

Cultural and Social Dimensions of Dance Traditions: A Study among the Santhal Tribe of Jharkhand

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Abstract

Tribal folk dances in Jharkhand are an important part of the cultural, social, and religious life of the Santhal community. The Santhals are one of the largest tribal groups in India and live mainly in Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, and Bihar. Their lives are closely connected to nature, farming, and community life. They follow a clan system, and their beliefs are linked to nature worship. Festivals like Sohrai, Baha, and Karam are very important in their culture. Music and dance are key parts of these festivals and help express their beliefs, unity, and traditions. They use instruments like the madal, tamak, and flute, and dances are usually performed in open spaces in the village. These dances are not only for entertainment but are also connected to farming and social life. This paper studies the role of men and women in Santhal dance traditions. It uses both primary and secondary data. The primary data were collected through fieldwork in Pakur district, particularly in the Littipara block. The study shows how cultural traditions decide the roles of men and women in dance. It also shows that these roles are slowly changing due to education and modernization.

Keywords: Santhal Community, Dance, Gender, Culture and Tradition.

Introduction

The Santhal tribe is widely recognized as one of the most significant indigenous communities in India, with a strong presence in Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, and other regions. The Adibasis, or tribal population, are identified as the indigenous inhabitants of our country, and "there are several tribes living all over India and in various parts of the world" (Baskey, 2019). Santhal society is deeply rooted in nature-based traditions, collective living, and oral cultural practices. Their cultural expressions are not separate from daily life but are integrated into social, religious, and economic activities. Among these expressions, dance holds a central position as a form of collective participation and cultural identity. As observed in ethnographic studies, tribal life is closely connected to rituals, festivals, and agricultural cycles, in which dance becomes a shared social activity rather than an individual performance (Elwin, 1955). Their way of life is closely connected with nature and community, and their identity is expressed

through music, dance, language, and traditions. Scholars like P.O. Bodding helped document and preserve their rich cultural heritage (Kumar, 2019). Earlier anthropological writings also highlight that Santhal cultural life is structured around community participation, where music and dance play a key role in strengthening social bonds and maintaining harmony within the group (Bose, 1971). These cultural practices are not only expressive but also functional, as they help in reinforcing unity, tradition, and collective identity across generations.

Ethnographic accounts further show that Santhal traditions are largely transmitted through oral narratives and lived experiences, rather than written texts. The oral nature of knowledge preservation makes performance-based traditions, such as dance, highly significant in maintaining cultural continuity (Bodding, 1942). Dance, therefore, becomes a medium through which social memory, beliefs, and values are passed on within the community. In this context, Santhal dance traditions are not merely artistic expressions but also represent a deeper social structure in which participation reflects cultural belonging and identity. The present study therefore attempts to understand these dance traditions within Santhal society, particularly in relation to gender roles and participation patterns, drawing on both the literature and fieldwork conducted in Santhal villages in Pakur district, Jharkhand.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to understand the role of tribal folk dances in the cultural life of the Santhal communities of Jharkhand. It also aims to study how men and women participate in these dance traditions and how their roles are shaped by culture and customs. Another objective is to examine how these traditional practices are changing over time due to modernization and education. The study also tries to identify gaps in existing research on tribal dance and gender roles.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach and uses both primary and secondary sources of data. Secondary data were collected from books, research articles, ethnographic writings, journals, and earlier studies on the Santhal community of Jharkhand. The study employs a descriptive-analytical approach to examine gender roles, cultural practices, and participation in Santhal dance traditions. Primary data were collected through fieldwork in Mohanpur village of Pakur district, Jharkhand. Around 20 respondents from different age groups were engaged, and data were gathered mainly through observation and in-depth interviews. The study combines field experiences with literature to develop a clear understanding of the topic.

