

# Sonajhuri Haat: Negotiating and Diluting Santal Culture

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**Abstract:** The establishment of the Ashram at Santiniketan in 1863 by Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, followed by Rabindranath Tagore's founding of an Ashram school in 1901 and subsequently Visva Bharati in 1921, laid the foundation for a unique confluence of cultural, educational, and social ideals. Visva Bharati, which became a central university in 1951, is located amidst more than sixteen Santal villages within a 3 to 5-kilometre radius. Over the decades, Santiniketan, Sriniketan, and the surrounding Santal communities have engaged in a dynamic process of mutual cultural and socio-economic influence, shaping the distinctive character of the region.

Emerging from this intercultural context is the Sonajhuri Haat—a weekly traditional market held near the Sonajhuri forest in the Khoai region of Bolpur, West Bengal. Named after the Sonajhuri trees (*Acacia auriculiformis*), which shed yellow blossoms in winter, the haat is set against the backdrop of eroded red laterite landscapes and the dry riverbed of the Kopai River. Historically known as the “Sonibaar Haat,” it was once primarily run by Santal artisans, who sold handcrafted items made from forest produce, such as musical instruments, ethnic jewelry, and household crafts. These products were created using indigenous knowledge and local materials through value-addition processes rooted in traditional skills.

In recent years, however, the demographic of artisans at the haat has shifted, with a growing presence of non-Santal sellers. This shift reflects broader social and economic changes and raises critical questions about authenticity, cultural appropriation, and representation. Despite this transition, the haat remains a vital cultural bridge between mainstream visitors—many of whom are tourists or academicians—and the Indigenous Santal community. It facilitates cultural exchange, economic transactions, and sometimes, tensions stemming from unequal participation and recognition.

Situated near Santiniketan, an internationally recognized center of learning and tourism, Sonajhuri Haat also plays a crucial role in commercializing ethnic crafts and promoting sustainable livelihoods. Yet, this commercialization walks a fine line—while it has the potential to reinforce cultural pride and economic resilience, it may also dilute Santal identity under market pressures.

This paper explores the dual role of Sonajhuri Haat as both a platform for cultural preservation and a site of cultural negotiation. It underscores how tradition, ecology, and education intersect to either uplift or unintentionally marginalize the cultural expressions of Indigenous communities.

**Keywords:** *Shantiniketan, Santal, Sonajhuri Haat, Culture, Visva-Bharati*

## INTRODUCTION

India is a land of immense diversity—geographically, culturally, linguistically, and ecologically. Stretching across the Himalayan ranges in the north to the coastal plains in the south, and from the Thar Desert in the west to the lush forests of the northeast, India offers an intricate mosaic of ecological zones. Each of these zones has nurtured unique communities, languages, and traditions. Among these communities, tribal or Indigenous populations—referred to as “Adivasis” or “Adibasis”—hold a special place. These communities have historically inhabited remote and ecologically sensitive areas, maintaining distinct identities that have endured for centuries despite the pressures of mainstream integration and modernization.

According to the Indian Census, there are over 700 officially recognized tribal communities in India, classified under the category of Scheduled Tribes. These communities together constitute approximately 8.6 percent of the nation's total population. The term “Adivasi” is widely used by these groups as a self-identifier, representing their status as the original inhabitants of the land. The International Labour Organization (ILO), under Convention 169, recognizes such communities as Indigenous Peoples, acknowledging their continuous presence in specific regions of the Indian subcontinent since time immemorial.

Among the myriad tribal groups in India, the Santals stand out as one of the largest and most culturally

distinct communities, especially in eastern India. Traditionally believed to be part of the Proto-Australoid group, the Santals are primarily concentrated in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Assam, Odisha, West Bengal, and Tripura, with smaller populations residing in neighboring countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan (Hossain, 2008).

