

Baha Festival: The Flower Festival and its Role in the Cultural Life of the Santal Community in West Bengal

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Abstract

The Baha Festival, known as the Flower Festival of the Santal community in West Bengal, is an important cultural and religious celebration that marks the arrival of spring and the renewal of life in nature. Deeply rooted in the traditions of the Santal tribe, the festival highlights their close relationship with forests, flowers and the changing seasons. It is usually celebrated in the month of March, when flowers like Sal and Mahua blooms, symbolizing purity and new beginnings. The festival begins with rituals performed at the sacred grove (Jaher Than) under the guidance of the village priest, known as the Naike and additional priest Kudam Naike. Offerings are made to nature and ancestral deities to seek blessings for prosperity, health and protection. Along with religious practices, Baha Festival also includes traditional music, dance and communal gatherings, which strengthen social bonds and cultural identity. Thus, the Baha Festival serves as a vital expression of the Santal community's heritage in West Bengal, promoting unity, cultural preservation and harmony with nature.

Keywords: Baha Festival, Santal Community, Tribal Culture, Indigenous Traditions, Spring Season, Sal and Mahua Flowers, Jaher Than (Sacred Grove), Nature Worship, Folk Dance and Music, Baha Dah Ceremony.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Baha Festival is one of the most important cultural and religious festivals of the Santal community, widely celebrated in West Bengal and other parts of eastern India. It is primarily a spring festival that symbolizes the blooming of flowers, renewal of life and the deep connection between humans and nature. The Santals, being one of the largest tribal communities in India, have preserved their unique traditions, customs and belief systems over generations and the Baha Festival plays a vital role in maintaining this cultural continuity.

This study focuses on exploring the significance of the Baha Festival in the socio-cultural life of the Santal community. It seeks to understand the rituals, practices and beliefs associated with the festival, including the role of sacred grove (Jaher Than), the village priest (Naike), additional priest (Kudam Naike) and the use of flowers like Sal and Mahua. The study also examines how the festival reflects the ecological values and sustainable lifestyle of the Santals, emphasizing their respect for nature and natural resources.

Furthermore, the study aims to analyze the social importance of the festival in strengthening community bonds, promoting unity and preserving cultural identity. In the context of rapid modernization and cultural change, such traditional festivals are increasingly under pressure, making it essential to document and understand their relevance. Therefore, this study not only highlights the cultural richness of the Santal community but also contributes to broader discussions on indigenous traditions, environmental awareness and cultural preservation in contemporary society.

2. IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

The study of the Baha Festival in West Bengal holds significant academic, cultural and social value. It helps in understanding the rich cultural heritage of the Santal community, one of the major tribal groups in India, by examining their rituals, beliefs and traditional practices, thereby contributing to the preservation of indigenous knowledge that is gradually declining due to modernization. At the same time, the study highlights the deep relationship between the Santals and nature, as the festival emphasizes environmental harmony, respect for forests and sustainable living, making it highly relevant in the present context of ecological awareness and conservation. Furthermore, it provides insight into the social structure and community life of the Santals, where the festival strengthens unity, promotes collective participation and reinforces social bonds. In addition, the study holds importance in the fields of anthropology, sociology and cultural studies by documenting tribal traditions and it can support policymakers and educators in designing culturally sensitive programs.

Finally, it fosters respect for cultural diversity in India by encouraging people to appreciate the values, traditions and lifestyles of indigenous communities, thereby promoting social harmony and national integration.

3. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To understand the cultural and religious significance of the Baha Festival among the Santal community.
2. To examine the rituals, customs and traditional practices associated with the festival.
3. To explore the relationship between the Santals and nature as reflected in the celebration of the Baha Festival.
4. To analyse the role of the festival in strengthening social unity, cooperation and community life.
5. To study the importance of Baha Festival in preserving indigenous knowledge, traditions and cultural identity.
6. To highlight the relevance of the festival in the present context of environmental awareness and sustainable living.
7. To contribute to academic research in the fields of anthropology, sociology and cultural studies through the documentation of tribal festivals.
8. To promote awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity and tribal heritage in India.