Ethnographic Background of Santhal

Early studies of the Santhal tribe offer important insights into their way of life. The Santhal community is one of the major indigenous groups in India, and many early writers tried to document their customs, beliefs, and social practices. These writings were done mostly during the colonial period, but they still help us understand how Santhal society functions, especially in relation to culture, traditions, and social life. One of the most important contributions comes from P.O. Bodding's work. His study on Santal Medicine and Connected Folklore describes in detail how the Santhal people understand health, illness, and healing (Bodding, 1925–1938). According to his observations, the Santhal way of treating diseases is closely connected with nature. They use plants, herbs, and forest-based resources for healing. For them, medicine is not only about treating the body but is also linked to spiritual beliefs and cultural practices. Bodding's work also shows that Santhal knowledge is mainly based on oral tradition. Most of the information was collected through conversations with Santhal people, especially elders and traditional

healers. This shows that knowledge in Santhal society is passed from one generation to another through speech, stories, and practice rather than written records. Because of this, oral tradition plays a very important role in keeping their culture alive.

Another important early work is *The Traditions and Institutions of the Santhals* (Horkoren Mare Hapramko reak Katha). This book was first collected by L.O. Skrefsrud from Santhal oral stories and later edited and translated by Sten Konow and P.O. Bodding (Bodding, 1942). The content of this book comes directly from Santhal elders, which makes it very valuable for understanding their real traditions and customs. This work explains many aspects of Santhal society, including how their villages are organized, how decisions are made, and how social rules are followed. It shows that Santhal society is based on community life, where people work together and follow shared customs. The village system is very important, and most decisions are taken with the help of community leaders and elders.

The book also highlights that customs and traditions are an important part of daily life. They are not separate rules but are deeply connected with social behaviour. These traditions help maintain peace and order in the community. They also guide people in matters like marriage, festivals, and social responsibilities. Another important point from these studies is the role of oral tradition in Santhal culture. The Santhal people do not depend mainly on written records. Instead, they use stories, songs, dances, and rituals to share knowledge. This helps in passing cultural values from elders to younger generations. Because of this system, their traditions remain strong even without written documentation. Dance and music are also important parts of this oral culture. They are not just forms of enjoyment but also ways of expressing identity and preserving traditions. Through dance and performance, people remember their history, celebrate their culture, and strengthen community bonds. Overall, these early studies show that Santhal society is deeply connected with oral traditions, community life, and nature. Their culture is not fixed but living, and it continues to change over time while still keeping its core values. These ethnographic works are very useful for understanding how the Santhal people live, think, and maintain their identity.

Santhal Dance Traditions

Dance and song are at the heart of Santhal culture. They are performed at almost every festival, often in groups, to show unity and joy. Songs are usually spontaneous and reflect everyday life and emotions (Kumar, 2019). Santhal dance traditions are closely woven into the everyday life of the community. Rather than being divided into strict categories, these dances are generally understood through the occasions and seasons in which they are performed. Each dance carries its own meaning and reflects different parts of Santhal life, whether it is farming, festivals, rituals, or social gatherings. From sowing seeds to celebrating harvests, from marriages to village celebrations, dance becomes a way for people to share their feelings of joy, gratitude, and togetherness. While the occasions may differ, all Santhal dances share a spirit of collective participation, rhythmic movement, and a deep connection to nature and community life.

Sohrai Dance

Sohrai dance is performed during the Sohrai festival, which is connected with the harvest season and the worship of cattle. It is one of the most important dances in Santhal culture, expressing happiness, prosperity, and gratitude for a successful harvest. The dance usually takes place in the evening after rituals are completed. Men play traditional instruments such as the tamak and tumdak, while women dance together in coordinated movements. The overall rhythm is gentle and joyful, creating a strong sense of unity and celebration within the community.

Baha Dance

Baha dance is associated with the Baha festival, also known as the flower festival. It marks the arrival of spring and celebrates the beauty of nature. This dance reflects the close relationship between the Santhal people and their natural surroundings, especially forests and flowers. Women often take the lead, dancing gracefully in groups, while men provide musical support. The dance expresses feelings of joy, freshness, and harmony with nature.

Karam Dance

Karam dance is performed during the Karam festival, which is centred on the worship of the sacred Karam tree, a symbol of fertility and prosperity. This dance is especially popular among young people, who participate with great energy and enthusiasm. Singing and dancing often continue throughout the night. The performance combines ritual devotion with social enjoyment, and its lively movements reflect the spirit of togetherness and celebration.

