

## **Village Council on the Subsistence Practices of Santals: A Case of Tiakati Village in Jhargram District, West Bengal**

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### **Abstract**

Santals are the third largest Adivasi of India and are predominantly agriculturists since ages. They usually are settled in villages, which are regulated by village councils, and with the advent of time, many of them have shifted to other source of subsistence such as manual labouring, migrant labouring, daily-wage labouring, government and non- government services and business as well. The paper attempts to illuminate on what role the traditional village councils play to regulate the varied subsistence practices of the community. The paper primarily focuses on the findings from a village named Tiakati of Jhargram district. We reveal here that in the village, almost every affair is dictated by its village council, which has its office-bearers and all the villagers are its general members. The council observes various rituals in different periods of the year, many of which are directly related to agriculture economy. The council also renders the division of labour, labour-wages, and distribution of subsistence economy among villagers. Furthermore, as it imposes certain compulsions for the village community, it also releases some provisions for the villagers engaged in the subsistence activities other than agriculture. Undoubtedly, through such flexibilities in the council, Santals have learned to adapt to the ever-changing outer world though keeping their base in village-life.

**Keywords: Santals, village council, subsistence practices, agriculture, Jhargram**

### **Introduction**

*Adivasis*, officially known as Scheduled Tribes (STs) in India, are considered to be the earliest settlers of the country, numbering more than 700, and comprising about 8.6% of its population. They are concentrated in the areas, usually in villages, maintaining socio-cultural distance from the other population even today. For ages they have been dependent on varied subsistence

practices such as forest resource collection, hunting, fishing, rearing of animals, shifting hill cultivation, *jhum* cultivation and so on, though the majority of them are dependent on agriculture. With the advent of time, they have been involved to run petty businesses and as labourers in agricultural or non-agricultural fields (Bandhyopadhyay and Guha 2016: 128). In case of many Adivasis, life is regulated by a council which exists in the villages they live.

A village council is a governance system at the village level, which is more or less similar to the Panchayati Raj Institution initiated by the Government of India. It frames rules and regulations to maintain harmony among villagers, to bind its members together, and to maintain communal dignity. Examples of some notable councils among Adivasis are the Munda-Manki system among Hos, Majhi-Parganit system among Santals, Parha Raja system among Mundas and Oraons (Sharan et al 1999: 287), Gaon Darbar and Jat Darbar system among the Kawars, Mukhia system among the Pando (Danda 1971: 14), Tanda system among Birhors (Sinha 1999: 77), Parha panchayat or Kutum Sabha or Bhira system among Kharias (Ota et al 2020: 25), and the Bhil Panch among the Bhils (Solanki 2023: 10). In this paper, we will solely focus on the Majhi-Parganait system of Santals and the role it plays at village level in terms of the subsistence practice of the community.

Santals, having a total world population of 7.5 million, are the third largest Adivasi of India after Gond and Bhil, and are predominately distributed in the states West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand, Assam and Tripura (Kisku 2017: 24; Ota and Patnaik 2020:4). Outside India, they live in Bangladesh and Nepal (Kisku 2020: 70). The language they speak is Santali; they usually are bilingual and speak the language of the state they live in beside their own language. They have their own script *Ol Chiki*, invented by a Santali writer and educator Pandit Raghunath Murmu. Santals are mainly agriculturists, but they also collect food and hunt animals in the nearby forests and do fishing in their nearby ponds, rivers, and streams (Sinha 2020; Hamsuddoha and Jahan 2018: 89). They also rear animals such as cows, goats, sheep, hen, pigs, oxen, buffaloes, cats and dogs in their houses and grow millet, maize, and some vegetables in their homestead lands. In recent times, they have adopted, though only in limited extent, different agricultural methods such as the application of crop rotation, irrigation, and use of fertilizers and pesticides to increase the crop yield (Sinha 2020).