4. AREA OF THE STUDY

The study of the Baha Festival is mainly conducted in selected regions of West Bengal where the Santal community is largely concentrated. These areas include districts such as Purulia, Bankura, Jhargram,

Paschim Medinipur, East & West Bardhaman and Birbhum. These regions are known for their significant tribal population and rich cultural traditions. The study focuses on rural villages within these districts, where the Baha Festival is traditionally celebrated with full cultural and religious practices. These areas provide an appropriate setting to observe rituals, social interactions and community participation in their natural environment.

5. METHODOLOGY

The study of the Baha Festival in West Bengal is based on a qualitative approach using both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through field observation and interviews with Santal community members, while secondary data were gathered from books and research articles. The study follows a descriptive and analytical method to understand the cultural and social significance of the festival.

6. RELATED LITERATURE REVIEW

S. Siwakoti (2013). The paper focuses on the Baha Festival as a vital cultural tradition of the Santal ethnic group in Nepal, with special reference to its celebration in the Eastern Tarai districts such as Jhapa, Morang and Sunsari. (Siwakoti, 2013)

L.S. Droesch (2014). This work highlights the concept of 'Fertility or Indigeneity? Two Perspectives on the Santal Flower Festival' in Jharkhand, focusing on the Baha festival of the Santal community and investigating the impact of national and global forces on its evolving ritual practices. (Schulte-Droesch, 2014)

J. Murmu (2017). The study states that traditional Santal festivals have great social and cultural importance in the life of the Santal community. These festivals help people learn important values such as respect for nature, land and other individuals. They strongly influence both the social and religious aspects of life and provide opportunities for collective worship and expression of cultural identity. (Murmu, 2017)

M. Singha (2023), had conducted the study "The Culture of Santal Community in the District of Birbhum," explores the different types of festivals organised by Santal community in different times, these are Saket Bonga, Maghsim Festival, Baha festival, Mang More festival, Festival Ear Sim, Festival Harar Sim, Festival of Sima Bonga, Festival Sing Bonga, Karam Puja, Majhi Karam, Dangua Karam, Guru Karam, Chela Karam, Mara Karam, Bonga Karam and Chhata Festival. (Singha, 2023)

7. BAHHA FESTIVAL

The word "**Baha**" means *flower* in the Santali language. Thus, Baha Festival is often referred to as the *Festival of Flowers*. It is a celebration of nature's beauty, fertility and the blossoming of new life. The Santals, who are deeply connected to forests and the natural environment, express their gratitude to nature during this festival.



(Figure1:Palashflowers)

8.1. Time of Celebration

The Baha Festival is generally celebrated in the month of March, before and after the “*Dol Purnima*” (Dol Festival) marking the arrival of the spring season. This period is characterized by the blooming of various flowers, especially **Sal** and **Mahua**, which hold special cultural and ritual importance for the Santal community. The exact date of the festival may vary from village to village, as it is usually decided by the village priest (**Naike**) based on traditional customs and local conditions. Despite these variations, the festival always symbolizes the onset of new life, freshness and the renewal of nature, reflecting the deep connection between the Santals and their natural environment.(Mandi, 2017)



(Figure 2: Mahua flowers)

(Figure 3: Sal flowers)

8.2. Rituals and Traditions



(Figure 4: Jaher Than)

The Baha Festival is rich in rituals and traditions that reflect the deep spiritual and cultural life of the Santal community in West Bengal. The festival begins with purification rituals, where villagers clean their homes and surroundings to welcome the new season. The main ceremonies are performed at the sacred grove, known as **Jaher Than**, which is believed to be the dwelling place of village deities.

The village priest, called the **Naike**, plays a central role in conducting the rituals. Offerings such as flowers, rice(unboiled) and traditional items are made to nature and ancestral spirits to seek blessings for prosperity, health and protection. Fresh **Sal** and **Mahua** flowers are especially significant and are used in worship as symbols of purity and renewal.

Another important tradition is the distribution of sacred flowers specially Sal flowers among community members, distributed by **Naike** signifying unity and shared blessings. After the rituals, the atmosphere becomes festive with traditional music and dance. Men and women, dressed in colourful attire, participate in group dances accompanied by drums like *tumdak* and *tamak*. These performances not only express joy but also strengthen social bonds and cultural identity. Overall, the rituals and traditions of the Baha Festival highlight the Santals' deep respect for nature, community and spiritual beliefs.

