



Negotiating Tradition And Modernity: Changing Practices Of Hunting Festival (Disom Sendra) Among The Santals

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ABSTRACT

The Santal community, one of the largest Indigenous tribal groups in India, maintains a rich cultural heritage closely connected with nature and traditional socio-religious practices (Singh 1994; Vidyarthi and Rai 1985). Among their important cultural traditions, the hunting festival known as Disom Sendra represents a significant collective ritual expressing community identity, ecological knowledge, and social unity (Bose 1971). Traditionally, the festival combined ritual worship, collective hunting, music, dance, and communal gathering, symbolizing the close relationship between humans and the forest environment. However, socio-economic change, environmental awareness, and wildlife conservation regulations introduced under the Wildlife Protection Act (Government of India 1972) have gradually transformed its traditional practices. This study examines the transition of the festival from actual hunting activities toward symbolic cultural expression. Using qualitative ethnographic approaches and oral narratives, the research highlights how the Santal community negotiates tradition and modernity while preserving cultural identity and sustaining the festival as an important form of living intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords:- Disom Sendra; Santal Community; Hunting Festival; Cultural Transformation; Indigenous Culture; Ajothya Hills; Intangible Cultural Heritage.

INTRODUCTION

The Santal community has practiced hunting since ancient times, and this tradition is deeply embedded in their mythological narratives, oral traditions, and cultural memory. According to Santal belief, Pilchu Haram and Pilchu Budhi, regarded as the primordial ancestors of humanity, sent their seven sons to khandera Bir (forest) for hunting (hembram, parimal). These sons are considered the earliest ancestors of the Santal people. Such mythological accounts, preserved through storytelling across generations, indicate the antiquity of hunting practices and reveal how hunting has historically formed an essential part of Santal social organization, cultural identity, and spiritual relationship with nature. For the Santals, hunting was

not merely an economic activity but also a ritual practice connected with collective cooperation, ecological knowledge, and respect for forest deities.

The Ajodhya Hills region of Purulia district in West Bengal has long functioned as an important cultural centre of the Santal community, where traditional rituals and collective festivals are actively maintained. Among these, the hunting festival known as Disom Sendra occupies a significant place in community life. Traditionally celebrated after ritual worship, the festival combines collective hunting, music, dance, and communal gathering, reinforcing social unity and inter-village relationships. The region also holds importance within the Santal customary system of governance, where La Bir Baisi, the supreme decision-making and traditional judicial system, is held at Sutan Tandi, located in this forested hills region (Majhi and Dhaneshwar). Sutan Tandi is also the site where the Disom Sendra festival is celebrated, further highlighting its central role in Santal social, cultural, and judicial life.

In recent decades, however, the practice of the Disham Sendra festival has undergone noticeable transformation due to modernization, expansion of formal education, migration for employment, environmental awareness, and wildlife protection laws restricting hunting activities. As a result, many traditional hunting elements have declined or become symbolic. Despite these changes, Disom Sendra continues to survive as a vital expression of cultural identity, demonstrating how the Santal community negotiates tradition and modernity while preserving its intangible cultural heritage.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The primary objective of this study is to document and understand the traditional practices associated with the Disom Sendra festival of the Santal community in the Ajodhya Hills region of Purulia district. The research aims to explore how ritual performances and cultural expressions connected with the festival have evolved over time under the influence of social change, modernization, and environmental regulations. It also seeks to examine the role of younger generations in maintaining, transforming, or reinterpreting traditional practices within contemporary society. Another important objective is to identify the challenges faced by the community in preserving their cultural heritage and Indigenous knowledge systems in the context of changing socio-economic conditions. Furthermore, the study intends to propose culturally sensitive and community-based measures for safeguarding and sustaining the festival as an important element of intangible cultural heritage.

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative ethnographic research methodology to examine the traditional practices and contemporary transformations of the Disom Sendra hunting festival among the Santal community in the Ajodhya Hills region of Purulia district, West Bengal. The methodological framework is designed to understand cultural practices within their natural social and ecological context by emphasizing lived experiences, community narratives, and ritual meanings.