Traditionally, in every village Santals live, they form a village council known as *Ato more hor* or *Sholo Aana* (Pinku 2020: 41). Though all the villagers are its members, there are certain office bearers in the form of *Majhi*- the head of the village, *Jog Majhi*- the head of the youth, *Paranik*- the assistant to the headman, *Godet*- the messenger, *Naike*- the priest, and *Kudem Naike*- the priest of the backyard (Soni 2000: 115; Soni 2001: 120; Soren and Jamir 2021: 79). The council resolves disturbances and disputes, supervises transmission and distribution of property, organizes deity worships and festivals, and takes the main responsibility in birth, marriage, death, divorce, and other village level affairs (Baskey 1987: 186; Murmu 2001: 31). This paper illuminates on the role it plays in controlling the subsistence practices of Santals with reference to a village named Tiakati of Jhargram district, West Bengal.

### **The Tiakati Village and its Village Council**

The Tiakati village comes under the Badhagora Gram Panchayat, Jhargram Community Development Block, and Jhargram police station of Jhargram district, West Bengal. It is situated in a remote area, about 6 kilometers away from the nearest one but district town Jhargram, although a small railway station named Banstala railway station is situated about 2.8 kilometers away. The village is surrounded by forest areas, although not isolated from neighboring villages. Two villages namely Joyanagar and Lalbana are situated in its north, Hudhudi and Ghagra Bhola villages are in the south, Banstala and Tukrudhula villages are in the east and Panisol and Sushnigerya villages are located in the west.

The forest with which the village is surrounded by is known as Joynagar forest. For each of the neighbouring villages, including the Tiakati village, there are separate demarcated areas to protect through West Bengal government created Forest Protection Committees (FPCs). There is one Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) centre and one primary school in this village. For education beyond the primary level, the children go to Jhargram Kumud Kumari Institution located around 9 kilometers away. For higher education, the nearest college is Jhargram Raj College situated about 10 kilometers away and Sadhu Ramchanda Murmu University is located approximately 15 kilometers away from the village. The villagers primarily rely on ethno-medicines collected from the forest to treat common diseases but for complex medical cases, they either consult doctors in the town or go to the Jhargram Super Speciality Hospital, located about 10 kilometers away.

Two communities namely Santals and Kamars are the inhabitants of the village. Though they live in the same village, these two communities are concentrated in separate hamlets and differ from each other in terms of their house types, education, occupation, and cultural practices. There are ten households of Kamar community, who traditionally are blacksmiths. The Santals living in the village are distributed in sixty four households, comprising a total population of two hundred forty six and men and women are almost of equal ratio. In this paper, we have only dealt with the Santals of the village.



Tiakati village Map



Jhargram District Map

This village has a traditional village council which looks after the social, economic, and religious life and the rituals from birth to death of the villagers. The traditional village council is responsible for fixing the days of festivals, settling disputes and maintaining social norms in the village. The village council is called *Ato More Hor*, of which the office bearers are *Majhi, Jog Majhi, Paranik, Naike, Godet and Kudem Naike*.

The *Majhi* of the village is Rajaram Murmu, who is a daily labourer by his profession and also is an agriculturist, cultivating a small amount of land. He is the first person to be informed in any matter concerning the villagers and he convenes meeting and settles matters in discussion with rest of the villagers. Tagal Murmu is the *Jog Majhi* in this village. He is an agriculturist and ekes out his living on cultivating lands. He is responsible to observe the moral character of the unmarried boys and girls in the village. He also conducts dances in the events such as *Sahrai* and *Karam*. Ramchandra Saren, another agriculturist, holds the post of *Paranik*. He is the assistant to the *Majhi* and presides over meetings and performs other responsibilities in the absence of the latter. Bhujoram Baskey is also an agriculturist and holds the post of *Godet*. He is responsible for calling the villagers by visiting everyone's houses in the village, upon the instruction from the *Majhi*. The *Naike* of the village is Ranjeet Murmu, who acts as a priest during the worship of deities performed in the village sacred grove or elsewhere. Ideally, though the posts of office bearers are not hereditary, it is a common practice that the sons of the office bearers receive the posts in absence or in case of death of the office bearers.

In the Tiakati village, meetings are termed according to the topics that are to be discussed, for example, *Magh Sim*, *Baha Bonga*, *Mak More*, *Asharia*, *Janthar* and *Sahrai* and so on. The place in the village, where meetings are held is called *Aakhra*. Besides, meetings are also held in the houses of villagers on the matters related to birth, marriage, and death ceremonies. Furthermore, in case of conflicts between two villagers, village council meeting is held in the houses of either party.

