



## **POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND PARTICIPATION OF SANTHAL COMMUNITY IN POST INDEPENDENCE MIDNAPORE DISTRICT – A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS**

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### **RESEARCH ARTICLE**



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### **Abstract**

The Santal community, one of the largest tribal groups in India, has a rich history of socio-political movements, particularly in regions like Midnapore, West Bengal. Post-independence, their political consciousness and mobilization have been shaped by both historical legacies and the socio-economic and political changes introduced in independent India. This abstract examines the evolution of the Santal community political awareness and organization in Midnapore, focusing on key developments and their implications. Historically, the Santals have been associated with resistance movements, notably the Santal Rebellion (1855-56) against colonial exploitation. This legacy of struggle created a strong collective identity, which laid the foundation for their post-independence political mobilization. However, the period after 1947 presented a new set of challenges and opportunities for the Santals. While the Indian Constitution provided legal safeguards for Scheduled Tribes (ST), including reservations in political representation and education, systemic socio-economic disparities, and marginalization continued to plague the community. In Midnapore, the Santals faced exploitation in agriculture, where they worked as laborers, and displacement due to development projects. These issues, coupled with limited access to education and healthcare, spurred political awakening. Various political parties and organizations sought to mobilize the Santals, often using their grievances as a rallying point. The Communist movement, which had a strong presence in West Bengal, played a significant role in organizing Santals in Midnapore, particularly around land rights and labor issues. The Naxalite movement of the 1960s further influenced Santal political consciousness, as many tribal youths were drawn to its revolutionary rhetoric. At the same time, identity politics began to play an increasingly significant role in Santal mobilization. These movements emphasized cultural preservation, land rights, and political representation, aligning with the aspirations of the Santal community.

**Keywords:** *Santal, Consciousness, Political participation, Election, Midnapore, West Bengal*

### **Introduction**

The Santal community, one of the largest indigenous groups in India. The Santals, the largest Austro-asiatic group in India, known for their rebellion of 1855, have a long tradition of exploitation and migration. With the hul<sup>1</sup> the Santal chiefs become socio-historical subjects, as rebels against the empire. Post-independence, the Santals have navigated a complex political landscape, particularly in Midnapore, West Bengal. This research aims to explore the historical context that has shaped the political identity of the Santal community in Midnapore since 1947. Historically, the Santals have been known for their agricultural practices and vibrant cultural heritage. However, their journey toward political consciousness began during the colonial era, particularly with the Santal Rebellion of 1855-56, led by prominent figures like Sidhu and Kanhu Chand and Bhairva.<sup>2</sup> This rebellion was a reaction to exploitative land policies and oppressive taxation imposed by British authorities and local zamindars. The Santals sought to reclaim their autonomy and resist the encroachment on their lands, marking a pivotal moment in their collective identity formation. The legacy of this rebellion continues to resonate within the community, influencing their contemporary political aspirations and mobilization efforts. This research will analyze how historical events have influenced the political consciousness of the Santal community in Midnapore post-independence. By examining key movements, leadership dynamics, and socio-political contexts, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the Santals have mobilized politically to address their aspirations for autonomy and recognition.

### **Aim and objectives**

1. Tracing the political development of Santals in Medinipur district after independence.
2. To assess how the legacy of the freedom struggle influenced post-independence political ideologies and activities in the Medinipur district.
3. To study the role played by political parties, local leaders, and social organizations in shaping the district's political landscape.

**Methodology:** This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods to gather comprehensive data on the impact of santhal community.

### **Political Participation**

The concept of political participation has illustrious lineages, starting from Aristotle to Rousseau, Mill and John Dewey down to contemporary political thinkers. Political scientists like Sidney Verba, Schlozman, Brady, and Nieckel of political participation as mechanism through which needs and preferences of citizens are communicated to political decision-makers.<sup>3</sup> Contemporary democratic theorists like Carole Pateman and Benjamin Barber have argued in favour of participatory or strong democracies, in which the ordinary citizen is more fully involved in the decision-making process. This could be done by strengthening local democracy so that citizens are involved in community affairs and social movements. Advocates of participatory democracy generally follow Mill in attaching importance to civic education as a way of creating a more active and politically engaged citizenry.<sup>4</sup> In India, Mahatma Gandhi, M.N Roy and Jay Prakash Narayan had advocated their ideas about participatory democracy.<sup>5</sup> Advocates of such participation belong to two categories one views participation as a means to achieve institutional efficiency and the other which sees participation as furthering the goals of empowerment, equity and democratic government.<sup>6</sup>

### **Electoral Politics and Political Participation**

The election is a key element of democracy and mass voting by the people is usually associated with the concept of participatory democracy. Elections are the major agents of political socialization where different issues are raised and in this way, elections serve as an instrument of political communication in the society.<sup>7</sup> Elections have adopted the principle of universal adult franchise and democratic rule after a long-time of evolution. Elections are central to the functioning of modern democracy.

