

## **Socio-Cultural Vulnerabilities of Agrarian Santal Women in the Barind Tract**

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**Abstract:** This article is about the socio-economic background and cultural system regarding present status of drought affected agrarian livelihood of Santal ethnic women. As the minority, the Santals face numerous challenges to adapt social, political, cultural, natural and economic changes in their life. This study aims at finding the socio-cultural vulnerabilities of Santals ethnic women who involved in agrarian task. Data was collected through mixed method approach using structured and semi-structured questionnaire at Naogaon District. The findings suggest that lack of quality education, the Santal agrarian women hardly get any employment opportunity. Illiteracy and unawareness, an absence of hazard free residence and lack of institutional support, have took Santal women far from developing their living standard. Natural vulnerabilities have made their living highly challenging and they used to cope with scarcity of overall assets. This study also observes at the socio-economic and cultural life of Santal ethnic groups is vulnerable. The Santal women deserve more attention due to their poor condition as one of the most disadvantaged population of Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** Santals, Sociocultural, Vulnerabilities, Ethnic Women, Drought, Barind tract.

### **1. Introduction**

The Santals is one of the oldest ethnic minority groups in Bangladesh. They are generally living in the Northern part of Bangladesh, especially, in the greater districts of Rajshahi, Naogaon, Chapainawabganj, Dinajpur and Rangpur. It is one of the most disadvantaged vulnerable communities. Santals are dependent on agro-based livelihood activities and natural resources. Due to natural hazards like drought the respondents have to face multi-dimensional changes in the economic, religious and cultural aspects of their lives.

The Santal is a major ethnic community of Bangladesh, practice wildlife hunting as part of their traditions (Barkat, et. al., 2021). Their socioeconomic and cultural tradition is old but not like mainstream people in Bangladesh. Their socioeconomic status is usually molded by the combination of various indicators of their daily life, like their population, education, gender, profession, income, landownership, residential pattern, living arrangement, health system, food system, communication system etc. There is no evidence which suggests that a considerable number of people from this community avail to improve their economic, social and financial conditions.

The Santal community do not have the opportunity of getting loans from different banks and failing to fulfill the condition of getting loans (Sarker, et al., 2016).

Traditionally, the Santals are mainly involved in farming work while about 95% of the Santals are involved in agricultural activities (Ahmed et. Al., 2019). In the past, the majority of the Santals was land owners but due to the increase of population, exploitation by money lenders and landlords, poverty and illiteracy and natural calamities, the vast majority of the Santals in Bangladesh have lost their land properties. At present, nearly 80% of the Santals are landless which is forcing them to earn their livelihood depending on the mercy of large farm holders and availability of work in the field of their Muslim or Hindu neighbors for their mere survival.

Male domination is prominent in the Santal society although, the role of women in the family is by no means insignificant (Banglapedia, 2021). Santal women rather take a leading role in earning livelihood or in farming activities (Elahee, 2013). Most of the families from Santal are engaged with agricultural activities though they do not have their own land. During drought women are to manage family expenses by saving from basic expenses. The drought makes these ethnic women more vulnerable as they are depend on agrarian task.

The number of Santal people living in Bangladesh is still debatable. In a survey conducted in 1941, the Santal population was recorded as 829,025 (Banglapedia 2006). In the censuses conducted after the Partition in 1947, the Santals were not distinguished from other minority groups. As a result, the accurate statistics of their population in the then East Pakistan (present day Bangladesh) are now vague and unclear. In the 1980s, the Christian missionaries estimated that the Santal population in northern Bangladesh was over 100,000. The 1991 census recorded the Santal population as over 200,000. In 2001, according to one estimate, the Santal population in Bangladesh was numbered around 157,000 but the World Bank report (2008) has estimated the number around to be 300,000 (Francesco Cavallaro& Tania Rahman, 2009). Last census (2011) recorded especially my research district in Naogaon the Santal population was 24409 and Sapaharupazila was 1851 (BBS, 2011).