### **Occupational Diversity of the Villagers**

Tiakati villagers cultivate only paddy and only once in a year, which is sown in the month of June-July and harvested in September-October. Some of the different varieties of paddy they cultivate are *Sarno*, *Badshabhog*, *Nilanjana*, *Baby One* and *Hazar Ek*. Some of the villagers also grow vegetables in their high lands during the winter that includes potatoes, tomatoes, turnips, gourds, pumpkins and bitter gourds.

Table 1: Amount of Landholding of the households of Tiakati village

Amount of Land (in <i>Bigha</i> )	No. of Households
Less than 1	14
1-2	14
2-3	5
3-4	1
4-5	3
5 more	2

Table 1 shows that the maximum number of households of the village possessing 2 bighas (1.25 acre) of cultivable lands or less. Five households possess 2 to 3 bighas (1.87 acre) of land, one household possess 3 to 4 bighas (2.50 acre), 3 households have 4 to 5 bighas (3.12), and only two households have more than 5 bighas of land. Understandably, considering the amount of land they have and as they cultivate only once in a year, it is not sufficient to secure food for them the year round. Villagers, especially women, thus frequently go to the forest to collect different resources. They collect leaves from the forest and make plates to sell them in the market.

Table 2: Primary and secondary occupational diversity of the people of Tiakati village

Primary and Secondary Occupations	Male	Female	Total
Dependents	(11.29%) 14 [5.69%]	(6.55%) 8 [3.25%]	22 [8.94%]
Students	(21.77%) 27 [10.97%]	(22.13%) 27 [10.97%]	54 [21.95%]
Agriculturists	(9.67%) 12 [8.67%]	(55.73%) 68 [27.64%]	80 [32.52%]
Daily labourers	(45.96%) 57 [23.17%]	-	57 [23.17%]
House hold work	-	(7.37%) 9 [3.65%]	9 [3.65%]
Govt. Service holder	(7.25%) 9 [3.65%]	(0.81%) 1 [0.40%]	10 [4.06%]
Old Age Allowance	(4.03%) 5 [2.03%]	(7.37%) 9 [3.65%]	14 [5.69%]
Total	(100) 124 [50.40%]	(100) 122 [49.59%]	246 [100]

( ) - Percentage in respect to column total. [ ] - Percentage in respect to grand total.

The table 2 presents the occupational diversity of the villagers of Tiakati which took into consideration both primary and secondary occupations. The primary occupations provide their main source of income, whereas secondary occupations supplement their main income and subsistence. Agriculture is the main occupation of the Tiakati village (32.52% of the total population). Most of the villagers cultivate on their land and occasionally work on others' agricultural lands in the village. A good percentage (23.17% of the total village population) of them works as daily labourers in the near town of Jhargram and it is only the males (45.96% of the total male population). Some males are found to be getting Old Age Allowance (4.03% of the total population) from the Government of West Bengal, and some are government service holders (7.25% of the total male population). The females members are primarily agriculturists (55.73% of the total population), besides being engaged in household work and collection of forest products such as Sal leaves and firewood. Only one woman was found to be having government service who works in an ICDS centre.

Apart from the above mentioned occupations, the villagers also rear livestock, including cows, bullocks, buffaloes, goats, pigs, ducks and hens. Pets such as dogs and cats are also found in most households. The relationship between the villagers and their animals is emotional, economic, subsistence, and religious in nature. Bullocks and buffaloes are used for ploughing the fields and pulling carts, while goats, pigs and hens are kept for consumption, sale and religious sacrifice purpose. Pigs, in particular are domesticated the most for sale and sacrifice.

### **Village Council in Regulating the Occupations**

From the above discussion, it is clear that agriculture is the main occupation in this village, at least in terms of practice. However, as observed, maximum number of villagers have a less amount of cultivable lands, thus in terms of dependency, they are more inclined towards daily laboring in the Jhargram town, collect consumable resources from the nearby forest, hold government jobs, and occasionally hunt to sustain their livelihood. A number of worships and festivals are performed throughout the year in the village to mark various stages of the village-level subsistence activities, particularly agriculture, hunting, and forest resource collection.

