

The Lagne Dance: As A Symbol of Santali Identity in the Age of Modernization

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Abstract

The paper examines the Lagne or Lagre dance which is an essential part of the cultural identity of the Santali people that is a very happy and joyful dance. The study through an ethnographic lens, does not just consider the dance as a performance, but as a living social practice that is a mirror of the values, history and harmonious unity of the Santal tribe. The Lagne is a group dance performed to the rhythm of the instruments such as the Tamak (drum), Tumdah and Tiriau (flute) and historically is a group dance known as men and women dance in circles and semi circles. With an etymological origin of the words denoting the clearing of the village meeting place, the dance had its original beginnings in the rituals to bring rain and assure agriculture to be fruitful. As time went by, it turned into a common social affair usually organized on moonlit nights in which romantic feelings were prevalent and offered a platform where young people could court each other. This study aims at capturing the historicity and linguistic background of the Lagne dance, the traditional choreography and rhythmic sequences of the dance, and the process through which the dance has evolved and is now a cultural show. In particular, the paper discusses the move towards so-called DJ Lagne or Disco Lagne, a modern mixture style based on modern electronic music. The studies seek to comprehend how the Santali youth struggle with the concern of maintaining their traditional folk dance, including the particular footwork and community spirit, and keeping up with the emerging social realities and urbanization effects. This study will help fill a gap in the research on indigenous performance by revealing how Lagne dance is an effective emblem of pride and identity that can be preserved and adapted to stay current and relevant to the future generations.

Keywords: Santal, Lagne dance, Cultural evolution, Indigenous identity, Folk performance

1. Introduction



The Lagne dance is a type of Santali danced and their songs are almost always filled with romantic sentiments. This dance is very common and it can be performed at any time. In the past, when the moon shines, or we can also say when it is a moonlit night, that night is his favourite occasion. The men play the drum to attract the young men and women. The 'Lagne' is a very exciting dance and on these occasions the tribal youth and girls get sufficient opportunities for exchanging love¹. The P.C. Hembrom has explained the word 'Lagne' very clearly and in a very linguistic way that it is derived from the word 'La' and 'More'. He said that 'La' means scraping or removing the grass on the surface of the earth and here it stands for the area (the village centre or the meeting place of villagers). According to Hembrom the word 'More' means five, which symbolizes the whole village community of Majhi, like Jog-Majhi, Paranick, Godet and other villagers. The perversion of 'More' was turned into 'ngre' or 'gre', and when joined with 'La' was called 'Lagre' or 'Langre/Lagne'. During the early phase, the head of the five groups of villages (Moreko/Moneko) the Majhi together with the deputy the Jog-Majhi appoint two virgin girls to scrape off the grass of the 'aakhara/aakhala' and to make a small altar. The girls then make the place clean with cow-dung water. Then they start dancing joyfully with solemn oaths and mantras recitations believing that the dance will bring rain to enable them to carry out their farming work². The most popular Santali dance is 'Lagne' and it can be performed on any celebratory event.

The author W. G. Archer writes that in the 'Lagne dance' is an excellent form of dancing is known as 'Tahri'. In this there is a swirling line of girls before the drummers. They start with a song to tie up the akhra (the dance-ground) and then proceed slowly round its sides. Then the drums increase in speed and a jerky movement starts. The right foot is slightly outward and slides towards right. The left foot joins it. Then the right foot shifts slightly to the side and the left one shifts outwards and borders on it. In the same time the knees draw up and down or simultaneously the hands which are bound together move gently and the buttocks move in a circular motion, up and down. The heads move along with the drums and when the corpses create a vertical wave, the songs are heard floating serene above the noise³. The Santal dance is traditionally performed using the beating drums and blowing of the flutes. They used many kinds of musical instruments like Tamak (madal), Dhol, Buang, Tumdah, Tiriau, Banam, Ghanta (iron bell) and singa (horn trumpet) etc⁴.

According to Charulal Mukherjia the Santals have a special season and festival for the dances which is part of their religious life. The 'Lagne enec' is the most common Santal dance which is held at any time, but the moon light night is the favourite occasion for it. When the moon glimmers, the drummer beats the madal to attract the youth boys and girls. After a couple of minutes numbers of people assembling at the spot. Then they make a circle with a radius of seven to ten feet. The step of the 'lagren' dance is regular through. The feet they wave forward making angle of 45 degrees and swing to the right while the circle appears to move in an anti-clockwise direction. They dance approximately half-an-hour then comes an interval. Then they sit and rest a few minutes, after that they crack some jokes and while men sing then women reply in chorus. They go on till about 3. a.m. in the morning. The 'Lagne' is a very stimulating dance and this occasion the youth or maids get the plenty opportunities for love making. Also, the steps

¹ Kumar, R. (2022). Exploring and Contextualizing Santali dance-songs: Lagre seren and Pata Seren. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Educational Research*. p.1.