Democracy today implies not governed by the people, which is impossibility but effective control over Government by the people. Elections constitute the principal mechanism for exercising this control and it is this that gives special significance to them. Elections determine who should come into power and carry on the government of the country. They are held periodically and those who come to power as a result of one general election hold office only till the next general election. It is through this power of electoral decision that people exercise control over the government and the broad lines of the policy pursued by it. Elections give legitimacy or a valid title to rule to the government in a democracy.

**Tribal Participation:** Recognising that Panchayati Raj institutions have provided avenues for creation of social and administrative infrastructure, the term tribal participation has been used in terms of :

- (a) economic benefits flowing from economic schemes,
- (b) voluntary contribution made by the people in cash or kind,
- (c) participation in different kinds of community activities, and
- (d) participation in the elections of different offices of Panchayati Raj.

The approach is essentially to examine the level of tribal participation in such activities and/or interaction with government agencies which have direct or indirect bearing on the functioning of the state.<sup>8</sup>

### **Growth of Political Consciousness Santhal Community**

As a corollary to over all socio-cultural changes, a marked change in the political desires and aspirations of the Santals can also be noticed in the years following independence. Santals today are taking active part in all political activities from the grassroots to the national level. As such, the issue of political consciousness of the Santals is a factor to reckon with.

It is necessary to admit that the Santals are no novice in the field of politics. Their participation in the historical battles against the Raj, itself lends testimony to the fact that they were very active in the field of politics long before the general political consciousness among Indian masses appeared in the horizon. A scholar like Dilip Soren even goes to the length of saying that the freedom movement of India and even the very consciousness of freedom were conceived in the womb of the Santal revolt. He thinks that the Santhal revolt in actuality started in the year 1780 led by Tilka Murmu much earlier than the great Santal Rebellion of 1855-1856.<sup>9</sup>

But it is true that electoral politics is something that the Santals had not experienced much during the colonial rule. After independence ever since India has developed into a stable democracy, election at various levels seem to gather importance.

Bidhan Sabha, Lok Sabha, and Panchayat are the three levels of Indian political system based on people's election. Tribals constituting an important section of Indian population have shown their increased level of political consciousness by participating in these elections. Among tribals we generally find four categories of voters in the villages and in towns like apathetics, peripherals/ spectators, auxiliaries and politicians.<sup>10</sup> Apathetics are literally unaware of the political situation around them. They do not even vote or show any interest in voting. These kinds of persons generally exist among landless agricultural labourers in the tribal society. Spectators or peripheral voters may have some interest in politics and some knowledge about it but their participation does not go beyond voting. Auxiliaries embrace those who vote and engage in one or two activities with medium level interest and information. Their activities include attending political meetings, campaigning in favour of a particular party and also to vote. The final category i.e., the politicians are the most active of all the groups during elections. They either stand themselves as candidates or remain busy in holding public meetings or doing other acts for mobilizing people in favour of a candidate of his party.

Anadi Kumar Mahapatra<sup>11</sup> has worked extensively on the nature of political participation of the Santals in some villages in Midnapore district during Bidhan Sabha, Lok Sabha, and Panchayat elections of 1977-1978. In his study he has shown that the nature of participation of the Santals in all three levels of elections was not uniform. Even consciousness and interest with regard to political activities seemed to differ among different members of their community. According to him, political participation depends on several variables like education, occupation, income, sex, age, and religion. Particularly education and income are considered to be most important ingredient for determining the degree of political participation. Further he states that the Bidhan Sabha and Lok Sabha elections of 1977-1978 had drawn little interest among the Santals as they were contested over issues and problems of international, national and provincial level.<sup>12</sup> The candidates contesting in these elections too did not bear any direct relation with the people living in the villages. So it was the Panchayat election that really made the Santals interested.

This is supposed to be true to elections held in subsequent years as well. Since Panchayat elections are held at village level and the contesting candidates normally belong to the areas where elections take place, Santals are found to take part in these elections more actively than in other levels of elections.

### **Panchayat Impact on Political Participation**

In the post-independence period, the inauguration of statutory panchayats also gave a setback to the traditional tribal panchayats. The introduction of community development programs had already changed the situation to a great extent. Persons close to the officials thereby found ample opportunity to become local leaders. Educational programs in the tribal areas increased the number of educated youth who started taking an interest in village politics. Elections on all Indian level also affected them and the result was the growth of factions and parties in the villages, (tribal villages were no exception), the formation of regional parties and so on.

The notions of the general election, community development programmes, panchayat election, etc. were entirely new to the tribes. A few intelligent and newly educated individuals tried to utilize every opportunity to push themselves to get into leadership positions and thus competing politicians emerged as new village leaders, posing a threat to the traditional authority structure in tribal India.

The local political system in India has thus undergone significant, changes since 1947. The Constitution enlarged restricted franchises and introduced universal adult franchises. This made a tremendous impact on village India. The rural masses, including tribals, suddenly became a significant determinant of Indian politics, leading in turn, to the politicization of political sections of the Indian community which can be regarded as an index of major social change. This does not mean that by the mere introduction of an adult franchise the traditional village society has been democratized.