In the state of West Bengal, particularly in the Birbhum district, the Santals constitute a significant demographic segment. According to census data and scholarly research, they make up around 6.74 percent of the total population in the district and account for a remarkable 89 percent of the tribal population in the area (Chaudhuri, 1987; Ghosh, 2013). Birbhum lies to the east of Santal Pargana, a district in present-day Jharkhand, often referred to as the cultural and historical heartland of the Santal people. Historical documentation reveals that the Santal population in Birbhum was just 6,954 in the year 1872. However, by 2011, this number had surged to 242,484, illustrating a considerable demographic expansion.

Despite their deep cultural roots and traditions, the Santals of this region are not immune to change. Over the decades, they have come into increasing contact with non-tribal populations and urban lifestyles. This exposure has led to transformations in many areas of their lives—ranging from culture, language, and traditions to livelihood practices, occupations, and social customs (Saren, 2013; Majhi, 2010; Paul, 2005). The pressures and opportunities presented by modernity, globalization, and state-led development initiatives have compelled the Santals to reimagine their roles in contemporary Indian society. The biggest impact has been made by the establishment of Visva-Bharati University among Santal population residing in near by villages.

The establishment of the Ashram at Santiniketan in 1863 by Maharshi Debendranath Tagore marked the beginning of an enduring legacy of cultural and spiritual exploration. This vision was carried forward and expanded by his son, Rabindranath Tagore, who founded the art school in 1901 rooted in holistic education and humanistic values. In 1921, this institution evolved into Visva-Bharati, recognized as a central university in 1951, Visva-Bharati is uniquely situated amid more than sixteen

Santal villages within a 3 to 5-kilometre radius. This proximity to Indigenous communities has led to a vibrant and ongoing exchange of ideas, practices, and mutual learning. Over the decades, the triad of Santiniketan, Sriniketan, and the surrounding Santal settlements have cultivated a dynamic and symbiotic relationship. Sriniketan, established as a rural reconstruction center, became a hub for practical education, agricultural reform, and craft revival, directly engaging with local Santal populations. Through educational initiatives, artisanal collaborations, and shared festivals, both the academic community and Santal inhabitants have influenced each other's social, cultural, and economic lives. This interaction has enriched the cultural fabric of the region, blending traditional Santal customs with Tagorean ideals of universalism, creativity, and sustainable rural development.

Emerging from the rich intercultural landscape of Santiniketan and its surrounding tribal communities is the Sonajhuri Haat located under Khajurdanga (Banerpukurdanga) village—a vibrant weekly traditional market held near the Sonajhuri forest in the Khoai region of Bolpur, West Bengal. The market derives its name from the Sonajhuri trees, known for their delicate yellow blossoms that carpet the forest floor in winter, creating a visually enchanting setting. Nestled amidst the eroded red laterite terrain and along the dry riverbed of the Kopai River, the haat offers a unique blend of natural beauty and cultural expression, drawing visitors from across the region and beyond.

Historically referred to as the “Sonibaar Haat” (Saturday Market), it was originally established as a grassroots initiative by local Santal artisans and forest dwellers, who used the platform to sell a wide range of handcrafted products. These included musical instruments, ethnic jewelry, bamboo crafts, and other household items, all crafted from natural and locally sourced materials. The products showcased at the haat reflect the deep-rooted indigenous knowledge systems of the Santals, who utilized forest produce and value-addition techniques rooted in traditional skills, passed down through generations.

Over time, Sonajhuri Haat has evolved into not just a marketplace but a cultural hub where music, dance, and art converge with commerce. The rhythmic

beats of tribal drums, the vibrant colors of traditional attire, and the aroma of local delicacies lend the haat an atmosphere of festivity and community spirit. While contemporary artisans and entrepreneurs have now joined the market, the legacy of Santal craftsmanship remains at its core.

In essence, Sonajhuri Haat stands as a living example of sustainable rural livelihood, cultural preservation, and creative economy. It reflects how traditional tribal practices can adapt and thrive in a modern context while maintaining their authenticity and contributing to the socio-economic empowerment of Indigenous communities in the region.