Santal communal gods namely *Marang Buru*, *Jaher Era*, *Moreko Turuiko*, *Purudhul*, *Sima Bonga* and so on are worshipped at the village level. All the dates for these worships and festivals are fixed through meeting of the village council in *aakhra*, a common meeting place of the village. All the deity worships and festivals are performed under the supervision of the village council, where participation of all the villagers, at least one member from each household, is mandatory. Absence without valid reason leads to fine levied in the form of money or an earthen pot full of *handi*, a traditional alcoholic drink of Santals.

A Santal calendar begins in the month of *Magh* (January- February) with the worship of *Magh Sim* in the village sacred grove. Through this worship, simply the well-being of the villagers throughout the year is prayed. On the very next day of this worship, an annual general meeting called *Magh Megh* is convened where one man and one woman from every household is mandatory. Through this meeting, the village council of previous year is dissolved and the office bearers formally surrender their post through verbal information before the villagers. New office bearers are elected through mutual consent or very often old ones are reelected. Important pending matters are resolved and rules and regulations in village are set for the whole year. Within the village, the labour rate for agriculture work and other services, the salary of council members, the rate of selling pork within the village, and the customary amount of *handi* required on the birth, marriage, and death ceremonies are fixed through this meeting. For example, for the current year in the village, the amount of *handi* to be given by the host to the village council during a marriage ceremony was fixed to 12 *tukujh* (a type of earthen pot for a long time have been used to cook rice, now only used to prepare and store *handi*). Further, some villagers sell another type of liquor called *poura* (made of *mohua* flower) to get extra income even to run their families, and the time for selling it in the village is not beyond 8 PM.

Since the observance of *Magh Sim* certain activities such as plucking new leaves and flowers, eating fresh fruits, collection of forest resources, and hunting and also some other activities such as building a new house, roofing of a house, fencing around a house, and negotiating a marriage alliance are prohibited in this village until the performance of *Baha Bonga* in the month of *Fagun* (February - March). *Baha Bonga* is both a worship of deities as well as a festival for the



villagers. is celebrated. In this village, it is observed for three days consisting *Um Maha* or the day of preparation, *Sardi Maha* - the actual day of observance, and *Baske Maha* i.e. the day after celebration. *Sardi Maha* is performed through going to the Joynagar forest for a ceremonial hunting, the collection of new flowers and leaves, and offering them to the deities. It is followed by a grand feast in the village sacred grove, song and dances, and people in joking relationship drench each other with water. This festival marks the welcoming of the spring season by the villagers and may be related to the observance of *Holi* festival by the Hindus in India. However, what makes it distinct is, after the observance of *Baha Bonga*, the prohibitions are withdrawn for the villagers. The whole festival is performed under the supervision of the village council.

Hunting may once has been an important part of Santal livelihood, nowadays its frequency has declined and now it is mostly ceremonial. The men of Tiakati village, besides hunting in the Joynagar forest during *Baha Bonga* and sometimes also participate in the communal hunting festival of *Ajodhya Buru Sendra* which takes place in the month of Fagun (February-March) at the Ajodhya hill range of Purulia district, West Bengal. Some other such festivals take place in the region such as Borya Bir Sendra, Vuju Bir Sendra, and so on where the men of Tiakati participate. There are certain important rituals and regulations and also there are certain roles of village council of such hunting festivals, which may be an important topic of discussion in another article.

The resources available in the Joynagar forest play a major role in the livelihood of this village. Even, in the days of scarcity, the villagers survive by collecting and selling forest fruits, roots, and firewood. Besides, villagers also earn by selling Sal leaves and Kendu leaves in the market to buy essential items like oil, salt and spices for their daily needs. As mentioned earlier, this collection of forest resources is also regulated by the village council. Furthermore, a significant number of the villagers of Tiakati village earn their livelihood by working as daily labourers. Though they cultivate paddy on their own lands during the cultivation season and once in a year from depending on the rain water, they also work as labourers on others' lands. For the present year, the village council has a fixed rate for agricultural laboring within the village, which is two hundred rupees per day for men and one hundred fifty rupees per day for women. Rupees three hundred has been fixed for ploughing others' the land within the village. During the months of

the year, when there is no cultivation, they work as a daily wage labourers in the Jhargram town. Some of them even migrate to other states such as Jharkhand, Tamil Nadu, Karnatak and so on to work as labourers in building and road constructions.