<b>PANCHAYAT ELECTION - MIDNAPORE DISTRICT, 1993</b>						
<b>ITEMS</b>	<b>Zilla Parishad</b>		<b>Panchayat Samiti</b>		<b>Gram Panchayat</b>	
<b>TOTAL MEMBERS</b>	108		1494		9040	
<b>S.T. MEMBERS</b>	7	6.48%	91	6.09%	482	5.33%
<b>S.T. WOMEN'S MEMBERS</b>	3	42.85%	61	67.03%	356	73.85%

Source: "Information on West Bengal Panchayats", State Institute of Panchayat and Rural Development, Govt. of West Bengal, Kalyani, (Nadia), 1997, pp. 137-147.<sup>13</sup>

PANCHAYAT ELECTION - MIDNAPORE DISTRICT, 1998						
ITEMS	Zilla Parishad		Panchayat Samiti		Gram Panchayat	
<b>TOTAL MEMBERS</b>	108		1295		7188	
<b>S.T. MEMBERS</b>	10	9.25%	123	9.49%	664	9.23%
<b>S.T. WOMEN'S MEMBERS</b>	2	20%	46	37.39%	304	45.78%

Source: "Information on West Bengal Panchayats", State Institute of Panchayat and Rural Development, Govt. of West Bengal, Kalyani, (Nadia), 1997, pp. 137-147.

PANCHAYAT ELECTION - MIDNAPORE DISTRICT, 2003						
ITEMS	Zilla Parishad		Panchayat Samiti		Gram Panchayat	
<b>TOTAL MEMBERS</b>	(E + W) 114		(E + W) 1337		(E + W) 7553	
<b>S.T. MEMBERS</b>	7	6.14%	129	9.64%	685	9.06%
<b>S.T. WOMEN'S MEMBERS</b>	3	42.85%	46	35.65%	229	39.27%

Source: Paschimbanger Sastha Panchayat Nirbachan, 2003, Tathya O Samikha, Kolkata, 2004, pp. 20-23.<sup>15</sup>

### Conclusion

Tribal participation in Midnapore district, however, exhibits an increasing trend. In 1993 the percentage of tribal candidates out of total candidates including castes candidates in three tiers namely Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samiti, and Zilla Parishad in the Midnapore district were 5.33%, 6.09%, and 6.48% respectively. The same figures in 1998 were 9.23%, 9.49% and 9.25% while in 2003 they were 9.06%, 9.64% and 6.14% respectively. The percentages of women candidates out of total tribal candidates in the three Panchayat elections here were 73.85%, 67.03% and 42.85% in 1993, 45.78%, 37.39%, and 20% in 1998 and 39.27%, 35.65% and 42.85% in 2003 respectively. Thus, while the over all tribal participation in the Panchayat elections in Midnapore district has increased over the years, the number of female participants has gone down remarkably.

However, it is necessary to mention here that the depiction of the number of tribal candidates who came out victorious in different Panchayat elections as mentioned above does not always reflect the real nature of political participation of the Santals in the villages. Because persons who work tirelessly for the success of the party, mobilize people, organize mass meetings and participate in campaigning to ensure victory of their candidates do not figure anywhere in the poll review or assessment by stalwarts. So we cannot get the exact figure of the persons involved in the entire show. Nor is it possible to know what all maneuverings and mobilizations are resorted to by people till the approach of the final day of election. Of course, a field survey as the one undertaken by Anadi Kumar Mahapatra (mentioned above) may reveal the ground level reality of Santal participation in the Panchayat elections. But since it is outside the scope of the present study, it can be presumed that repeated attempts of mobilizations by cadres of different political parties and their performances in the past years generally count in establishing the credibility of the contesting parties and the tribals are also influenced by these factors.

But what is striking is that Santals nowadays are showing signs of political consciousness in no uncertain terms than others in the society. They are quite conscious about their own welfare; class position and voting right, which get particularly manifest during election times. As Anadi Kumar Mahapatra states "Survey work on the eve of the Panchayat election revealed that class identity and class consciousness were very much prevalent among the respondents. Even an illiterate Santal woman respondent went to the length of identifying them as working class and the researcher and his associates as 'babu class' people.<sup>16</sup> Needless to say, that this rising political consciousness has imparted a new dimension to their sense of identity.

However, there is one more side to this participation of the tribals in the Panchayat elections. The Planning Commission and the National Council accepted this statutory Panchayat system as an integral part of the community development programme in 1958.<sup>17</sup> Now it acts as important machinery for implementation of various central and state government plans for rural and tribal development. The participation of the tribals in the Panchayat elections give them both knowledge and experience about various central and state government schemes for tribal development. It thus, ensures on the one hand their development as a community and on the other facilitates their assimilation with the neighbouring non-tribal communities. Modern Panchayat, thus, acts, apart from developing a power structure at the grassroots level, as a means to involve greater number of people from below for both setting and executing plans for rural development in the society.

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