² Ibid. p.2.

³ Ibid. p.2.

⁴ Ota, A. B., & Patnaik, K. (2020). Santal. *Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute (SCSTRTI)*, C.R.P. Square, Bhubaneswar-751003. p.25.

of the dance provide facilities for courtship as the couple face sideways and talk as they dance⁵. But now a day's people are being turned towards 'DJ Lange' dance or 'Disco Lagne' dance. The 'Disco/DJ Lagne' is a term associated with the Santali dance and music. It is not a specific traditional form but likely a modern of fusion style that combines traditional elements with contemporary music, as seen in many places. The term 'Disco Lagne' points to the modern influence of DJ music on traditional Santali dance competitions which is being liked very much by today's youth.

2. Historical Background

The Dance (Enej) and Song (Serenj) is an important and joyful part of Santali people's life⁶. The Santali traditional dance is performed in groups only, where both the men and women can dance together. This dance is mostly performed at the marriages, ritualistic occasions and happy moments. The people perform this dance for themselves. There is a place where a drummer or a leader who leads the entire team. Then the drummer stands Infront of the dancers and play the drum and the dancers move simultaneously in a round shape or the drummer also moving with dancers in rhythmic flows. The dancers hold each other's hand and making a line or semi circles or they observe each other's simple monotonous steps and movement with following rhythm. When the people perform the dance, the drums beat out a steady rhythm or sometimes joined by flutes and brass plates which makes both the dancers and audience feel happy and energized. The upper part of the body stays relaxed, slightly bent Infront but the legs move in a clear ordered patterns and stepping or shifting in a time with the rhythm⁷. But when a dance that originally belonged to the santal tribal community is performed by the urban people or foreign guests it starts to feel less like the original tribal tradition and more like a general 'Disco party'⁸. The present study describe that the tradition of folk dance is not only the old village dance but the way people use to express identity, values and social belonging. The folk dance is a way of people come together to celebrate culture, history and community living. It often presents a combination of the tendencies of common villagers and educated middle classes, and over time it has been modified according to modern needs.

3. Review of Literature

Acharya, S.K. and Kshatriya, G.K. The article (2016) discusses how the Santali-speaking people are gradually transforming their lifestyle due to improved employment opportunities, better living conditions and education. Individuals get married at a later age today and lead some modern lifestyle. Despite these changes, they still honour their culture, language and traditions, and adapt to new opportunities and development.

Kumar, R. (2022). Two significant dance-song traditions of the Lagre Seren and Pata Seren traditions of the Santal community express their culture and their emotions as highlighted by Lagre Seren mostly done at night when the moon is out, it is linked mainly with friendship, love and courtship and is danced gracefully and even symbolically through music and dancing. The Pata Seren is associated with the Pata festival, but can also be heard during other events, indicating a social aspect and culture.

⁵ Mukharjea. C. (1962). The Santal. *Gyan Publishing House*.pp.365-367.

⁶ Ota, A. B., & Patnaik, K. (2020). Santal. *Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Research and Training Institute (SCSTRTI)*, C.R.P. Square, Bhubaneswar-751003. p.24.

⁷ Ryzhakova, S. (2021). "Tribal Dance" in India: A concept, a Category and an Ethnographic reality. *Journal of Indian Anthropological Society*, 56(2), p.10.

⁸ Ibd. p.12.

Ryzhakova, S. (2021). This concept of tribal dance in India is a complicated one due to the fact that the tribal identity is influenced by various social, cultural, political and economic factors, as outlined by the cultural expressions such as tribal dances, including Santali dance, are significant cultural expressions that are changing over time. They are being played these days in the traditional village life and on national and international stages, maintaining the heritage with adaptations to a modern audience.

Ahmed, N. (2025) in the article, the Santals are one of the major tribes of India who have a rich cultural tradition of songs and dances. These performances are closely related to the festivals, daily life and cultural values. While education and technology have changed their way of living, traditional music and dance are still significant means of Santali identity and heritage.