8.3. Dance and Music

Dance and music are essential parts of the Baha Festival, reflecting the joy and cultural spirit of the Santal community in West Bengal. During the festival, men and women participate in traditional group dances, forming lines or circles and moving rhythmically together. They wear colourful traditional attire and ornaments, adding vibrancy to the celebration.

Music is performed using traditional instruments like the *tumdak* and *tamak* (drums), along with flutes and other local instruments. The songs are usually based on nature, love and daily life. Together, dance and music create a festive atmosphere, strengthen social unity and preserve the cultural heritage of the Santal community.



(Figure 5: Cultural Dance) (pic credit goes to Kalimoni Hembram)

8.4. “Baha Dah” Ceremony



(Figure 6: Baha Dah)

Last day of the Baha Festival, members of the Santal community observe a special custom of offering “*Bahadah*” to their relatives. This includes close family members such as sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law and grandparents. The practice is a gesture of respect, love and social bonding. It reflects the importance of maintaining strong family relationships and mutual affection within the community. Through this tradition, younger members show respect to elders, while also strengthening kinship ties. This post-festival ritual adds a social dimension to the celebration and helps preserve the cultural values and traditions of the Santal community.

8. Social Importance

The Baha Festival holds immense social importance for the Santal community in West Bengal, as it plays a vital role in strengthening social bonds, promoting unity and preserving cultural identity. This festival is not just a religious event but a collective social occasion where all members of the community actively participate, regardless of age or gender. It creates a sense of belonging and togetherness among

the Santals, reinforcing their shared values and traditions. One of the key social aspects of the Baha Festival is community participation. Every individual, from children to elders, takes part in the preparations and celebrations. Activities such as cleaning the village, decorating homes, preparing offerings and organizing rituals are done collectively. This cooperation enhances mutual understanding and cooperation among community members, fostering a spirit of unity and collective responsibility.

The festival also serves as an important platform for social interaction. People gather in large numbers, exchange greetings, share food and spend time together. It strengthens interpersonal relationships and helps in resolving minor conflicts within the community, as the festive environment encourages harmony and goodwill. For the younger generation, it provides an opportunity to interact with elders and learn about their traditions, customs and values. Another significant aspect is the role of dance and music in promoting social cohesion. Group dances and songs bring people together in a joyful and inclusive manner. Men and women participate equally, reflecting a sense of equality and cooperation in the community. These cultural performances help in preserving traditional art forms while also reinforcing a shared cultural identity.

The Baha Festival also plays a crucial role in the transmission of cultural knowledge from one generation to another. Elders guide the younger members in performing rituals, understanding their meanings and respecting cultural norms. This process ensures the continuity of traditions and helps maintain the unique identity of the Santal community in the face of modernization and external influences.

Furthermore, the festival promotes values such as respect for nature, social harmony and collective well-being. By celebrating together and honouring natural elements like flowers and forests, the Santals reinforce their ecological consciousness and sustainable way of life. These values are not only important for the community but also relevant for broader society. In addition, the Baha Festival contributes to social stability and cultural pride. It allows the Santals to express their identity and maintain their cultural heritage with dignity. In a rapidly changing world, such festivals act as a source of strength and continuity, helping communities stay connected to their roots.

Overall, the social importance of the Baha Festival lies in its ability to unite people, preserve traditions and promote harmony within the Santal community, making it a vital part of their social and cultural life.

9. CONCLUSION

The study of the Baha Festival in West Bengal highlights its deep cultural, social and ecological significance within the Santal community. It reveals that the festival is not merely a seasonal celebration but a vital expression of indigenous identity, traditions and beliefs that have been preserved over generations.

The findings show that Baha Festival plays an important role in strengthening community bonds, promoting unity and ensuring the transmission of cultural values from one generation to another. The rituals, music, dance, baha dah ceremony and social customs associated with the festival reflect a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, emphasizing respect for the environment and sustainable living practices. However, the study also indicates that modernization and external influences are gradually impacting traditional practices. Despite these challenges, the festival continues to remain a strong symbol of cultural pride and resilience among the Santals.

In conclusion, the Baha Festival stands as a significant cultural heritage of the Santal community in

West Bengal. Preserving and promoting such indigenous festivals is essential for maintaining cultural diversity, strengthening social harmony and encouraging a balanced relationship with nature in contemporary society.

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