Before the advent of British rule in India, the Santal society was isolated, segmental and egalitarian in nature. Everywhere, the Santals possessed broadly similar cultures and social structures. But their society was not so static, as is commonly believed by many. Rather, contrary to popular assumption, it was mobile and dynamic and had experienced major social, political and economic changes through ages. The fact, that the society of the tribals, including that of the Santals, survived the test of time and has been capable of maintaining its existence even today, itself lends testimony to the changeable and dynamic character of their society. But lack of sources and absence of references to adivasi culture in the existing pre-colonial literature in India has, in fact, arrested the understanding of the pre-colonial adivasi society in its true perspective. However, if not in details, some stray references of cultural contact between the adivasis and the Hindus in pre-colonial India are available. It is believed that "for the Mundas and Oraons, primarily as a result of the emergence of the Raja and of traditional landlords, and for the Santals because of migration into predominantly Hindu regions", this cultural contact became possible.¹

Under British colonial rule, the village society of the Santals lost its isolated and egalitarian character. Santals had to pay revenue hitherto unknown to them, following introduction of the Permanent Settlement (1793) in Bengal. Intensification of imperial interests in their lands, further subjected them to various forms of exploitations. Land passed increasingly into private hands, customary rights over forests curtailed and the debt trap of the mahajans (local moneylenders) over them, now, perpetuated like never before. There appeared lots of other changes in the life of the Santals, including breaking up of the mandali system, all of which had adversely affected their existence. The emergence of Kherwar movement since the second half of the 19th century, further reflected cracks in their cultural integrity as well. Thus, by the end of the colonial rule, the Santals appeared to have come at the receiving end of their identity and existence.

¹ John, MacDougall., Land or Religion ?, New Delhi, Manohar Publishers, 1985, p. 17.
Edward Duyker, remarks in this context, that “Until the late eighteenth century, the Santals can be said to have been primitive cultivators but, after British changes in the system of land tenure, they underwent a period of rapid transition and found their free forest based economic life challenged. With the curtailment of their independence, the Santals found themselves dominated by unsympathetic rulers.”

After independence, the Santals seem to have appeared again at the doorstep of change. The impact of the forces of modernization and commercialization coupled with other developments that came in consequence of various tribal welfare measures, initiated by the central and state government, have heralded a new epoch in their life. In post-independent India, they have undergone remarkable changes in agriculture, education, economy, politics, including other fields pertaining to their mental world, such as, values and attitudes towards life. Signs of class stratification and economic differentiation have also surfaced in their society. Even the rise of ‘bhadralok’ Santals is a reality today. The new generation Santals seem to have taken interest more on the modernizing influences than on the acknowledgement of their tradition-based ritual identity. The educated Santal elites are in a dilemma, today, as they are caught between the lures of two diametrically opposite forces i.e. revival of ethnic solidarity on the one hand and acquiring modern parameters of change and development on the other. This ambivalence is pretty manifest, nowadays, in Santals’ approaches and attitudes towards life and has also generated a sort of identity crisis among them.

For better exposition of the subject matter, we intend to begin with a theoretical perspective on ethnicity and an explanation on ethnic processes, as tribes today, belong to a special category of their own i.e. ethnic category and correspondingly, their identity is known as ethnic identity.

**General Perception of Identity**

Identity is a concept that has a multitude of meanings and a great variety of uses. It usually refers to mankind either individually or in a group and takes differential shape according to differences of contexts and modes of addresses. It has two different connotations i.e. identity in general and identity in particular. Particular identities like

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social identity, political identity, ethnic, linguistic, regional and national identities emerge with reference to specific contexts and manifest separately, in isolation to the other attributes of an individual or a group. On the other hand, identity in general represents a unified approach taking into consideration all the attributes and characteristic traits of an individual or a group. Further, there are also interrelated levels of meaning in the concept of identity. For example, individual identity can be explained as a sum total of those psychic, physical and mental traits that defines peculiarities and uniqueness of an individual. Obviously, it also relates to one’s own position or standing in the group or in the society. But as a part of the group, he / she is also subjected to the characteristic traits of that group, which is also the other side of his identity. Similarly, when we talk about cultural identity of a group, it also involves individual characteristics and behaviours along with certain specificities of that group, which distinguishes the group from others. So, basically, the definition of the concept of identity is analogous to the definition of culture, which means the way in which a group of people lives, thinks, feels, celebrates and shares life. In every culture, there are underlying systems of values, meanings and views of the world, which are expressed visibly in languages, gestures, symbols and rituals. This set of values shapes, what is called the identity of the group and distinguishes it from other groups. Thus, the difference between identity and culture is nominal and while culture grows out of a total way of life, identity refers to ‘assertion of cultural self-image’ by the members of that group for making it distinct from the rest.