### STUDY AREA

The present study was conducted in the Santal villages situated in the vicinity of Visva Bharati, Santiniketan, in Birbhum district of West Bengal. This region is well known for the Sonajhuri haat, a traditional weekly market located in the Khoai area, where local people engage in buying and selling a variety of goods. The haat plays a vital role in sustaining the livelihood of the Indigenous communities, particularly the Santals, by providing a platform to trade forest produce, handcrafted items, and other goods. Many families depend on the forest resources in the surrounding area—such as timber, bamboo, leaves, and minor forest products—not only for their domestic needs but also as a source of income through their sale in the haat.

The study area covers several Santal villages distributed under different administrative panchayets and local jurisdictions. Under the Ruppur Panchayet, the tribal villages include Ballabhpurdanga, Sarkardanga, Khajurdanga (also known as Banerpukurdanga), Fuldanga, Kalapukurdanga, Srimantapally Adibasipara, Moldanga, Lalbandh, Bondanga, and Chipkuthi. These villages are largely forest-fringed and maintain a traditional rural character, with livelihoods still tied to agriculture, wage labor, and forest-based occupations.

Additionally, under the Kankalitala Panchayet, the major Santal villages include Paruldanga Adibasipara and Tamsuldanga. These settlements reflect the cultural vibrancy and communal life of

the Santal people, where traditional practices coexist with modern influences.

Some of the villages fall within the Visva Bharati-owned area, including Balipara, Kaliganj, Pearsonpalli, and Baganpara. These villages are located closer to Santiniketan town and are more directly influenced by its educational and cultural environment. The study area represents a unique confluence of tribal livelihoods, forest ecology, and market-based economy, centered around the Sonajhuri haat as a lifeline for the Indigenous communities.

### METHODS

The present study was conducted among the Santal community residing in the Bolpur-Sriniketan block of Birbhum district, West Bengal, focusing on the villages surrounding Santiniketan. The objective was to explore and understand the cultural changes experienced by the Santals in this region. The study was field-based, emphasizing direct engagement with the community to capture authentic insights into their lived realities, cultural practices, and changing socio-economic conditions.

The research area comprised 18 Santal villages, carefully selected to represent the diversity of the Santal settlements in and around Santiniketan. The selection of villages took into account their proximity to the Sonajhuri haat, Visva Bharati, and forest areas, which are central to the community's livelihood and cultural life. The villages studied include those under Ruppur Panchayet, Kankalitala Panchayet, and Visva Bharati-owned areas, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the Santals' socio-cultural dynamics in different administrative and ecological settings.

The data collection relied primarily on qualitative methods, as these were most suitable for capturing nuanced cultural patterns, perceptions, and narratives of change. The fieldwork was conducted over several visits, allowing for rapport-building with the villagers and immersion in the community context. A variety of qualitative tools were employed to gather in-depth data:

**Focused Group Discussions (FGDs):** Group discussions were conducted in several villages with community members of different age groups and

genders. These sessions helped elicit collective views on cultural traditions, livelihood strategies, and perceived changes over time. The group format encouraged participation and brought out diverse perspectives.

**Intensive Interviews:** Individual interviews with selected respondents provided detailed life histories, personal reflections, and specific examples of cultural practices. Respondents included elders, women, youth, and artisans.

**Key Informant Interviews:** Certain knowledgeable individuals—such as community leaders, school teachers, and long-term residents—were identified as key informants. Their insights helped contextualize the findings and understand broader trends within the community.

**Informal Interactions:** Informal conversations during walks, haat visits, and village gatherings offered valuable spontaneous insights that complemented the more structured interviews. These interactions helped to verify data, uncover subtle observations, and gain trust.

In addition to primary data collection, the study also relied on secondary sources of data to complement field observations. Relevant literature, government records, census data, and previous ethnographic studies on the Santals of Birbhum were reviewed. These secondary materials provided historical background and helped in situating the findings within a wider academic and policy context.

The analysis of the collected data was qualitative in nature, prioritizing thematic understanding over statistical generalization. Field notes, transcripts of interviews, and discussion summaries were systematically organized and coded for emerging themes. Patterns of cultural continuity and change were identified through careful reading and interpretation, with attention to both collective and individual narratives.

The methodological approach of this study combined field immersion, participatory techniques, and qualitative analysis to ensure a rich and nuanced understanding of the cultural changes among the Santals of the Bolpur-Sriniketan region. The emphasis on direct community engagement ensured

that the voices of the Santals themselves remained central to the findings.