Schleiter, M. (2014) In the article explains that Santali dance is an important part of Santal culture and identity. It connects people together at festivals and village celebration and maintains their traditions. While younger generations are shaped by films in the Santali language and by contemporary entertainment, the traditional dance remains a symbol of community, cultural pride and social solidarity.

Panigrahi, B., Oomaidurai, S., Kuddus, K., & Murmu, P. C. (2026) in their article emphasizes the significance of the Santali dance as an integral part of their oral and cultural tradition, which helps to maintain their culture, belief, and collective memory. It is practiced during festivals, rituals and gatherings of social groups to build cultural identity and to transfer knowledge from generation to generation. Its ongoing practice helps in sustaining the Santali heritage amidst the fast-changing society and culture.

Behera, D. H. (2025) The study emphasizes the role of Santali dance in preserving the cultural heritage of the Santal community, which is deeply intertwined with their religious beliefs, social cohesion, and historical background. These dances, once patronized by the local rulers, have been decreasing since modernisation and lifestyles change. The study highlights the importance of preserving it by engaging the community, educating, and raising awareness about it.

Saren, S. (2025) the study highlights that the Santali dance is a symbol of dignity, identity and cultural resistance of the community. In the Adivasi Will Not Dance it takes up the discussions around displacement, poverty and modernisation, and how these have affected the traditional performances. The dance is a protest against exploitation and it is a statement of the Santals' determination to keep their culture alive.

4. Research Methodology

This study adopts the qualitative ethnographic research approach. It is based on both primary and secondary sources. The study was carried out in Mayurbhanj district of Odisha, which is inhabited by a large number of Santal people. The study intends to know about the history of Lagne (Lagre) Dance, its cultural significance, performance and evolving and adapting styles of Lagne (Lagre) Dance.

4.1 Research Design

The study is conducted in an ethnographic research design and qualitative approach is used to gain insight into the culture of Lagne dance in its natural context. It involves the history of the dance, its performance, its significance in the Santal society and the current transformation of the same.

4.2 Sources of Data

4.2.1 Primary Sources

The Santal villages in Santal Pahar in Mayurbhanj district were visited in the field to gather information. The Data were collected through interactions with dancers, the village elders, musicians, and members of

the community.

4.2.2 Secondary Sources

Reference materials including books, research articles, journals, theses, government reports, and reputable websites were used to gather information.

These were the sources used for gaining insight into the historical context and previous research into Santali dance and culture.

4.3 Fieldwork and Ethnographic Observation

The researcher observed Lagne dance in festivals and gatherings at the community level. Dance movements, musical instruments, costumes, songs and involvement of various age groups were considered.

4.4 Data Collection Tools

The Semi-structured interviews were held with dancers, musicians and elders.

The Documentation of the dance and associated cultural practices included participant observation, field notes, photographs, and audio/video recordings.

4.5 Analytical Framework

The gathered data was organized based on the themes of history, cultural value, performing style and contemporary transformation. The results were analysed through ethnographic and cultural approach to articulate continuity and transformation of Lagne dance.

4.6 Limitations

The study is conducted in a few selected Santal villages in Mayurbhanj district and thus the result may not be applicable to other Santal communities. Field data were restricted due to limitations in number of participants, time of year, and seasonal festivals.

5. Research Gap

Apart from a few studies on Santali folk dance and tribal culture, the specific study on Lagne dance among Santal community of the Mayurbhanj district Odisha with the influence of modernization, urbanization and digital music including the creation of a new form of Lagne dance, namely DJ Lagne (Disco Lagne) remains under-researched. This study makes an attempt to address these lacunae as it provides an ethnographic and historical study on Lagne dance in Mayurbhanj district. It explains the traditional practices, explores the cultural significance of the dance and examines its continuity and change in the light of shifting social and cultural contexts.

6. Scope of the Study

This study is about 'Lagne (Lagre) dance' of the Santal community in Mayurbhanj district of Odisha, which presents the historical background, cultural importance, dance, music, song and costume of dance of the Santal community. The social role of Lagne as a community space for gathering, celebrating and interacting amongst young people is also discussed in this study. Also, it examines the changes of the dance in the years caused by the modernization and the effects of electronic music, which gave birth to DJ Lagne (Disco Lagne). Through ethnographic studies, the traditional and contemporary forms of Lagne dance are documented and the significance of this dance in maintaining the cultural identity and heritage of Santal community is highlighted.