Ethnic Identity

It is important to note that there has never been a single discourse of ethnicity. ‘Ethnicity’ and ‘ethnic group’ are not the same. While ethnicity is a psychological construct, referring to an attitude or set of attitudes and beliefs, ethnic group is a sociological concept. The term ‘ethnicity’ was first used by David Reisman in 1953, which has come to include, in course of time, a vast range of phenomena formerly subsumed under tribal, racial, cultural, linguistic and religious categories. For Max Weber, ethnicity is a

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4 Ibid., p. 16.
"significant belief in common descent ... whether or not an objective blood relationship exists." Donald Horowitz goes a step further and recognizes ethnicity as a kind of identity irrespective of differentiation in colour, language and religion and covers 'tribes', 'races', 'nationalities' and even 'castes'. According to Harold Isaacs, ethnicity refers to primordiality and primeval intensity of involvement with and allegiance to one’s ethnic group. According to him, ethnic allegiance edges out other forms of allegiances in case of clashes between the members of two groups. This view is, however, refuted by others as many believe that it would be an over simplification to say that the "individuals always choose ethnic identification over other kinds of identification whenever the situation arises." However, this plurality of discourses over ethnicity has raked up disagreements among scholars about the rudiments of ethnicity and has left the discourse of ethnicity divided into two major schools of thought. First, there is an attempt on the part of the social theorists to provide it a theoretical construct by cataloguing different social groups and their phenomena, which can be characterized as a static conceptual category. This school of thought comprises of groups, like “Primordialists”, “Instrumentalists”, “Survivalists”, “Maximalists” and “Minimalists.” Much disagreement exists among them, as to what would be the ideal proposition for defining ethnicity. On the contrary, there are also attempts to “encounter ethnicity as actually lived, as a dynamic process with a specific present, entailing a particular mode of social experience.”

Whatever it may be, broadly speaking, ethnicity refers to group identity based on some common characteristics. Lists of these characteristics, however, have been prepared to arrive at some kind of common substantive core. But as with the concept of ‘tribe’, a certain degree of arbitrariness in preparing such lists of ethnic identity, with one list overlapping the other is also noticeable. Because listing of characteristics for defining

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ethnicity is, after all, a subjective construct and therefore, lacks consensus of opinion. Of course, some characteristics may found a common place in all the lists. But over all, what the contents of the list would be and how the group comes to an awareness of them will depend on who is defining that identity and how it articulates in that society. It is, thus, the framers or the authors of those lists who create or legitimize ethnic groups, as has been the case for 'imagined communities' and 'the inventions of traditions'. Moreover, “as collective identities practiced in everyday life” are liable to change, ethnic identity is also vulnerable to change as the group evolves. Thus, while the objective features constitute a basis for an ethnic group, the boundary is delimited by the group’s changing subjective consciousness. So, to define ethnicity, we can say that “ethnic group is a historical entity whose members in large part conceive of themselves as being alike by virtue of certain common stable features located in language, culture, stereotypes, territory, ancestry – real or fictitious, specific nomenclature and endogamy and are so regarded by the members of other ethnic groups.”

Definition of ‘Tribe’ in Indian Context

The etymological origin of the word ‘tribe’ goes back to the Latin ‘tribus’, which referred to the three original divisions of the early Romans. But the word ‘tribe’ is generally used today for referring to a “socially cohesive unit, associated with a territory, the members of which regard themselves as politically autonomous.” Of course, they are also known for a distinct dialect and distinct cultural traits. The term ‘primitive tribes’ was first used by western anthropologists to denote a primary aggregate of people living in a primitive or barbarous condition under a headman or a chief. Anthropologists refer to two realities while using the word ‘tribe’. It is used to distinguish a type of society from others, and also to designate a stage of evolution in human society. These types of references imply that the tribes are yet to develop fully and were in a ‘primitive’, ‘barbarous’, and ‘aboriginal’ state of existence in the past. Later on, scholars have discarded such

14 Susana, Davalle., op. cit., p.18.
15 Ibid., p.18.
derogatory characterizations of tribe and have used terms like ‘pre-state society’, ‘pre-literate society’, ‘folk society’, or ‘simple society’. All these terms with evolutionary approach, however, indicate the backwardness of the tribals in comparison with other advanced groups. Thus, according to the early British anthropologists of evolutionary school, an ideal type of tribe should be a socially homogenous unit having its own dialect, territory and political and cultural institutions that separate it from outside influences.

However, this type of theorization might be applicable to some of the tribes of Australia, America and Africa. But the Indian tribes do not fit into this western notion of ‘tribe’ as they have not been living in total isolation from the territorial and cultural atmosphere of the mainstream society. The fact that in Indian languages, we do not have any synonym for the word ‘tribe’, lends proof for it. This means that tribal and non-tribal categorization did not exist in pre-British India.

G.S. Ghurye explained how the term ‘tribe’ finally came to be accepted by the British. According to him, in the Census Report of 1891, Baines arranged the castes according to their traditional occupations. Under the category of agricultural and pastoral castes, he formed a sub-heading and named it ‘forest tribes’. In the next two Census of 1901 and 1911, Sir Herbert Risley and Sir E.A.Gait included the so-called ‘animists’. Dr.Hutton, at the 1931 Census followed Baines, but substituted the term ‘primitive tribes’ for ‘forest tribes’. But G.S. Ghurye believed that the term was not appropriate to define Indian tribals as he considered them as ‘backward Hindus’. However, Indian academic with the sole exception of Ghurye, has accepted the category of ‘tribe’ as propounded by colonial anthropologists and administrators.