Erok Dance

Erok dance is linked with the sowing season and is performed before agricultural work begins. It reflects the community's hope for a good harvest and their dependence on nature for livelihood. The dance is simple in form but meaningful in purpose. People come together to participate and seek blessings for a successful harvest, showing their deep connection to farming life.

Janthar Dance

Janthar dance is performed during the harvesting season, marking the successful completion of agricultural work. It is a time of happiness and relief after months of hard labour. The dance is lively and energetic, with both men and women participating actively. It expresses a sense of achievement and collective joy shared by the entire community.

Dong Dance

Dong dance is performed during marriage ceremonies and celebrates the union of two individuals as well as the bonding of families. It is a joyful and expressive dance in which relatives, friends, and villagers all participate. The performance reflects happiness, togetherness, and the importance of social relationships in Santhal culture.

Dasai Dance

Dasai dance is associated with the Dasai festival and has a more ritualistic and ceremonial character. It often includes symbolic elements connected to traditional beliefs and practices. Compared to other dances, it is more serious in tone and reflects the spiritual aspects of Santhal culture.

Cultural Importance of Dance in Santhal Society:

Dance is a very important part of Santhal life. For the Santhal community, it is not just entertainment or a performance. It is something that is closely linked with their daily life, celebrations, rituals, farming activities, and social relationships. People come together to dance during festivals, village gatherings, marriages, and important moments of life. From earlier studies, it is clear that Santhal dance is deeply connected with their culture and identity. It reflects unity, cooperation, and the feeling of togetherness in the community. As Bodding (1942) noted, dance and music are part of their everyday social life, not something separate from it. This means that Santhal people do not see dance as an "extra activity", but as something naturally connected with their way of living. Santhal dance also shows their close relationship with nature. Many dances are performed during agricultural seasons, especially during sowing and harvesting time. These performances are a way of expressing gratitude to nature for providing food and

life. People believe that dancing together brings happiness, balance, and good fortune to the community. In this way, dance becomes a part of both culture and belief.

Dance is also a simple but powerful form of communication. In Santhal society, people express feelings like joy, unity, respect, and belonging through group movements, rhythm, and songs. Everyone participates together, and this shared participation helps to build strong social bonds. It also creates a feeling of equality, because people from different age groups and backgrounds dance together in the same circle.

During field visits, it was seen that dance is still very much alive in daily cultural life. Villagers shared that they regularly take part in group dances during festivals like Sohrai and Baha. Men and women both join these dances, forming circles and moving together in rhythm. Elders in the villages explained that no formal training is needed to learn dance. Children learn naturally by watching older people and slowly joining in. In this way, dance is passed from one generation to another through observation and practice. It was also observed that during festivals, the whole village becomes part of the celebration. Traditional drums and other instruments set the rhythm, and people gather in open spaces to dance together. At that time, social differences become less important, and everyone participates as one community. This shows that dance is not just a cultural activity, but a strong force that brings people together. Both literature and field experience show that Santhal dance is more than a performance. It is a living tradition that connects people with their culture, nature, and community. It helps maintain unity, strengthens social bonds, and keeps the Santhal identity alive across generations.

Social Structure, Nature, and Collective Participation

Santhal society is built on strong community living where people do everything together, including work, celebrations, and rituals. Life here is based on cooperation rather than individual effort, and dance is a natural part of this shared culture. Their daily life is closely tied to nature, as they live among fields, forests, and water sources. Farming shapes their routine, and festivals are linked with agricultural seasons like sowing and harvesting. During these occasions, people come together to dance as a way of sharing joy, showing gratitude, and expressing their bond with nature. They believe that such collective dancing helps create balance and harmony between human life and the natural environment.

Ethnographic writings also support this view. According to Bodding (1942), Santhal cultural life is not separate from social structure. Instead, it is part of everyday living where people participate together in rituals and celebrations. Dance is one of the strongest expressions of this collective life, where unity and cooperation are clearly visible. In the Santhal culture, participation in dance is open to everyone. There is no strict separation between performers and audience. People join naturally, and group movement becomes the main form of expression. Circular dance formations are commonly seen, which symbolically represent equality, continuity, and unity. No single person dominates the performance; instead, the group moves together with shared rhythm.