7. The Dance as Culture

The Santali community has a rich ritual practice which is closely correlated with their social and religious context. The life cycle beginning with Janam Chhatiar purification ritual during childbirth and Chacho Chhatiar during adulthood, which allows one to perform in society rituals. The girl rites of passage are mainly focused on cleaning of home and weddings (Bapla) are done in a collective manner with different types including negotiation, elopement, or widows' remarriage. The Death rituals involve burial and cremation and then cleansing of the living to lose the spirit of the dead. On the religious level, Santals also worship gods in the sacred groves (jaher than), honour ancestral spirits in the household shrines (bhitar) and also celebrate such festivals as Saharai, Magh-sim, or Baha, which are strongly connected with nature⁹. In the Santali tradition, every happiest moment is celebrated. Whether it is the birth of a child or the celebration of any festival, the dance is connected every part of the rituals or festivals. But the sad part is that nowadays traditional musical instruments are not seen in the village. The People use sound boxes or DJ to celebrate their joyful moments or festival. I am not saying that people are forgetting to give importance to their culture, it's just that their interest is gradually decreasing. And sometimes, they perform the rituals of their village, they bring instruments from another village or borrow them from a musical instrument shop and return them after the ritual is over. It is true that the tribal community is slowly moving towards modernity but in their own carelessness, they are neglecting their culture.

8. Modern Changes and Adaptations

The santal community now face mix modern changes in their livelihood. With the advance of modernism and idea the santal civilisation filtered into the tribe both consciously and unconsciously¹⁰. The majority of santal followed Hindu religion¹¹. The early Santals known as 'Kharwars' they had helped Rama Chandra to win the battle of Lanka against Ravana. The huge number of santal declared themselves as 'Hindus' because such speeches were heard, "Sriram Chandra used bows and arrows as we do", and "Sri Krishna was dark like us and played on the flute and tended cattle as we do". So, why are we not Hindu? We are"¹². We are living in fast changing times¹³. But the santal peoples have the one special feature in them that they are learn to adjust himself to the influences of the civilisation¹⁴.

The purpose of writing this paper is that the 'Disco Lagne' dance is being promoted rapidly. The traditional Lagne dance has its own unique style, steps, and significance. But today's youths and people are competing with it everywhere, and other people are being pulled towards the new form. Although I haven't found anyone opposing this dance in written form, many people have opposed it on YouTube and internet pages. I have visited many places where Disco Lagne competitions are being held everywhere with big prizes like dressing tables, Godrej, TVs, coolers, sarees, gold earrings or nose pins, and fans, etc., being given away. Today's generation is excited for the occasion of Disco Lagne; that's why the cultural dance is being pulled towards modern disco dances. I would like to highlight through this paper that though dance is a very significant part of our culture but it must be accompanied by our own traditional music instruments both during the day and night events. The presentation of disco and DJ music undermines the culture of our performance but in addition, we run the risk of losing our young generation to what is not their natural

⁹ Ibid. pp.16-22.

¹⁰ Ibid. p.376.

¹¹ SIWAKOTI, S. Origin and History of the Santal Ethnic Group of Nepal. Seeta Siwakoti (Olee). p.2.

¹² Mukharjea, C. (1962 reprint in India 2017). The Santals. Gyan Publishing House. p.381.

¹³ Ibid. p.385.

¹⁴ Ibid. p.386.

heritage. Thus, the young people should be encouraged to perform dance and celebrate it in its traditional way.

9. Cultural Significance

The Santali folk dance 'Lagne enec' play a significant role in representing the identity of the Santali community and also reviving the indigenous knowledge of this communities. Over the year the Santali Lagne dance has undergone significant transformation. The 'Lagne dance' hold deep cultural meaning and it indicates the Santali traditions, values, and the identity of the community practice. It has been a medium of expression and bonding since it is based on rituals and social events. Today while the younger generations are mixing new aspects into the classic such as disco rhythms in the conventional one this development reveals how culture adapts to the altering times without losing its identity. The merging of old and new brings out the adaptability steps and movements of the Lagne dance. It has the ability to maintain the ancestral heritage and at the same time attract young people so that the tradition can be going on be still current and a living symbol of the continuation of culture.