## ANALYSIS

The present study focuses on the Sonajhuri Haat in the Santiniketan area, examining it both as a platform for cultural preservation and a site of cultural negotiation among the Indigenous communities of Santals, Mahales, and Mundas. The findings reveal a complex reality: what once functioned primarily as a space to sustain and showcase tribal culture has increasingly become a locus of negotiation with dominant social, cultural, and economic forces. This shift highlights the challenges faced by these communities in preserving their distinct identities in the face of growing external influences and structural inequalities.

## CULTURAL NEGOTIATION VERSUS PRESERVATION

The study shows that the cultural preservation intent of Sonajhuri Haat is being overshadowed by cultural negotiation, where the tribal communities find themselves compelled to adapt to mainstream expectations and market demands. The haat was historically a venue where the Santals and other tribes sold forest products, handicrafts, and produce, showcasing their unique traditions and sustaining their livelihoods. However, in recent times, non-Santal traders have begun to dominate the haat, offering products at much lower prices than those produced by tribal artisans. Since Santal handicrafts are handmade and time-intensive, they cannot compete economically with mass-produced, cheaper goods. This economic disadvantage has undermined the ability of the tribal communities to sustain their traditional crafts as a viable source of income.

This shift in the haat's character also reflects deeper cultural changes among the Santals, Mahales, and Mundas. The study observed a declining sense of trust and pride in their own cultural practices. Rituals, festivals, and customs—once central to tribal identity—are increasingly neglected, particularly by the younger generation, who see little relevance in maintaining these traditions in a modernized society. The older generation laments this erosion of tradition, yet their own failure to actively practice and transmit these customs raises concerns about the sustainability of tribal identity.

For instance, while Santal women continue to dress in ways that are distinct from the mainstream, even this unique practice is under pressure from prevailing fashion norms. This suggests that while cultural markers still exist, their significance and resilience are weakening.

#### LAND DISPOSSESSION AND ECONOMIC MARGINALIZATION

The study also brings to light the historical and ongoing land dispossession of the tribal communities. It is documented that during the time of Rabindranath Tagore, the Santals donated significant tracts of agricultural land for the establishment and expansion of Santiniketan. However, there are no official records recognizing this contribution, and the tribal communities today remain largely landless. Deprived of their traditional means of subsistence through agriculture and forest resources, they have been pushed into precarious, low-paying, and informal jobs.

The economic profile of the Santal population in the study area reveals widespread marginalization. Approximately 50% of the Santal workforce is employed as domestic helps, caretakers, and security personnel in non-tribal households, which is indicative of their limited access to better employment opportunities. About 10% of the population works as seasonal laborers in agriculture, often migrating to other districts or even states during harvest seasons. Another 30% are daily wage laborers or unskilled workers in local businesses, including at Visva Bharati University. These figures highlight the lack of sustainable livelihoods within their own community and the structural constraints that confine them to the margins of the regional economy.

#### EDUCATION AND YOUTH ASPIRATIONS

Another critical finding is the perception of formal education as non-employable. Many Santal families in the area believe that education does not guarantee a job or improve life prospects, leading to high dropout rates among teenagers, often before they even complete high school. This attitude not only reflects their lived experience of exclusion from formal job markets despite education but also perpetuates their dependence on low-skilled, low-paying jobs. The disenchantment with education

among youth signals a dangerous cycle of marginalization, where limited skills and qualifications reinforce their economic vulnerability.

#### THE CHANGING ROLE OF SONAJHURI HAAT

Historically, Sonajhuri Haat served as a lifeline for the Santal population, providing them with an opportunity to sell their forest produce, handcrafted items, and minor forest products. The income earned from the haat supplemented their meager wages and helped sustain their families. However, the current situation reveals a significant transformation of the haat. The influx of non-Santal traders, who dominate the market with cheaper, mass-produced goods, has marginalized Santal sellers. The economic viability of traditional Santal products—especially non-timber, handmade crafts—has declined, as these are more expensive and time-consuming to produce. As a result, the haat, instead of being a site of empowerment and preservation, has become a space of cultural and economic negotiation, where the Santals struggle to maintain their presence and relevance. Unfortunately, The haat has left the Santal population with no choice but to display their traditional dances and songs to attract visitors for their livelihood.