This article will focus on impact of drought like situation and other crisis on agrarian livelihoods of Santal women in Northern Bangladesh. The on-going study has been designed to analyze vulnerabilities of Santal women in the face of crisis like drought and their socio-economic scenario of Santal women in Northern Bangladesh.

## **2. Review of Literature**

National Adaptation Program of Action (2005) presented a paper and focus on impacts of climate variability (and quite possible also of climate change) on the biophysical system and consequences on different sectors and these are already evident in different parts of the country. Shahid and Behrawan (2008) focus on the drought characterization and risk assessment are of great significance due to drought's negative impact on human health, economy and ecosystem. The

inclusion of the assessment of agriculture and socio-economic related vulnerability is essential in drought study. Department of Environment (2008) focused different types and context of vulnerability especially how drought creates externalities on women in Bangladesh. The impact is particularly important in Bangladesh where agriculture is the largest sector of economy. Bangladesh Center for Advanced Studies (2010) presented a research paper that the Regional Climate Change Adaptation Knowledge Platform for Asia (RCCA-KPA) has been developed to respond to demand for effective mechanisms for sharing information on climate change adaptation and developing adaptive capacities in Asian countries, many of whom are the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Habiba, Shaw and Takeuchi (2011) focus their paper that disasters come along with a lot of collisions.

Bangladesh has been facing various natural calamities almost every year. Drought is found to have a substantial negative social and economic impact on farmers and others employed in the agricultural sector. Abarghouei, Amin, Zarch, and others (2011) published their paper on the agrarian community which was affected from last decade by the increasing drought. The unavailability of water supply owing to the drought brought beggar description in the crops production. The ethnic community in the Barind region needs to manage more water resources for production and drinking. Germany based researchers published an article on Women Farmers Adapting to Climate Change (2012). They observed in Bangladesh that indigenous knowledge has been used by women from generation to generation. It became evident throughout the study that the entire homestead agriculture activities are traditionally done by women while the farm activities are carried out by men, especially during periods of flood and drought. Women learnt how to use local and indigenous technologies from their ancestors or through their own experience for adaptation and resilience. Solh and Ginkel (2014) jointly presented that the drought is a climatic event that cannot be prevented, but interventions and preparedness to drought can help to: (i) be better prepared to cope with drought; (ii) develop more resilient ecosystems (iii) improve resilience to recover from drought; and (iv) mitigate the impacts of droughts. Preparedness strategies to drought include: (a) geographical shifts of agricultural systems; (b) climate-proofing rainfall-based systems; (c) making irrigated systems more efficient; (d) expanding the intermediate rain fed-irrigated systems. The paper presents successful research results and case studies applying some innovative techniques where clear impact is demonstrated to cope with drought and contribute to food security in dry areas.

Bhandari and Panthi (2014) focus that climate change is the world-wide biggest natural disaster which impacts on the human livelihoods. The agrarian ethnic people who greatly depended on the agriculture are suffered most. Drought nowadays is the biggest issue especially in Bangladesh. And the agrarian ethnic society is the sufferer. The agricultural productivity is greatly hampered because of inadequate and inappropriate rainfall. Shiferaw, Tesfaye, and others (2014) presented on their paper

that the vulnerability can be used both in the loss of bio diversity as well as socio economical ground. Drought is the result of climatic heavy temperature and that is why shortage of rainfall in the full monsoon. The mostly affected people by drought are the agrarian ethnic people. Drought has vulnerable impacts on the biophysical and socioeconomic bases of the ethnic people.