1. Research Design

The study follows an ethnographic and descriptive research design. Ethnography allows the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of cultural behaviour, belief systems, and ritual practices through direct engagement with the community. The descriptive approach helps document the structure, processes, and cultural significance of the Disom Sendra festival. In addition, an exploratory dimension is incorporated to examine the emerging transformations influenced by modernization, environmental regulations, and socio-economic changes within the Santal society.

2. Study Area

The field study was conducted in villages surrounding the Ajodhya Hills region of Purulia district in the state of West Bengal. This region is predominantly inhabited by members of the Santal community and is culturally known for the annual celebration of the Disom Sendra hunting festival. The area is characterized by forested landscapes, hills, and strong socio-cultural relationships between the local population and natural resources, making it a suitable location for studying Indigenous hunting traditions and ritual practices.

3. Research Approach

The research adopts a qualitative approach in order to capture cultural meanings, symbolic interpretations, and social experiences related to the festival. Instead of focusing on numerical measurement, the study emphasizes understanding Indigenous ecological knowledge, ritual symbolism, and the perceptions of community members regarding cultural continuity and transformation.

4. Sources of Data

The study relies on both primary and secondary sources of data to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

4.1 Primary Data

Primary data were collected through direct interaction with members of the Santal community. This included interviews with village elders, traditional leaders, ritual specialists, and festival participants. Participant observation was also conducted during festival preparations and celebrations. Informal discussions with both youth and elders provided additional insights into changing cultural perspectives and practices.

4.2 Secondary Data

Secondary data were collected from various academic and institutional sources to support the analysis and provide contextual understanding. These sources included books, research articles, ethnographic studies on tribal culture, government reports, and documents related to Indigenous traditions and cultural heritage.

5. Sampling Technique

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who possess relevant knowledge and direct experience related to the Disom Sendra festival. Village elders, traditional leaders, ritual practitioners, and active participants in the festival were selected because of their cultural knowledge and involvement in maintaining traditional practices.

6. Data Collection Methods

6.1. Participant Observation

Participant observation was used as a primary method to understand the practical aspects of the festival. The researcher observed ritual performances, hunting preparations, community gatherings, and cultural celebrations. Detailed field notes were maintained to record behavioural patterns, ritual symbolism, and interactions among participants.

6.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using open-ended questions that allowed participants to freely share their experiences, beliefs, and perspectives regarding the festival. This method helped capture diverse viewpoints related to tradition, cultural change, and heritage preservation.

6.3 Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions were organized with community members, particularly youth and elders, to understand collective opinions regarding the transformation of the festival, environmental concerns, and the future of the tradition.

7. Data Analysis

The collected qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Information obtained from interviews, observations, and discussions was organized into thematic categories such as ritual practices, cultural transformation, youth participation, ecological knowledge, and heritage preservation. These themes were interpreted in relation to anthropological perspectives on cultural continuity and social change.

PROCESS

The hunting festival is conducted through a structured traditional process guided by customary rules and rituals. Members of the Santal community gather collectively and perform ritual worship dedicated to forest deities before the hunting activities begin. The festival involves ceremonial hunting followed by cultural celebrations including music, dance, and communal gatherings (Mandi, disham). These activities strengthen social unity and reinforce the community's spiritual relationship with nature.

Prior to the commencement of the festival, members of the Santal community assemble at a common meeting place to discuss and organize the event. Village elders and traditional leaders, particularly the Majhi (village head), hold meetings to determine the festival date, ritual procedures, and community responsibilities. Participants arrive from different villages and regions to take part in the celebration, demonstrating its collective and inter-village significance (participants). Hunters traditionally carry various hunting implements such as tangi (axe), tenta, bows and arrows, swords, bhojali, and other traditional weapons. Musical instruments including dhamsa, madal, shinga, and regra are also brought, creating an atmosphere of excitement and festivity across the forested landscape from the foothills to the hilltops (Mandi, Disham).