#### THE BROADER IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study reflect the larger structural inequalities and cultural assimilation pressures faced by tribal communities across the country. The loss of land, erosion of traditional knowledge, marginalization in labor markets, and disenchantment with education all contribute to a precarious existence on the fringes of society. The Santals of Bolpur-Sriniketan exemplify these struggles. While they have contributed significantly to the history and development of Santiniketan, they remain largely invisible and under-recognized in official narratives and development policies.

At the cultural level, the negotiation between preserving tribal identity and adapting to dominant cultural norms is evident in every aspect of their lives—from rituals and dress to livelihoods and aspirations. The diminishing observance of traditional festivals and the adoption of mainstream belief systems illustrate the deep-seated cultural shifts underway. Yet, the persistence of unique

cultural practices, even if weakened, suggests that all is not lost. With targeted interventions—such as supporting tribal artisans, ensuring fair prices for handmade goods, recognizing land rights, and promoting inclusive education policies—there is potential to revitalize tribal identity and improve their socio-economic standing.

#### INFLUENCE OF VISVA BHARATI OVER SANTALS

The establishment of Visva Bharati University at Santiniketan marked a turning point not only in the history of Indian education and culture but also in the lives of the Tribal communities residing in the region, particularly the Santal population. Once forest dwellers living in relative isolation, the Santals of Bolpur and surrounding villages have gradually come into contact with the outside world through their association with Visva Bharati. Over the decades, this interaction has transformed many aspects of their lives — socially, economically, culturally, and educationally.

Historically, the Santals were a forest-dependent community, relying on agriculture, minor forest produce, and traditional crafts for their subsistence. Their lifestyle was largely self-contained and shaped by their immediate natural environment. However, with the growth of Santiniketan and the foundation of Visva Bharati by Rabindranath Tagore, the Santals were drawn into a larger socio-economic and cultural network. The university became a bridge between the Santals and the modern world, opening up avenues of employment, education, and cultural participation.

#### EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

One of the most visible influences of Visva Bharati on the Santal population has been through employment generation. Many Santals from nearby villages now work at Visva Bharati in a variety of roles. They are employed both as teaching and non-teaching staff, contributing to the functioning of the university at multiple levels. According to available data, about 44% of the total Santal population in the area work in staff quarters, likely as maintenance workers, helpers, and support staff ensuring the upkeep of university facilities.

In addition, about 13% are employed as drivers, providing essential transportation services to faculty, students, and visitors. Another 12% have become self-employed as rickshaw drivers, an occupation that benefits from the steady flow of students, staff, and tourists visiting the university. These jobs, although modest, have provided regular income and increased the economic stability of many Santal families who otherwise relied on seasonal agricultural labor or unsteady forest-based livelihoods.

#### PROMOTING SANTAL LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

Visva Bharati has also contributed significantly to the educational aspirations and cultural preservation of the Santals by establishing a Department of Santali. This department offers courses at the Bachelor's, Master's, and Ph.D. levels in Ol Chiki, the written script of the Santali language. By institutionalizing Santali as an academic subject, the university has created opportunities for Santal students and scholars to study and research their own language and culture in a formal setting. This initiative helps preserve linguistic heritage and ensures that younger generations have the tools to sustain their cultural identity while participating in the modern education system.

#### HEALTH AND SOCIAL WELFARE

Another important contribution of Visva Bharati to the Santal community comes through healthcare initiatives. The Dinabandhu Andrews Memorial Hospital, affiliated with the university, provides free medical care to tribal populations from nearby villages. Access to reliable and affordable healthcare has been a crucial support, improving the overall well-being of the Santal community, which historically had limited access to such services.