During the British rule, a reference has been made to the ‘backward tribes,’ according to the Government of India Act, 1935. As per the 13th Schedule to the Government of India (Provincial Legislative Assemblies) Order, 1936, certain tribes were specified as

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19 Ibid., p. 16.
21 Ibid., Chapter 1-3.
backward in the then provinces of Assam, Bihar, Bombay, Central Provinces, Madras and Orissa. The first serious attempt to list “primitive tribes” was made in the Census of 1931. The main characteristics, on the basis of which categorization of Scheduled Tribes were done, are: i) tribal origin ii) primitive way of life iii) habitat in remote and less accessible areas IV) general backwardness in all respects.22

However, though the concept of tribe has been perpetuated in India, social scientists today, have moved away from British anthropologists’ notion of tribe as an isolate, homogenous, autonomous social unit. The general feeling of Indian anthropologists is that though tribals in India have suffered partial and relative isolation through ages, they have always remained an integral part of Indian civilization. Today they are being increasingly viewed in relation to non-tribals.23

Select Reviews of Individual Studies

Since the main focus of the present study is to portray various facets of the socio-economic transformation of the Santals, some select reviews of individual studies have been undertaken to facilitate understanding in this regard.

Tribal studies in post-colonial era basically revolve around highlighting the modalities of tribal transformation already in place in India through ages. Some interesting analytical concepts have been put forward to explain this process of change. Foremost among them are ‘Sanskritization’ (1952) process of M.N. Srinivas24 and ‘Hindu method of tribal absorption’ (1953) advocated by N.K. Bose.25 According to these concepts, as the tribals have come in close contact with the caste Hindus, a continuous process of imbibing the borrowing from the neighbouring Hindu culture has ensued. Subsequently, this process of acculturation intensified and in some cases, the tribals have been even accommodated into the bottom strata of the Hindu society. While agreeing with this line of thought, some scholars have explained this process of acculturation with a difference. Surajit

23 Vidyut, Joshi., op. cit., p. 18.
Sinha, for example, says that the tribes and the castes exist in the same line of the continuum and in the process of evolution as the tribals march forward, they tend to emulate the characteristic traits of the peasant society. According to him, cultural amalgamation of the tribes with those of the caste Hindus, has resulted in the upliftment of the tribes from a backward to an advanced community, with features like social stratification, hierarchic divisions and political and economic consciousness etc. also making headway into their society. Sinha has also shown that the social movements of the Gonds, Mundas and Bhils of the central provinces, were directed to achieve higher social status. L.K. Mahapatra, has said that that some form of tribal movements have originated among the Gonds, Bhumij and Bhils “for securing kshatriya status in the Hindu society.” According to them, these movements are in nature, social mobility movements, aimed at achieving higher ranking in the society. Similar references to the transition of the tribes also found expression in the writings of other scholars. A.R.Desai states, “A study of the history of Indian civilization reveals how the growth and expansion of the Hindu society was a prolonged and complex process of assimilation both forcible and peaceful, of the tribal people into it.” Among European scholars Risley, Mandelbaum and others too have admitted the directions of change of the Indian tribals towards characteristics of the caste society. Mandelbaum writes, “The direction of tribal change in India is clear and predictable. Virtually, all tribes are now shifting towards Jati characteristics, a movement which has greatly accelerated as communications have improved and external forces have impinged more closely.”

Writings, such as these, understandably suffer from a bias, as they portray the picture of tribal transformation necessarily through Brahminical models. But the paradigm of tribal transformation in India is not one-dimensional. On the flip side, there always exists a strong tendency to revive the tribal socio-cultural system, to negate or dismiss all attempts of emulation and to strengthen the forces of ethnic solidarity. According to K.S.

27 Ibid., p. 63.
Singh, "the Brahmins who moved to middle India have...developed an antagonistic form of relationship with local people. There is a saying in Chhatisgarh that if you see a snake and a Brahmin, kill the Brahmin first."31 In most cases, it has been found that the tribals, after an initial contact with the dominant cultural milieu, generally revert to their original fold and try to revitalize their own tradition and culture. At times, such attempts culminate into a political movement, as the case in Jharkhand movement that symbolizes ethnic solidarity and put forth demands for cultural and territorial identity. Scholars like, Martin Orans has harped on this tendency of the tribals as no less strong than the forces of emulation. According to him, although the Santals have been long exposed to acculturative encounters with the surrounding Hindu castes for many generations and have incorporated many Hindu traits in their cultural pattern, the acculturative tribal elites have often been found to remain engaged in contra-acculturative social movements asserting tribal distinctiveness and creating an elaborate myth in support of such distinction.32 In his book, *The Santal: A Tribe In Search of Great Tradition*, he says that the transition of the tribes is not all about smooth assimilation or integration with the mainstream society but acculturation has also significantly contributed in the development of a consciousness on the part of the tribals to improve their own 'rank' or position economically, politically and otherwise.33 This 'rank syndrome', he finds is so intense among the tribals more particularly among the rich and affluent tribal elites that they sometimes indulge in ethnic solidarity movements to get access to political and economic powers.34 Orans, further believes that this drive for ethnic solidarity movements is not an exception rather than a persistent phenomenon in the tribal scenario in India. Some others, however, have taken a synthetic approach highlighting an oscillation process where the tribals have been influenced by a dominant culture, but over a period of time have again reverted to the status quo.35

33 Ibid., pp. 93-97.
34 Ibid., p. 97.
Other shades of opinion with regard to the re-tribalization and de-tribalization processes operating in the Indian tribal milieu are also available. There are scholars, who are interested in exposing inner responses and contradictions within the tribal society in the course of their gradual transformation into a more advanced one. Sitakant Mahapatra, for example says, “In a society undergoing rapid transformation there are two sets of symbols, the primitive ritual-ridden symbols of identity and the modern politically-oriented symbols. Santal society is trying to find a balance, between these two sets of symbols, between technology and ritual, between politics and culture.”