Ritual worship forms an essential part of the preparation phase. Special prayers are offered to Sendra Bonga and Pargana Bonga, who are believed to be spiritual guardians of the hunting festival. Ritual specialists known as Dihiri perform sacred ceremonies seeking harmony with nature, safety for participants, and collective well-being (majhi, village). The festival is also culturally associated with youth transition and social initiation, symbolizing the passage into adulthood and social responsibility. For this reason, the Ayodhya Sendra gathering is sometimes locally regarded as a form of a youth initiation fair that promotes social learning and community integration.

During the hunting activity, community members move together into the forest areas. The activity emphasizes cooperation, bravery, and traditional ecological knowledge rather than economic gain. If two hunters attack the same animal, the hunter who strikes it first is traditionally entitled to claim the prey. If any dispute arises during the hunting activity, the matter is traditionally settled at Sutan Tandi, which functions as the customary judicial space or supreme decision-making forum of the Santal community (Hansda 21). The head of the Sutan Tandi is known as the Dihiri (Majhi, dhaneshwar), who presides over

discussions and ensures the fair resolution of conflicts according to customary law. This traditional judicial system is collectively known as La Bir Baisi(majhi,Dhaneshwar), representing the indigenous governance and conflict-resolution mechanism of the Santal community.

After the hunting activities, participants assemble again at a common ground known as Sutan Tandi, where cultural performances take place. Traditional songs, dances, and storytelling are performed, strengthening social bonding and reinforcing collective identity within the community(Murmu, 2001). The celebrations often continue into the night through communal gatherings, music, and interaction among community members, promoting unity and facilitating the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations. After these communal celebrations, and before the hunters enter their homes, women of the household wash and cleanse the hunters' feet with water as a ritual act of purification(Murmu 2001)Through this ceremonial practice, the hunting festival formally comes to an end, symbolizing the safe return of the hunters and their reintegration into domestic and community life.

CHANGES IN THE FESTIVAL (TRANSFORMATION OVER TIME)

In recent decades, rapid socio-cultural transformations have influenced many aspects of everyday life in tribal societies, including food habits, educational opportunities, cultural traditions, and spiritual practices. These changes are also clearly visible in the Ajodhya Hills region of Purulia district, where the Santal community has historically maintained a close relationship with forests and natural resources. With the spread of modern education, communication networks, migration for employment, and increased interaction with the wider society, traditional cultural practices have gradually undergone transformation. The Disom Sendra hunting festival is one such cultural institution that has experienced significant changes over time.

Traditionally, hunting constituted the central component of the Disom Sendra festival. In earlier times, from the pilchu haram or pilchu budhi, the Santal community collectively entered the forests during the festival and hunted various wild animals as part of a ritualized cultural practice. Hunting was not merely aimed at obtaining food; it symbolized bravery, masculinity, communal solidarity, and the transmission of traditional ecological knowledge across generations. Participation in hunting was often associated with social recognition, and young men acquired important survival skills and forest knowledge through collective hunting. Therefore, the festival functioned as both a cultural ritual and a social institution, reinforcing community identity and relationships with nature (Majhi,village).

Over time, the nature and practice of the Disom Sendra festival have gradually shifted from actual hunting activities toward symbolic and cultural expressions. One major factor contributing to this transformation is the implementation of wildlife conservation laws and environmental protection policies by the government. The Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, strictly prohibits the hunting of wild animals in India and imposes penalties, including imprisonment and fines (Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, Government of India). Importantly, the law does not provide exemptions for customary or ritual hunting practices carried out by Indigenous communities during traditional festivals. As a result, hunting during the festival has declined, and the community increasingly emphasizes cultural programs, traditional music, and symbolic rituals.

