructure development in Adarpara village, but there have been developments in roads, business premises, and industrial facilities in several tribal regions. However, a large number of indigenous people have lost their houses and agricultural land as a result of microcredit. They cannot make the required revenue for living since they cannot alter their vocation as time goes on. Women, in particular, feel at ease in their traditional field of agriculture in Santal society. They find it difficult to pursue careers outside of agriculture. Even if several public and private organizations try to raise their living standards, they must keep their farming tradition. Women have relatively little interest in small-scale and cottage enterprises, according to respondent Deepa Kisku.

Even though the government and NGOs give them facilities and training, they are interested in cultivating the land. They've had this work for a very long time. They used to hunt and fish as one of their jobs. However, when rivers and forests disappear, they are employed as day workers and agricultural laborers. Some people don't want to pursue new careers since their current workplace only sometimes provides opportunities for success.

Men and women have equal rights to work and get paid. However, this right is not always respected in our nation. It is seen that a guy and a female perform the same task but are not compensated equally. When women become pregnant, they are frequently denied the facilities they need. Sometimes, the girl loses her job.

➤ **Isolation which turns to lack of unity:**

Santal women are insular by nature. They are unwilling to interact with Bengalis or members of other communities. They consider themselves to be an isolated group. They are unaware that they are also Bangladeshi citizens. They have the same rights as Bengalis. As a result, they are feeble, immobile, or isolated.

➤ **Lack of awareness**

In the study area, four NGOs are devoted to advancing Santal women. Although the goal is for women to become financially independent, the majority of them work as day laborers in shops, farms, or cottage businesses, and they are not allowed to keep the money they make. It must be given to the family and the male family member. Therefore, women have not developed at all. In the Santal culture, women are valued as resources rather than people. *Women's ailments are treated relatively lightly here*, according to Lipi Tudu. They are frequently denied access to contemporary medical facilities. They consider folk or traditional medicine to be beneficial for women's reproductive health. Women's harmful health is a result of all these factors, which negatively affect their employment and income.

➤ **Daily migration and lack of safeguarding policy**

Santals, traditionally farmers, have become nomads due to land loss, now working as day laborers on their former land. Bangladeshi agriculture is dominated by family farming, providing income for millions of smallholder farmers. Santal women play a significant role in rural economy, primarily in agriculture, facing difficulty in pursuing other careers. Challenges in agriculture include high input costs, scarcity, poor quality, natural disasters, fair pricing, technology adoption, and COVID-19 effects. Santal women are increasingly seeking employment outside agriculture, often forced into hazardous jobs due to lack of formal education. In urban areas, they face economic inequality and harassment, feeling less safe due to their tribal identity. They often end up in low-paying service roles instead of meaningful employment. Despite their contributions in various industrial settings, Santal women endure abuse and deprivation, working longer hours for lower pay and feeling insecure about their jobs and careers. According to Tula Saren,

The Bengali owner who offers the labor frequently subjects us to torture at work. The proprietors often use foul language, make poor recommendations, pay low wages, and make fun of them for speaking Swahili. In addition, the Bengali owners treat us with contempt when we work as day laborers since we sometimes don't dress appropriately. They are equally vulnerable to men's passion at work and even while traveling there and back.

Another respondent Gita Hasda added that,

Bengali and Santal guys stand around the pond while we wash in it. It qualifies as sexual harassment as well. Although it happens less frequently, they are occasionally the victims of sexual assault by Santal males in their communities. And the absence of legal protection is the reason for all these things. Eve teasing, once limited to chatting or whistling, has evolved, posing new threats. Girls in villages fear attending school or college due to harassment. Miscreants target both boys and girls, making vulgar remarks, gestures, and threats. They also use anonymous calls and text messages to intimidate.

External Factors

➤ **Low participation in local government public services-**

Adivasis are less involved in local government services than Bengalis. However, in the case of tribals, Santal women's engagement is far lower than Santal men. A few causes of women's limited involvement in government services are:

(a) Lack of information about public services and its process-

Women in the Santal community face challenges due to a lack of information about public services and their processes. Many are unaware of government services available in their area, as well as the procedures and requirements for

accessing them. Unfortunately, there are no advertisements or educational sessions to inform people about the services offered by government offices and how to use them. Government offices rarely use loudspeakers to notify the public about the delivery location and date of distribution. Furthermore, because of their lack of literacy and adherence to community norms, they lack the motivation to seek information from governmental offices and services independently. They generally reside in and around their community, aside from their place of employment.

