

Exploring Vulnerabilities of Santal Communities as Plainland Ethnic Minority in Northern Bangladesh

Md. Adil Ibne Sifat

Abstract

This research explores the vulnerabilities of the Santal communities, a marginalized ethnic group in northern Bangladesh, focusing on challenges like limited access to education, employment, debt bondage, and the impact of 'structural development' on their culture and livelihood. Historically subjected to discrimination, the Santals continue to face restricted access to basic rights such as land ownership, and education. The study uses a qualitative approach with ethnographic interviews and archival data to explore how systemic marginalization and cultural disruption affect the community. Findings reveal that land alienation and exploitative labor conditions have entrenched poverty, while external interventions have led to some improvements in income and social status. However, these positive changes often come at the cost of traditional livelihoods and cultural identity. The paper highlights the need for inclusive policies to address land rights, labor exploitation, and culturally sensitive education to ensure their socio-economic and cultural sustainability in a modernizing context.

Keywords: Santal Community, Debt Bondage, Land Dispossession, Socio-Economic Marginalization, Structural Development

Introduction & Background

The Santal people are among the oldest indigenous groups in Bangladesh, tracing their origins back to pre-Aryan times (Akan et al. 2015) and primarily residing in the northern regions of the country, including Rajshahi, Dinajpur, and Rangpur. Historically, the Santals are believed to have migrated from the Santal Parganas in India during the 19th century, when they sought employment opportunities, especially in labor-intensive work such as the construction of railway tracks and agricultural labor during the British colonial period (Hossain 2008). Over time, they became settled in these northern districts, where they now form a significant indigenous community.

MD. ADIL IBNE SIFAT, Former Post Graduate Student, Department of Anthropology, Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Email: sifat2592@gmail.com