Mohan.K.Gautam, on the contrary, has totally dismissed tradition-modernization conflict and has explained that ‘modernizing networks’ has nothing to do to retard the process of progressive ‘Santalization’ of the Santals. Rather, he says that modernity helps strengthening Santal traditions and ideals and becomes an asset for achieving unity and progress with regard to local, ecological and economic needs. He defines modernity as an ongoing steady process, resulting from the contacts with outside forces such as, modern industry, markets, administrative system, courts, urban centres etc. He believes that the Santals have undergone considerable modernization for achieving political and economic powers but it did not affect their adherence to their own social and cultural traditions. Modernization does not mean sanskritization and the “very fact that the Dikkus are disliked is a clear indication against sanskritization…” The term Diku is used by the Santals to refer anybody who does not belong to them. “He is the outsider, the alien, the one who is non-conversant with, and most probably inimical towards, the cultural ethos of the community.” This concept served them as a source of unity against alienation.

L.M.Khubchandini, on her book, Tribal Identity, has mentioned that the tribal society is not so stagnant as has been perceived by many social scientists. According to her, the first step in the process of their de-tribalisation began, when the missionaries first interfered into their system leading to de-tribalisation of their rituals, customs and

36 Sitakant Mahapatra., op. cit., p. 2.
38 Ibid., p. 214.
39 Sitakant Mahapatra., op. cit., p. 11.
morals. After independence, they were further subjected to domineering forces in the name of progress and development. Thus, living at the midst of cross-cultural influences the end result is the emergence of a pan-Indian tribal consciousness “in relation to its own tradition and history and in relation to outsiders” as an important part of the subaltern consciousness of the nation. She thinks that the Jharkhand movement is the best illustration of this identity, welding together the aspirations of different tribal groups belonging to different ancestries.

Thus, as far as tribal transformation is concerned, while some feel concerned about the process of relative re-tribalisation of the tribals in the context of their growing ethnic solidarity movements, others are keen to demonstrate the phenomenon of de-tribalisation under the impact of the forces of modernization and cultural assimilation with the caste-based societies for centuries. Some others hold different opinions regarding the impact of the forces of modernization and nature of Santal acculturation with the neighbouring communities. In view of all these, it can be said that the identity of the Santals is a far more complex phenomenon, as it calls for a curious mix of history, migration, economics and religion – all combined together to infuse a sense of solidarity among them. It incorporates contradictory processes, like sanskritization and santalization, or tradition and modernization, for the achievement of integration with the larger civilizational whole of India on the one hand and maintenance of cultural distinctiveness on the other. Time and again, there have been attempts among the Santals to cast back to the glorious days of their past with same intensity as their desire to achieve parameters of modernization and material well being, at the present. The Santal society has actually been living with these crisis and contradictions ever since the dawn of the British rule. The struggle, which was once aimed at maintaining identity and existence from the hands of colonial exploiters, has now turned into a struggle to preserve ethnic identity and communal solidarity against various domineering forces that have come into existence in the name of progress and development in the post-independence era. The signs of such struggles of the Santals have already been visible, while in the first half of the 20th century it

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41 Ibid., pp. 95-96.
42 Ibid., p. 95.
manifested through their Jharkhand movement for territorial identity, in the second half, it found expression in their Ol-Chiki movement for a language identity.

**Setting the Area**

Bankura, Birbhum and Midnapore, the proposed areas of the present study were formerly known as the ‘Jungle Mahals’, till the second half of the nineteenth century. Our study of these areas in this period of time, therefore, has been carried out under the name, the ‘Jungle Mahals’. These areas were located between the Chhotonagpur plateau and the plains of Bengal and have remained as clustered units overlapping each other under different administrative divisions, prior to the second half of the nineteenth century. Before these districts finally came into being with specific boundaries and district-names, they had witnessed repeated reshuffling for administrative convenience at the hands of the British administrators.43

The term ‘Jungle Mahals’, was quite well known long before the advent of British rule in Bengal, though between 1760 and 1805 there was no officially recognized administrative unit as Jungle-Mahals.44 Several jungle tracts in the districts of Birbhum, Burdwan, Bankura, Midnapore and Purulia (of modern times) were known as Jungle Mahals. During the time of Akbar, these areas formed the part of Sircar Goalpara and at the time of Murshid-Quli Khan in the year 1722, these areas were transferred to Chakla – Midnapore. In 1760, when Midnapore was ceded to the East India Company, it came under the possession of the British government. It was only in 1805 that the district of the Jungle Mahals was officially recognized and a separate Magistrate was appointed for the immediate superintendence of the district.45 Before going into the details of the administrative aspect of the area, the term “Jungle Mahals’ needs an illustration. M.C. McAlpin, in his report has remarked, “In the 18th Century, a considerable portion of the area under enquiry appears to have formed part of an indefinite administrative unit called the Jungle-Mahals lying between Chota Nagpur and the Plains of Bengal. This was subsequently defined as being composed of certain parganas in Birbhum, Bankura, and

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45 Ibid., p. 28.
Midnapore; but on account of the disturbances of the Bhumijes, it was split up amongst
the neighboring districts in 1833. The name of the Jungle Mahals, however, still survives
in a portion of Moureswar thana in Birbhum, and in the whole of the western area of
Midnapore. The fact that there was once an administrative unit roughly corresponding to
this area, and the fact that this area contains the largest population of Sonthals outside the
Sonthal-Parganas and outside Chota Nagpur are not accidents...."46