(b) Ethnic stereotyping and treating as ‘Minority’-

At the policy level, Santali women express concern about being categorized as 'minorities,' fearing limited access to services compared to male in their own society moreover mainstream Bengalis. That's why they hesitate to seek services again if initially denied, due to past neglect and mistreatment. This reluctance is reinforced by a pervasive fear of government offices and mainstream Bengalis, hindering any potential resistance or protest. There's a prevalent belief that protesting may lead to further problems without real solutions. Consequently, Santali's women rarely see public offices as avenues for their own needs. In this regard Dipti Soren said that,

It was said, generally, Santal's women can hardly avail any networking with public offices and their officials, which they think is one of the reasons for their exclusion. Some of them who are experienced in dealing with public officials, either by bribing and nepotism, play the role of a third party in exchange for money or in-kind benefit.

(c) Birth certificate, NID, and ethnic identification certificate

Often, spelling errors in the documents or dissimilarities among the cards pose problems in getting public services. According to Maloti Hasda in this regard claim that-

The process of accessing services remains challenging for some women who are selected as beneficiaries, as they encounter obstacles such as spelling errors or the absence of crucial documents like birth certificates, NID cards, and ethnic certificates.

Moreover, some of them do not have the cards or the certificate at all. Correcting these documents or making them causes huge hassles, as the officials mostly ask for some money or harass them.

Discussion

Santal women also face significant challenges stemming from discrimination practices both at home and in society. They tend to view these issues through a cultural lens within their households, where gender norms and traditional customs play a central role in perpetuating discrimination. Santal women report experiencing discrimination across various domains, such as property

ownership, access to education, freedom of movement, and also low participation in local government public services.

One of the functions of the family is to socialize the child. Santal families uphold and nurture patriarchal values in the upbringing of their children. Children learn about their role in the family and society from their families in early childhood. As a result, men and women find themselves or become members of two distinct cultures. The socialization procedure essentially determines their gender. As a result, a culture of silence emerges among them. A girl raised with these emotions lacks the confidence to rebel and becomes too afraid to stand up. Injustices grow and exacerbate inequity in the absence of protest or opposition.

The findings of the research indicate that a prevailing norm holds that women, specifically wives, should confine themselves to the home and attend to their husbands' requirements. It further limits their chances beyond the confines of the household. Additionally, gender norms and customary practices as significant factors contributing to discrimination, acknowledging the roles of various family members in perpetuating these inequalities. Santal women may inadvertently perpetuate discrimination by internalizing and conforming to culturally prescribed gender roles, accepting their responsibilities without recognizing the underlying discrimination. Furthermore, married women, in particular, feel more discriminated against compared to unmarried women, especially concerning property rights, job opportunities, and educational attainment. This discrimination contributes to their dependency on society, as lacking access to these resources undermines their ability to achieve independence. Mobility is highlighted as a critical area of discrimination, with Santal women often facing restrictions imposed by males, who assert their superiority and limit women's freedom under the guise of protection.

Santal women's poor participation in local government public services exacerbates discrimination. Santal women face numerous challenges and barriers in accessing public services. Firstly, they often lack information about available services and the application processes, leading to missed deadlines and missed opportunities for assistance. Publicity and awareness sessions about accessing services are rare, further leaving Santal women uninformed and disengaged from the process. Additionally, ethnic stereotyping and discrimination exacerbate these challenges, as Santals are marginalized and treated as minorities, facing prejudice and exclusion from mainstream society. Such types of discrimination extend to public institutions, where Santal women may encounter biased treatment and denial of services based on unfounded judgments and stereotypes. Moreover, beneficiary selection processes are often influenced by favoritism, nepotism, and corruption, resulting in deserving Santal women being deprived of the services they need. The lack of proper identification documents, such as birth certificates and national identity cards, further complicates access to services for Santal

women. Overall, at both the practice and policy levels, there is a failure to adequately recognize and address the distinct needs and priorities of Santal women, leading to insufficient resource allocation and ineffective implementation strategies that hinder their access to essential services.

Conclusion

In addition to estranging women from their human identity, the division of labor has detrimentally affected their social stature and perspective. Hegemonic attitudes subject Santal women, above all else, to severe oppression, principally on account of their gender and secondarily as a result of their indigenous heritage. Patriarchy, disparities in state exploitation, and capitalist globalization exacerbate the marginalization of Santal women by adding to their oppression. Although women are capable of autonomously completing various productive activities, they are now frequently dependent on assistance during career transitions; this constitutes a form of dependent behavior. The study reveals several facets of discrimination against women. The family is the primary setting in which discrimination against girls occurs, and parents are among those who engage in this discrimination. Regarding this, the perspective and demeanor of the parents exert a significant impact. Education and familial prosperity significantly contribute to the formation of this perspective. Females frequently face diverse forms of discrimination as a result of societal norms and customs, despite the fact that parents rarely engage in intentional discrimination. Such discrimination is detrimental to women's personal lives, families, and society as a whole. Such discrimination impedes human resource development and hinders overall development goals. Existing gender discrimination must be addressed in order to achieve equal social development. Only then will a new egalitarian world devoid of exploitation, injustice, and prejudice emerge.

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