#### AGRICULTURAL SUPPORT AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Agriculture remains an important part of the Santals' livelihood, even as many take up wage labor and other jobs. Recognizing this, Visva Bharati's Soil Testing Laboratory and Agricultural Training Center at Sriniketan have extended services to the surrounding tribal villages. Farmers can bring soil samples for testing free of cost, enabling them to

make informed decisions about crop selection and soil management. Additionally, the training programs offered by the center introduce modern farming techniques and help farmers increase productivity and sustainability. These services have enhanced the Santals' agricultural knowledge and skills, offering them better chances of success in a competitive market.

#### CULTURAL PARTICIPATION AND ECONOMIC SUPPLEMENTATION

Visva Bharati also actively involves the Santal community in its cultural events and festivals. Major occasions like Poush Mela, Magh Mela, and Basanta Utsav provide part-time income generation opportunities for the Santals. They are invited to set up stalls, showcase their crafts, and perform traditional dances and songs at these events. Such participation not only supplements their income but also brings their cultural heritage into the public eye, fostering pride and encouraging the continuation of traditional practices.

Through these cultural interactions, the university has helped the Santal community gain recognition and respect for their unique traditions in a wider social context. These events have also become occasions where tribal and non-tribal communities meet and engage with each other, promoting mutual understanding and social cohesion.

#### CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Despite these significant contributions, the influence of Visva Bharati on the Santal population has not been without its challenges. While employment opportunities have increased, most Santals remain in low-paying, unskilled or semi-skilled positions. Structural inequalities persist, and upward mobility within the university system remains limited for many. Similarly, while the Santali department has institutionalized the language, enrollment in higher education among Santal youth continues to face barriers, such as financial constraints and high dropout rates. Cultural participation at festivals and melas, while economically beneficial, sometimes risks commodifying tribal traditions rather than fostering genuine cultural preservation. The balance between showcasing culture for income and maintaining its authenticity remains delicate.

#### CONCLUSION

The Sonajhuri Haat undoubtedly holds an important place in the lives of the Santals living in the nearby villages, offering them a connection to both livelihood and cultural identity. However, it has fallen short of fulfilling its potential as a true platform for cultural preservation or economic empowerment. The haat has not provided adequate space and opportunity for the Santals to showcase and sustain their heritage and livelihoods, resulting in decreasing participation from the community. Consequently, the haat has failed to meet the expectations of the Santals, who find themselves increasingly marginalized in both cultural and economic terms.

At the same time, the influence of Visva Bharati University on the Santal community is undeniable and largely positive. Over the years, the university has opened doors to opportunities that were previously out of reach, offering employment, education, healthcare, agricultural support, and platforms for cultural expression. The challenge now lies in building upon these foundations to ensure that the Santals are no longer mere participants at the periphery but active decision-makers and leaders in shaping their own futures.

To truly uplift the Santal population and address their cultural, economic, and social marginalization, it is imperative for policy makers, government agencies, and institutions like Visva Bharati to work together with the community. There is an urgent need for reformatory measures that support the Santals in preserving their culture, improving employment prospects, enhancing access to education, and securing their land and agricultural livelihoods.

The following recommendations emerge as crucial steps toward this goal:

1. **Support for Tribal Livelihoods:** Introduce targeted programs to train and assist Santal artisans and producers, ensuring their handmade products remain competitive through better marketing and wider market access.
2. **Recognition of Land Contributions:** Officially document and acknowledge the land historically donated by the Santals to

- Santiniketan, and explore fair mechanisms for land redistribution or compensation.
3. Education Reform: Develop culturally sensitive and employment-linked education programs that integrate tribal knowledge systems and reduce dropout rates.
  4. Regulation of Sonajhuri Haat: Implement measures to protect and enhance Santal participation in the haat, preventing them from being displaced by non-tribal traders.
  5. Cultural Revitalization: Support the revival of traditional festivals, rituals, and crafts through community-led initiatives and partnerships with cultural institutions, to strengthen Santal identity and pride.

In conclusion, while challenges remain, there is a clear path forward. With sustained efforts and inclusive policies, the Santals can move from the margins to the mainstream as respected custodians of their rich cultural heritage and active contributors to the region's social and economic fabric.

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