Similarly, the Forest Rights Act, 2006 recognizes the rights of tribal and forest-dwelling communities over forest resources and traditional livelihoods but does not permit the hunting of protected wildlife under the pretext of traditional customs (The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, Government of India). These legal frameworks have significantly limited the continuation of large-scale hunting practices that were once associated with the Disom Sendra festival. In addition, judicial interventions by the Supreme Court of India and the Calcutta High Court have reinforced

wildlife protection measures and emphasized strict enforcement of conservation laws (Supreme Court of India; Calcutta High Court, relevant wildlife protection cases). It is important to note, however, that the Supreme Court has not prohibited customary judicial systems such as the Santal La Bir Baisi, which continue to function for internal community disputes and social governance. These systems are recognized as valid for cultural and social matters, but they cannot contravene national laws, such as the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, which restricts hunting of protected species. As a result of these legal and administrative measures, many participants in the festival now refrain from killing animals and instead perform symbolic hunting rituals.

Environmental factors have also contributed significantly to the transformation of the Disham sendra festival. In earlier times, the forests of the Ajodhya Hills region supported a rich diversity and a larger population of wildlife. Over the years, however, deforestation, habitat loss, and ecological imbalance have resulted in a noticeable decline in several animal species, such as mammals including *Viverra zibetha* (Khatas), *Viverricula indica* (Gondho Gokul), *Paradoxurus hermaphroditus* (Bham), *Herpestes edwardsi* (Neul), *Hyaena hyaena* (Hyena), *Canis lupus* (Nekre), *Canis aureus* (Siyal), *Vulpes bengalensis* (Khek Siyal), *Melursus ursinus* (Bhaluk), and birds including *Streptopelia chinensis* (Chit ghughu), *Streptopelia tranquebarica* (Kanthi ghughu), *Halcyon smyrnensis* (Nil machranga), *Choriotes nigriceps* (Indian bustard), *Amaurornis phoenicurus* (Dahuk), *Pseudogyps bengalensis* (Sada sakun), *Gyps indicus* (Sakun), etc (Mandi disham). This decline in wildlife populations has gradually influenced the attitudes of community members toward hunting practices. Many elders and traditional leaders now emphasize the importance of maintaining ecological balance and protecting remaining wildlife resources. Consequently, traditional beliefs concerning harmony between humans and nature are increasingly reinterpreted in ways that encourage environmental conservation and sustainable coexistence.

Another important factor influencing the transformation of the Disham Sendra festival is modernization and changing socio-economic conditions of Ayodhya hill area. Younger generations increasingly pursue formal education and employment opportunities outside their villages. Migration to urban areas has reduced direct participation in traditional hunting activities. Nevertheless, younger community members continue to engage in the festival through alternative forms such as organizing cultural programs, performing traditional music and dances, and assisting in community management activities. In this way, the festival remains an important medium for cultural expression and intergenerational transmission of knowledge despite changes in its practical components.

Overall, the transformation of the Disom Sendra festival demonstrates the dynamic and adaptive nature of Indigenous cultural traditions. Although certain traditional practices associated with hunting have declined due to legal restrictions, environmental awareness, and socio-economic changes, the symbolic meaning and cultural significance of the festival continue to remain strong. Rather than disappearing, the festival has gradually evolved into a form that emphasizes cultural celebration, social unity, and spiritual connection with nature. In this sense, the Disom Sendra festival illustrates how the Santal community negotiates between tradition and modernity while striving to preserve its cultural identity in a rapidly changing world.

CONCLUSION

The Disom Sendra festival reflects the dynamic and evolving nature of Indigenous cultural traditions in the context of modern challenges. Although traditional hunting practices have declined due to legal restrictions, environmental concerns, and socio-economic changes, the festival continues to retain its deep cultural, social, and spiritual significance within the Santal community. Rather than disappearing, it has adapted by shifting its focus toward symbolic rituals, cultural performances, and community participation, demonstrating the resilience of Indigenous culture and its ability to negotiate between tradition and modernity. Therefore, it is essential to promote culturally sensitive policies and community-based initiatives that support the preservation of such traditions, as safeguarding intangible cultural heritage like the Disom Sendra festival not only strengthens Indigenous identity but also encourages a sustainable relationship between humans and nature.

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