W.W. Hunter has also described, in some details, the natural manifestation of this area as
well as the nature of people living in this region. According to him, "The western jungle
is an extent of country about eight miles in breadth and sixty in length. On the east, it is
bounded by Midnapore, on the west by Singhbhum, on the north by Panchet, and on the
south by Mourbhanj. There is very little land cultivated in its whole extent, and a very
disproportionate part if it is capable of cultivation. The soil is very rocky. The country is
mountaneous, and over-spread with thick forests, which rounded it in many places utterly
impassable. It has always been annexed to the province of Midnapore, but from its
barrenness it was never very greatly regarded by the Nawab’s Government, and the
zamindars sometimes paid their rent or rather tribute and sometimes not."47

It is undeniable that the British government wanted to get access to these areas primarily
for collecting land revenue. These areas first came to be exposed before the British
government when Midnapore came under the possession of the East India Company. The
Company’s administration gradually came to know that a vast expanse of territory, west
of Midnapore, was lying in the hands of zamindars, who had paid little or no revenue
since the time of the Maratha troubles. They, therefore, tempted to spread revenue
network in these parts of the country. In 1767 an attempt was made by the Company to
bring this ‘Jungle’ or ‘western’ zamindars under control.48 Accordingly, Lieutenant
Fergusson was deputed to bring the whole area under control. Lieutenant Fergusson
marched to Supur, Raipur and Ambikanagar, forced the local chiefs to surrender and
compelled them to agree to some form of revenue payment. He found Raipur as the
richest pargana and most widely cultivated. In Chatna he found ‘a polished set of People’

46 M.C. McAlpin., Report on the Condition of the Santals in the Districts of Birbhum, Bankura,
Midnapore, and North Balasore, Calcutta, Firma KLM, 1981, (Reprint) p. 4. (Hereafter McAlpin Report)
48 Ibid., p. 139 (CXXIX).
in comparison with their neighbours. But it was only a temporary success. As the years went on, the British government found it increasingly difficult to keep these jungle zamindars under control.

Apart from Midnapore, the other two districts like Birbhum and Bankura also had their respective share in the affairs of the Jungle Mahals. Raja Muhammad Asad Al Zaman Khan Bahadur ruled Birbhum from 1752 to 1777 when the East India Company obtained Diwani in 1765. But the administration of the district continued for some time to be governed from Murshidabad. The area was inhabited by hill-plunderers called Paharias, who often plundered it. Lord Cornowallis realized that Birbhum could never be brought under effective control as long as it would remain a remote dependency of Murshidabad. Therefore, he took steps to bring Birbhum within the administrative jurisdiction of Bishnupur. In 1786, Foley was sent there as Collector and Magistrate and in the following year Sherburn succeeded him. During this time the headquarters of the district was transferred from Bishnupur to Suri.

The history of Bankura prior to the beginning of the British rule was identical with the history of the rise and fall of the Rajas of Bishnupur. The Bishnupur Raj family, considered to be one of the oldest dynasties of Bengal, withstood the conquests of the Muslim rulers armed with natural fortifications of its territories. "Protected by rapid currents like the Damodar, by extensive tracts of scrub-wood and sal jungle, as well as by strong forts like that of Bishnupur, these jungle kings were little known to the Musalman rulers of the fertile portions of Bengal, and were never interfered with. For long centuries, therefore, the kings of Bishnupur were supreme within their extensive territories. At a later period of Musalman rule, when the Mughal power extended and consolidated itself on all sides, a Mughal army sometimes made its appearance near Bishnupur with claims of tribute, and tribute was probably sometimes paid. Nevertheless, the Subhadars of Murshidabad never had that firm hold over the Rajas of Bishnupur which they had over the closer and more recent Rajaships of Burdwan and Birbhum. As the Burdwan Raj

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49 F. W. Robertson, op. cit., p. 28.
50 J. C. Jha., The BhumiJ Revolt, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967, Chapter I.
52 Ibid., p. 6.
53 Ibid., p. 6.
grew in power, the Bishnupur family fell into decay; Maharaja Kirti Chand of Burdwan attacked the Bishnupur Raj and added to his zemindari large slices of his neighbour’s territories. The Marathas completed the ruin of the Bishnupur house.  

Bankura came under the possession of the British government with the rest of the Burdwan Chakla in 1760. Meanwhile, the Maratha-raids had impoverished the country and in 1770 it was further desolated by famine. The old Raja of Bishnupur had no power to control these elements of disorder. He had been reduced from a position of a tributary prince to that of a mere zamindar. As he was unable to collect his rents and pay his revenue, he had been thrown into prison. The state of affairs in the adjoining territory of Birbhum being as bad as Bishnupur, with marauders committing depredations and mayhem in all these areas, the British government realized that the anarchy prevailing demanded the presence of a responsible officer. Thus, as mentioned earlier, Cornowallis united Birbhum and Bishnupur into a compact British district and issued a notification in the Calcutta Gazetteer to the effect that Pye was “confirmed Collector of Bishenpore in addition to Beerbhoom, heretofore superintended by G.R. Foley, Esq.”