Villagers shared that during festivals like Sohrai, Baha, and Karam, the entire village gathers in the evening after finishing daily agricultural work. It was found that the preparation for dance is simple and informal. People gather in open spaces such as village courtyards or near agricultural fields. These spaces are naturally chosen and reflect their close relationship with the environment. The atmosphere becomes lively as traditional drums (tamak) and flutes are played, creating a rhythm for group movement.

During Sohrai festival, for example, villagers explained that cattle are decorated during the day, and in the evening people come together for dance and singing. The participation includes men, women, youth, and

elders, showing that dance is a shared cultural practice rather than an individual activity. Children also join by watching and slowly learning the steps. It was also observed that dance continues for long hours, often late into the night. People do not need formal coordination; movements happen naturally through rhythm and group feeling. The sense of togetherness is very strong, and villagers described dance as a time when "everyone becomes one family."

Another important observation was that during these performances, nature remains an important background element. Open fields, cool air, and the presence of trees create a natural environment for cultural expression. This shows that Santhal dance is not only social but also ecological in nature, deeply connected to their surroundings. The Santhal social structure is deeply rooted in collective life and harmony with nature. Dance plays an important role in maintaining this structure by bringing people together in shared celebration and participation. Both ethnographic literature and field observations in the villages and show that Santhal dance is a living tradition. It reflects unity, equality, and a strong bond with nature, where community life is always placed above individual identity.

Gender Participation in Santhal Dance Traditions

Gender plays an important and visible role in shaping participation in Santhal dance traditions. In everyday cultural life, both men and women actively take part in dance performances, but their participation is usually guided by long-standing customs and community expectations. As Surajit Sinha (1965) explains, tribal cultural practices are closely linked with social organization, and gender roles are naturally reflected in these cultural forms.

In Santhal society, dance is always a collective activity. Men and women perform together, but their movements, positions, and responsibilities within the group may differ. Generally, men are more associated with playing traditional instruments like the tamak (drum), while women are more visible in group dance formations with graceful and coordinated steps. Even then, this division is not rigid. It is flexible and works in a complementary manner, where both genders contribute equally to the overall cultural expression.

What is important in Santhal dance is not separation but coordination. Men and women stand in circles, hold hands, and move in rhythm with each other. This circular movement represents equality, unity, and continuity of community life. The dance space becomes a shared cultural space where both genders express joy, belonging, and identity together. In this way, gender roles are present, but they function within a balanced and cooperative structure rather than a strict hierarchy.

At the same time, these roles are not completely fixed. Over time, changes have started appearing in participation patterns. Education, migration, exposure to urban culture, and socio-economic changes have influenced younger generations. In many cases, young men and women now participate more freely in dance performances, with fewer restrictions than earlier generations. This shows a gradual shift in traditional gender boundaries, although cultural values still remain important.

For the villagers, dance remains a strong part of social and cultural life. Villagers shared that during major festivals like Sohrai, Baha, and Karam, the entire community gathers in the evening after completing daily agricultural work. This timing itself reflects the close connection between livelihood and cultural practice. It was observed that participation is highly inclusive. Men, women, children, and elders all join the dance without formal arrangement. The dance usually begins spontaneously when drums start playing in the village courtyard or open field. The rhythm created by traditional instruments guides the movement of the group, and people naturally form circular patterns and begin dancing together.

In terms of gender roles, it was noted that men often take responsibility for playing drums and leading the rhythm, while women actively participate in group dance formations. However, in several instances, young women were also seen singing and supporting rhythmic coordination. This indicates that participation is becoming more flexible, especially among younger generations. Elders in both villages explained that earlier, there were clearer cultural expectations regarding gender roles in dance. Certain movements and responsibilities were traditionally followed. But now, these boundaries are slowly changing. Young boys and girls are seen dancing together more freely, especially during festival nights when the whole village gathers.