Some villagers of Tiakati are government employees in the sectors such as police department, ICDS centre, railway, and the agriculture department of West Bengal. Some of them also work as drivers of private vehicles. Because of their nature of work, they often are not able to participate in the village level affairs and meetings of the village council, but their membership in the village council never ends. The service holders who live outside the village because of their employment are required to attend the *Magh Megh*. For this year, an annual monetary contribution of rupees 1200 has been fixed for the village festivals. Further, they are bound to accept the decisions of the council which are made from time to time, though their opinions are heard when they return to the village and attend the meetings.

The villagers perform certain rituals for their agricultural practices, which are determined by the traditional village council in the village. For example, with the first rain of monsoon and before the sowing season begins, *Erok Sim*, a worship of deities is performed in the village sacred grove, called *Jaher*, with a prayer of sufficient rain throughout the cultivation period. Then, before transplanting the paddy saplings, they perform another worship called *Asharia* in the month of *Ashar* (June-July). This worship is performed in the midst of agricultural fields with prayers to ensure good farming and the protection of crops. Once the paddy is ripen, before harvesting their crops, the villagers perform a deity worship called *Janthar* in the month of *Agrayan* (November-December). When the paddy has been harvested and villagers have sufficient food at their home, there comes *Sahrai*, a festival observed in the month of *Poush* (December-January). *Sahrai* is considered to be the largest festival and continues for five days. It begins with deity worships in the sacred grove called *Got Jom*, which is performed in appreciation and well wishes for domesticated animals, for the service they have provided during the cultivation, followed by different kinds of celebrations and ample food.

The year ends with the performance of a ritual called *Yugni Betyao*. Through the ritual, the villagers symbolically ward off evil spirits and diseases from the village. On the night before its performance, women of each house disown used household items such as broom, broken basket,

broken earthen pot and so on and assemble items in village road in front of their houses. The men of the village, led by *Kudam Naike*, collect these items in the late night and go to the Joynagar forest to throw them away. In the forest, they set free a black chick, which symbolizes the evil deity of the village. Throughout the day, the men collect ethnomedicines and return home only in the dusk. On the next, the ethnomedicines are distributed from the house of the *Majhi* to each household of the village and for consecutive three days, the villagers abstain from consuming non-vegetarian food.

### **Conclusion**

The paper attempts to illuminate the role of the traditional village council in regulating the varied subsistence practices of the Santal community of Tiakati village. This study also highlighted how traditional customs and modern subsistence practices coexist together. The principal occupation of the villagers and the primary source of subsistence is undoubtedly agriculture. However, the amount of cultivable lands the villagers have is not sufficient to yield crop that would ensure food throughout the year. Thus agriculture is supplemented by daily labouring, collection of forest resources, and hunting. The village also has a number of government service holders. The traditional village council, known as the *Ato More Hor*, consisting of *Majhi*, *Paranik*, *Jog Majhi*, *Naike* and *Godet*, plays a significant role in regulating and maintaining these activities, except the subsistence practices performed outside the village such as daily labouring and government service.

The study further revealed that influence of the village council goes beyond modulating the subsistence practices; rather it is entrusted with solving village-level disputes, organizing festivals, and observing rituals. Despite the gradual shift from agriculturists towards non-agricultural occupations and the migration of many villagers for employment, the village council of Tiakati village has been able to maintain its authority and uphold the traditional customs and practices. Festivals such as *Magh Sim*, *Baha*, *Mak More*, *Asaria*, *Janthar* and *Sahrai*, are not only celebrated in connection to agriculture but also to strengthen the communal bond among the villagers. During the *Magh Megh*, in the annual general meeting held on the day after the observance of *Magh Sim* worship, the village council fixes the rates of all the payments which will be made within the village and between the villagers including the salary of permanent

service providers, daily labour in agricultural field or in household, the rate at which pork is to be sold, and so on. The amount with which common villagers and government employees of the village will contribute towards the observance of village festivals is also fixed in the *Magh Megh*. On other meetings held in different period of a year resolving different issues, the village council ensures the participation of all its village members during all village level observances and festivals, failing which often monetary fines are levied. The ways of functioning of village council in the Tiakati village further shed light on the adaptability of Santals in the face of external changes and strongly propagate that the traditional self-governance system, state run governance system and modern economic development and co-exist together.

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