Santals Before the British Rule

Controversies are rife with regard to the original homeland of the Santals and the way through which the race had made its way into the Jungle Mahals. Santal legends and history indicate the original abode of the Santals at Hihiri or Aheripipri in the Hazaribag district of Bihar. The Santal folklore mentions about the origin of the tribe to a wild goose, which laid two eggs. From these eggs, sprang Pilchu Harem and Pilchu Burhi, the parent of the race. The migratory nature of the Santals corresponded substantially with the account provided by almost all the early ethnographers of colonial India. W.W. Hunter, E.G. Man, Rev. Skresfrud, E.T. Dalton and M.C. McAlpin all these writers were unanimous in speaking about the nomadic character of the Santal settlements though they disagreed over the way the Santals splintered off to different districts of Bengal from their original abode. It was indeed a long trek from Hajaribag to Chottonagpur, Rajmahal

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54 District Census Handbook, Bankura, (West Bengal), 1961, A. Mukherjee, p. xi.
55 Ibid., p. xvi.
hills to Jungle Terry and the Jungle Mahals of Bengal. According to Rev. Skresfrud, the name Santal is a corruption of Saontar and was adopted by the tribe after their long sojourn in the country around Saont (modern Silda) in Midnapore or Chhatna in Bankura district. Then they spread out to Maurbhanj, Bhagalpur and Chhotonagpur regions. Santal legend More Hapramko Reak Katha furnishes hints about their march through the inner parts of Bengal spreading westward. But M.C. McAlpin, while making an enquiry into the conditions of the Santals in 1909 in the districts of Birbhum, Bankura and Midnapore, had observed that the Santals were not the original inhabitants of these areas, though their ancestors had cleared jungles and made settlements here. From Hazaribag, the place of their origin, it seems, that the Santals came to Chhotonagpur and Rajmahal hills including Chai-Champa (Bhagalpur foothills) where they faced rivalry from the Malpaharias. The Malpaharias, residing in the foothills of the Rajmahal hills and known for their aversion to cultivation were not ready to yield an inch to the outsiders. In the ensuing conflict, the Santals gave in and being more adaptive by nature, moved to new pastures. From the Rajmahals and Manbhum, they came down to the plains of Bengal proper.

These are, however, conjectures put forward by different scholars, but in the absence of any reliable data, it is really difficult to say how the race had finally sneaked into the territories of the neighbouring districts of Bengal proper. As to their frequent migration, it can be said that inadequacy of land in proportion to their growing population and practice of traditional jhum cultivation had contributed, in some degrees, to this repeated change in their settlements. Moreover, the devastation caused by the Bengal famine (1770) had also facilitated their influx in the districts of Bankura, Birbhum and Midnapore.

**Basic Structure of Santal Society, Economy and Culture**

As far as exterior looks are concerned, Santal villages of the present times bear a close resemblance to the villages in the past. The foundations of the Santal social structure lay

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59 Chittabrata, Palit., op. cit., p. 287.
60 Slash and burn method of clearing jungles and land. Ibid., p. 287.
in their villages. Structurally, a Santal village is a 'linear cluster or assemblage with a regular open space or a straight street between parallel rows of houses.' Generally small, each village is divided into two parts. (Jaher than and Majhi than) The Jaher than is generally a place of installation of deities like Jaher Era, Marang Buru etc., and is located at the end of the village. The Manjhi than, on the other hand, is generally located at the centre of the village and is also used for holding meetings and discussions among the members. The Santal villages are generally surrounded by agricultural fields all round and the villages represent "clustered or nucleated pattern of residential arrangements."

A normal Santal village generally has a fairly wide and unpaved street intersecting the village into two blocks. Each block consists of a row of houses with trees like mango, jackfruit etc. planted on both the sides of the street. Additional hamlets and lanes develop only when there is an increase in population. The linear cluster of houses often look like 'Square or rectangular cluster or agglomerate with straight streets running parallel or right angels to one another.' Before the construction of houses, the Santals follow elaborate rituals. In fact, for a tradition-directed society as that of the Santals rituals dominate almost every walk of life. Be it clearing jungles or establishing new settlements, or building houses or initiating cultivation in the field, every act of the Santals is preceded by some forms of rituals. This testifies to the essentially ritual dominated characteristic of the Santal society and their tremendous reverence for the deities and spirits. However, Santal houses are marked for their exemplary cleanliness and beautiful paintings in the walls. Houses are often plastered with mud, a job Santal women are fond of doing too often.

In the past, Santal villages symbolized mutual cooperation and fellow feeling. The entire village community used to live like a big family. Everybody was prepared to work hard and rendered some kind of service to the community. Serfdom was unknown in the villages. The essence of the Santal social structure was its majhi or headman system. Though majhi system has considerably weakened nowadays they used to exercise profound authority over the village community in the past. Earlier, there existed a

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63 Ibid., p. 15.
64 Ibid., p. 15.
65 Ibid., p. 16.
hierarchy of officials to assist the majhi. For example, there were the Paramanik (the headman’s assistant), and then by order the Jog manjhi (the master of ceremonies, dances and weddings), the Jog Paramanik (a deputy Jog manjhi), the Naiki (the village priest), the kudum naiki (a deputy village priests) and Gorait or Kotal (the village messenger or peon).  

The office of the majhi was hereditary and through his hands all the business of the community had to pass. P.O. Boding has mentioned the activities of a Santal majhi in the following words:

“The manjhi is the head of the village people. All the people in the village will have to follow his lead. In ordering and inviting, in calling and restraining, at the name giving, at the initiating festivals, at marriages, when hunting and chasing, at feasts and festivals religious instructions and worship, in connection with rice and curry, with beer and liquor with spirits and mountain spirits, in quarrelling and quibbling, in strife and dispute, when crime and misdeeds occur in connection with thefts and stealing with medicine and witchcraft, with wenches and strumpets, when there is fighting and killing, murder and wickedness in grief and sorrow in calamities and dangers in illness and pain at dying and falling away, at ceremonies in connection with death and disease, at cremation and the funeral ceremonies – in connection with all these, the manjhi has his responsibility.”