10. Continuity in Modern days



The paper is focused what are the characteristics of a tribal dance in the modern day and what is the nature or its content. It explores the idea and changes of tribal Lagne dance also resistance to such connotations as 'Disco Lagne'

or 'DJ Lagne'. The type of dance known either as the 'Disco Lagne' or sometimes as 'Disco Enej' is a modern version of the folk dances of the Santali, hence its popularity and controversial nature among the community. The more traditional styles such as the Lagne, Dahra or Sahoray that follow a set, time-tested sequence of steps and costumes, Disco Lagne uses quicker and more energetic movements, sometimes inspired by modern, Bollywood, or disco styles and is often done to modernized music with heavy beat. This amalgamation is usually observed in the adapted costumes, which, although still containing some traditional details such as the Lagne (waist-cloth), often contain the eye-catching, even synthetic garlands of flowers, and more glamorous design, abandoning the simpler and more natural appearance of traditional Santali dress in other areas.



The Disco/DJ Lagne dances have been prohibited since the people feel that the contemporary changes on the dances undermine or disrespect the original cultural and spiritual meaning of the dances. Such dances frequently originated as religious ceremonies, seasonal dances or significant social customs. The old generation or the community elders who are the traditionalists feel that there has to be a time that this dancing should not be changed with time so they can honour their origin and uphold their sanctity. However, a large number of youths have a different opinion. To them, one of the means of preserving the dance is by modifying or modernizing the dance, making it easier to learn and enjoy, and more appealing to the contemporary social environment. In updating the style, the style of music presentation, they divorce the dance of its strictly ritualistic roots and convert it into something of a cultural heritage, which has come to labour in contemporary celebrations and events.



This has rendered the dance more accommodating and adaptable hence one can enjoy the dance in a party, festival, wedding or community event and not just in the ancient formal or religious rituals. Some arena the 'Disco Lagne' dance practice is banned because traditionalists dislike particularly when the youths are doing it in their social gatherings. The fact that the dance is still being used demonstrates that the dance is still a part of the cultural life, albeit in a modified form. This may be loss of purity but to another this may be a tradition that has been living with time. With modifications to the dance, the community can balance between the respect to tradition and the acceptance of the changes and the dance will survive not only as the object of the past but the living element of the present.

The present research findings are that the intangible tribal heritage of the Santal community of Mayurbhanj is still a solid source of cultural identity, collective memory and social solidarity despite the contemporary forces redefining the traditional customs. The dance of the Santals, especially the Lagne dance, serves as a living archive, which helps the Santals stay close to their ancestors, nature, and their spiritual values. Nevertheless, the fast proliferation of Disco Lagne has slowly started to change the culture particularly among the youths who now are so inclined to DJ music, sound systems, and competitive events that come with great prizes. There are also personal experience and observations that show that the modern version is becoming more popular nowadays at festivals, social gatherings, and online platforms, which dominates the traditional Lagne dance done with native instruments. Modernization brings the new ways of expression and it also has a threat of alienating the young generations to their true cultural background. Thus, this paper emphasizes the necessity of promoting the performances that will retain the musical remoteness of traditions, rhythms, and movement to make sure that the spirit of Santal tradition is not erased. Simultaneously, the paper acknowledges that culture does not remain the same, as the Santali young people explore new social realities, they remake traditions in such a way that they remain alive, relevant, and meaningful. The fact that heritage can be preserved and adapted can be demonstrated by the performance of Lagne dance on modern stages, in schools, and during cultural festivals. Its music,

costumes, and community still remain an image of unity, identity, and pride. So, the metamorphosis of Lagne dance shows that the intangible cultural heritage is capable of living and developing at the same time. The Santals will be able to preserve their cultural heritage and guarantee its preservation by other generations by appreciating the old forms yet appreciating the modern factors.

11. Conclusion

The traditional folk dance tries to show that the Santali youths are attempting to adopt their old tradition to new social realities. It is performed in villages during social events and festivals, and it is the demonstration of unity and closeness to nature. Its cultural meaning has not been lost in the modern world where it is mainly played in stages, in schools, and in cultural events, but it has become a part of identity and pride. This kind of transformation indicates that an intangible heritage such as dance can be conserved through re-presentation as it retains its rhythm, costume and communal ethos and it can also be offered to new audiences not part of the tribe. Through this Santal Lagne dance shows that heritage can be preserved and modified at the same time hence it is preserved and modern. This paper is an examines the history and change in the themes of Santali Lagne dance. It finds a gap in the early scholarly research on Lagne dance and the recording of indigenous performance traditions. Also, further the paper will help the researchers to comprehend the central themes, cultural background, and changes of the Lagne dance particularly in relation to its transition between traditional and contemporary versions. In spite of the fact that the study is not comprehensive enough to consider all the aspects of the topic, it offers important information regarding the historical evolution, cultural connotation, and the further ongoing progress of the Santali Lagne dance.

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