Another important observation is that during dance performances, social identity becomes less important. Differences of age, gender, and family background are less visible, and everyone participates as part of a single community. Villagers described this experience as a time when "the whole village becomes one," showing the strong emotional and social unity created through dance. At the same time, respect for tradition is still maintained. Even though participation is becoming more open, people still follow cultural rhythm, songs, and traditional instruments. This shows a balance between continuity and change in gender roles within dance traditions.

Gender roles in Santhal dance traditions reflect both tradition and gradual transformation. While cultural norms continue to influence participation patterns, especially in rural areas like Mohanpur villages of Pakur district, there is also increasing flexibility among younger generations. Dance remains a powerful cultural space where men and women come together, share rhythm, and express collective identity. It continues to represent unity, cooperation, and the evolving nature of gender relations within Santhal society.

Cultural Identity and Continuity Through Dance

For the Santhal community, dance is much more than a cultural performance. It is a part of everyday life that carries their identity, memories, and traditions. Through dance, people express who they are, where they come from, and what they value as a community. It is not something separate from life, but deeply connected to their social and cultural existence. Santhal dances help keep the past alive in a very natural way. The songs, rhythms, and steps are not written in books, but passed from elders to younger generations through practice. Children learn by watching adults during festivals and slowly join in. In this way, dance becomes a living form of memory that connects one generation to another. It helps the community remember its roots and maintain a sense of belonging.

Baskey (2019) points out that Santhal cultural practices play an important role in protecting their identity, especially in a changing world. Today, many outside influences, such as education, migration, and modern lifestyles, are affecting traditional societies. Even in this situation, dance continues to hold the community together. It gives people a strong feeling of connection with their culture and helps them stay rooted in their traditions. Another important aspect of Santhal dance is how it brings people together. During festivals like Sohrai, Baha, and Karam, the whole village joins in. There is no separation between performers and audience. Everyone becomes part of the same celebration. People hold hands, move in circles, and dance to the rhythm of drums. These moments create a strong feeling of unity, where differences of age, gender, or status become less important.

Santhal dance is also closely linked with nature. Most performances take place in open spaces such as fields or village grounds, surrounded by trees and natural surroundings. This shows how closely their cultural life is connected to the environment. Dance becomes a way of showing respect and gratitude

towards nature, especially during farming seasons. From an ethnographic point of view, Santhal dance acts like a bridge between the past and the present. It carries forward old traditions while still being part of today's social life. Even though changes are happening in society, these dances continue to preserve important cultural values, beliefs, and practices. In simple terms, Santhal dance is a way of keeping culture alive. It helps people remember their history, stay connected with their community, and feel proud of their identity. It is not only a tradition but also a shared experience that continues to give meaning to their everyday life.

Conclusion

To conclude, Santhal dance traditions are deeply woven into the everyday life of the Santhal community. These dances are not just a form of entertainment, but a meaningful part of their culture, closely linked with festivals, farming activities, rituals, and social life. Through dances like Sohrai, Baha, Karam, Erok, Janthar, Dong, and Dasai, people express happiness, gratitude, devotion, and a strong sense of togetherness. Santal culture brings together religion, art, and social life in a balanced way. However, modernisation is slowly affecting these traditions. Preserving them is important to keep their unique identity alive (Kumar, 2019). From an ethnographic point of view, Santhal society is built on collective living, oral traditions, and a close relationship with nature. Dance plays an important role in bringing people together and passing cultural knowledge from one generation to the next. It is through these shared performances that values, memories, and traditions continue to live within the community. The study also shows that gender participation in Santhal dance is generally balanced and cooperative. Men and women dance together, each contributing in their own way, which reflects harmony rather than separation. At the same time, some changes are slowly appearing due to education, modernisation, and outside influences. Younger generations are participating more freely, showing that traditions are adapting with time while still maintaining their core values. Overall, Santhal dance remains a living and powerful expression of cultural identity. Even as society changes, it continues to hold the community together, strengthen social bonds, and keep its traditions alive. It connects the past with the present in a very natural way and remains an important part of Santhal life and identity.

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