Thus, in the social set up of the Santals, theoretically, the headman presided over all the activities of the Santals in the villages. However, though the headman was the centre of all social activities in the village, he always acted in consultation with the village council i.e. the Panchayat. The village council was composed of the elderly members of the village and its meetings were held to solve grievances of the members of the village. Above the majhis of different villages, there was a parganait. He was assisted by a body consisting of the representatives of a group of villages. In the villages, inter-familial or personal disputes were referred to the village council (Panchayat) and inter-village disputes or disputes of serious magnitudes were addressed by the parganait and his

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67 P.O. Boding, Traditions and Institutions of the Santals, Oslo, Broggers & Boktrykkare, 1942, p. 102.
counsel. Unsolved problems were referred to the yearly hunt council or Lo Bir. Decisions of Lo Bir were binding to all.\textsuperscript{68}

The internal social structure of the Santals was quite elaborate. They were divided into a number of exogamous clans or septs called Paris. These septs were altogether twelve in numbers. The names of these septs were: Hansda, Murmu, Kisku, Hembrom, Marandi, Soren, Choden Tudu, Besra, Baske, Pauria, and Bedea. These septs and clans were again subdivided into a number of exogamous sub-septs called khunts in Santal terminology.\textsuperscript{69} Occupational specialization or vertical stratification characterized these exogamous clans, which were, in all probability, totemistic groups having a totem or ancestral symbol for each of them. The bond between the members of the same sept was one of kinship or as the Santals called it ‘Jatia Pera’ (i.e. friends of the same blood), as distinguished from ‘Bandhu Pera’, signifying bond between separate clans.

The Santals had a mixed economy with shifting cultivation and dependence on forest produce both constituting the mainstay of their economic life. ‘Their migrations were from forest to peripheral agriculture and back to forest when jhum cultivation left the fields barren.’\textsuperscript{70} Their long association with the Hindus, however, imparted among them, the art of plough cultivation over the ages. But the land system of the Santals modeled along lines of their traditional ideas and beliefs were fundamentally different from the agrarian system of the Hindus. When the land was first reclaimed, the majhi or the village headman acted as the sole spokesman of the entire village and engaged in a settlement with the superior landlord in relation to land rent. After consultation with his co-villagers, he agreed to pay a fixed amount of rent, which he collected from all the cultivators of the village. The headman then distributed the land among his co–villagers, making them responsible for the rent to be paid as per settlement. The headman too, had to pay his share of rent for the land he held. He was, however, given a portion of the village land around two to four bighas, in addition to his own share of land (nij jote), which he held rent-free. Such lands were called man/khem lands. But the headman, as also the other officials of the village, who held man/khem lands by virtue of their position could not

\textsuperscript{69} H.H. Risley., op. cit., pp. 224-225.
\textsuperscript{70} Chittabrata, Palit., op. cit., p.287.
claim any special privilege. Thus, it was not a farming system in the ordinary sense of the term, because the Santal *mustagir* or headman did not derive any profit for managing land rent on behalf of the community. He was merely a rent collecting individual and one among the equals.

In the traditional social system of the Santals, no distinction was being made between male and female labour. Ploughing and preparation of fields were mainly done by the Santal males. But females participated in transplanting, harvesting and threshing of crops. Among other economic activities, hunting and fishing were important.

Forests always played a major role in the economic life of the Santals. Apart from wood, Santals also collected other necessary commodities of life from forests. Of all the woods, Sal, was widely used by them. Sal logs were used for building houses, and its leaves for making leaf cups and platters. Bamboos and other type of wood were collected for making furniture and other articles, including agricultural implements and weapons. While wood cutting was essentially a business of males, women participated in gathering and collecting different plants, fruits, roots, leaves of trees, flowers etc. for various purposes. Santals were in the habit of eating various types of leaves, shoots and roots, all collected from forests. N. Datta-Majumdar has given a list of the types of herbs, roots and fruits used by the Santals. About 82 varieties of wild plants, 72 varieties of fruits, 7 varieties of resins, 31 varieties of mushrooms, and 7 varieties of jungle millets were gathered at some time or another. Hunting and fishing also formed important economic activities of the Santals. Santals enjoyed collective fishing in village ponds and nullahs.

Thus, the economy of the Santals, in the past, was primarily self-sufficient and non-commercial, based on collective initiation and cooperation of the people. It was devoid of individualism and competition. Santals used to produce for direct consumption and not for sale. A limited kind of barter economy prevailed in their society before the advent of money economy. Transactions of various kinds, including agricultural and hunting instruments, with the low caste Hindus in exchange of food grains, vegetables and clothes

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72 Ibid., p. 170.
73 Nabendu, Dutta Majumdar, *The Santals, A Study in Culture Change*, Delhi, Govt. of India Press, p. 37.
74 Narrow stream that flows down through different terrains.
used to exist in the past. The agricultural economy of the Santals had intimate relationship with their magico-religious beliefs and practices.

The religious universe of the Santals consisted of hordes of Bongas and Spirits. These Bongas, Spirits and deities occupied an important place in the Santal society as they governed both the material and ethical life of the Santals. It is believed that a close and intimate relation existed between the Santals and these Supernatural beings and powers.\textsuperscript{75} Thakur Jiu, the supreme deity of the Santals, occupied a position of pre-eminence in their society. The word Cando was used to identify the supreme deity. The word Cando means Sun and it is natural that the Santals identify their Supreme deity with the Sun. Actually the sun, the moon and other manifestations of nature had important places in Santal pantheon. The Thakur Jiu or the Supreme deity was regarded as the Creator and the Preserver of the Universe and was seen as a benevolent deity.\textsuperscript{76} According to Charulal Mukherjee, the Santals, however, did not bother very much about their supreme deity as “he is too good to interfere with men and was a passive deity after all.”\textsuperscript{77} Therefore, no specific worship was accorded to the Thakur Jiu but was reverentially remembered in every important religious festival and in other important occasions, such as marriage and death.

The Santals believed that the Bongas and Spirits were powerful enough to control nature and even sometimes caused natural calamities. So they always tried to appease them through magical and religious practices. These Bongas were often worshipped and propitiated by offering rice beer as well as sacrificing animals. The village tutelary spirits of the Santals consisted of Marang Buru, Morenko Turiko, Jaher Era, Gosal Era, Pargana Bonga and Manjhi Haram Bonga etc.\textsuperscript{78}

The religious festivals of the Santals, spanning throughout the year, were mostly connected with their agricultural activities. The most important festivals were: Soharae, Baha, Erok Sim, Iri-Gundhi, Nawai and Janther. Besides, other important festivals like Karam, Jom Sim, and Mak More were also important.

\textsuperscript{75} A.K Das., U.K.Roy., and S.K.Basu., \textit{To be with Santals}, Calcutta, Backward Classes Welfare Department, Govt. of West Bengal, 1982, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid. p. 46. Quoted from J Troisi, \textit{Tribal Religion}, New Delhi, 1978.
\textsuperscript{77} Charulal Mukherjee., op. cit., p. 274.
The nature of Santal worship was primarily congregational, while the approach was collective. Every festival has two aspects—one the magico-religious, which covered the sacrifice and offerings to the deity or the spirit for its appeasement and the other, the recreational part, which provided entertainment and enjoyment including drinking, dancing and singing.79

Thus, the foundations of the traditional identity of the Santals rested on their community-oriented un-stratified social structure, a special kinship pattern, tradition-directed socio-cultural life laden with numerous rites, rituals and festivals and above all a close bond with nature. Indeed, as the life of the Santals through ages had mostly been spent under the cover of natural defense, there developed among them as a result, an intimate relationship with nature. The religious system of the Santals was, in a sense, a celebration to that relationship. Probably for this reason, the key elements of nature i.e., land (Jami), water (Jal), and forests (Jungle) upon which they depended most for sustaining life, also constituted the nucleus of their cultural life. Particularly, land was synonymous with the identity Santals. Loss of land meant loss of their identity. In other words we can say that, their socio-economic and religious life revolved around worship of nature in one form or the other. According to Asoka Sen, “The traditional land base holds an important symbolic and emotional meaning for them as the repository of ancestral remains (Sasans), clan origin sites and other sacred features important to their religious system.”80

Even elements of democracy are not totally absent in their socio-cultural set up. The un-stratified nature of their society, absence of differentiation between male and female labour, the concept of man-woman relationship on the basis of mutual respect and dignity—all these reflected democratic foundations of their society. But the democracy practiced by them was “participative rather than representative. Decisions are taken by consensus and not by majority.”81

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79 Ibid., p. 59.
81 Ibid., p. 8.
Santal Migration to Jungle Mahals

Santal migration to the Jungle Mahals seems to have taken place around the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The wandering nature of the Santals as well as growth of their settlements in different areas, lying between Chhotonagpur plateau and the plains of Bengal, have in fact, cast doubt on the way through which they had sneaked into the territories of the Jungle Mahals. "What is certain is that about the middle of the eighteenth century, i.e. at the time of the beginning of the British rule in India, Chota Nagpur was found to be the chief habitat of the Santals, as of many other allied Munda-speaking tribes."82 The migration of the Santals from Chhotonagpur to different areas of the Jungle Mahals is believed to have caused for two main reasons, namely, the great Bengal famine of 1770 and the introduction of the Permanent Settlement in 1793. According to Hunter, "the Permanent Settlement for the land tax in 1793 resulted in a general extension of tillage and the Santals were hired to get rid of the low lands of the wild beasts which, since the great famine of 1769, had everywhere encroached upon the margin of cultivation."83 In fact, the famine of 1770 had changed the entire agrarian prospect of Bengal. It not only caused death of a great majority of agrarian population in Bengal but also had converted a huge mass of arable land into waste, jungle land. Since the number of cultivators reduced drastically owing to de-population caused by the famine, there began virtually a scramble for winning Santal cultivators for reclaiming jungle land.

Thus, when Bengal came under the clutches of the ravages of famine and widespread forestation, the Santals were the natural choice to reclaim land for cultivation. They, on their part, were also in search of land "as they had given up their nomadic habits long ago."84 Robertson has also admitted that the credit of facilitating cultivation in large parts of land in the districts of Bankura, Birbhum and Midnapore during the last few decades of the eighteenth century, actually belonged to the Santals.85

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82 N. Datta-Majumdar., op.cit., p. 23.
84 Suchibrata Sen., op. cit., p. 29.
85 F.W. Robertson., op. cit., p. 9.