### **3. Justification of the Study**

It is disappointing but fact that little can be done to stop or alleviate the devastating impacts of slow onset disaster drought upon the livelihoods of much of the ethnic population in northern Bangladesh. In fact, little attention was given to focus on the drought affected agrarian livelihood adversities of ethnic women and their consequent adaptation and survival strategies undertaken by them in their own ways. The fact is that this slow onset disaster inflates annually the existing unemployment, and finally the grueling poverty in Bangladesh. A very little socioeconomic research has been carried out to understand its devastating effects of drought on the agrarian livelihood of ethnic women in precarious habitat of Barind Tract. The findings of the present study would thus be useful for policy-makers of national planning, and development workers at village level and also for international development agencies in developing insights into their program contents. Since there has not been any study especially on drought affected agrarian livelihood adversities of the ethnic women in precarious habitat of Barind Tract in northern Bangladesh, the present study would serve as a baseline for further studies. It would bear a great deal of importance in sociological research providing new facts in this line.

### **4. Objectives**

The study was conducted with following objectives that includes- (1) to investigate the socio-economic status of agrarian Santal women of the study area and (2) to know the socio-economic vulnerabilities they have to face during water crisis in lean season.

### **5. Methods**

It is a descriptive study and the data was collected by conducting a sample survey. The quantitative approach was applying for making analysis and draw a conclusion. The tool for gathering primary data was a set of survey questionnaire. Two unions of Sapahar upazila under Naogaon district was purposively chosen as the study area and 106 Santal women who involved in agrarian tasks were taken as respondents purposively. The data collection period was June to September of 2019 and again March to April of 2022. Secondary data (various research reports, journals, periodicals, magazine, newspapers, articles, books collected from websites) were used to understand the origin, culture, economic and social conditions of target group.

## 6. Findings and Discussion

### 6.1 Socioeconomic Profile of the Respondents

A noticeable fact from table 01 is the highest number of the respondents of this study was 24 to 36 years age group that is 60.4% of total respondents. Educational status of the Santals women was miserable as most of the respondents (73.6%) could sign only their name. Lack of institutional education kept those women far from modern technology in agriculture. Regarding religion, almost 80.0% of the women belongs to Christianity and rest of them still practice traditional belief system. Most of the respondents were married and belonged to nuclear family. The highest number of respondents (43.4%) earn Tk. 8000-16000 per year. Income range defined between Tk. 24000-32000 was confirmed by 18.9% respondents. Less income made a family poor to fight with drought and overcome from that hazard. During drought men have to manage family expenses by staying far from the village in searching of work that led a woman to struggle. The head of the families usually takes all the decisions of the families, so women were always dominated by male in all aspects.

Socioeconomic Profile	Category	Santal	
		(N=106)	
		n	%
Age	18-24	24	22.64
	24-36	64	60.37
	>36	18	16.98
Education	Sign only	78	73.58
	Class 1-5	5	4.71
	Class 6-10	16	15.09
	SSC	4	3.77
	HSC	2	1.88
	Graduation	1	0.94
Religion	Sanatan	24	22.64
	Christian	82	77.35
Marital Status	Married	103	97.16
	Widowed	3	2.83
Types of Family	Nuclear family	85	80.18
	Joint family	14	13.20
	Extended family	7	6.60
Income	<8000	19	17.92
	8000-16000	46	43.39
	16000-24000	10	9.43
	24000-32000	20	18.86
	>32000	11	10.37

## 6.2 Residential Status of the Respondents

Residence is the place, especially the house, in which a person lives or resides. This table shows that the highest number of Santal people (38.7%) live in self-owned residence. Living room is very important than other room in house. Almost all of the respondents live in shanty. Living room is a place where a man spends most of the time especially in leisure time. So, living room is needed to be well decorated. A large number of respondents (77.4%) replied their living room wall components were bamboo twigs. Second largest number of respondents of this community ensured their living room wall components was a slip of bamboo. Roof of any room or house is like a protection from numerous facts. This study shows that almost all of the targeted people live in such living room made of tin. The drought free housing structure was absence in Santals community. Their housing pattern increased the vulnerabilities during drought.

Residential Status	Category	Santal	
		(N=106)	
		n	%
Owner of residence	Self	41	38.67
	Parents	3	2.83
	Father-in-law	14	13.20
	Other person	29	27.35
	Plot belonging to the government	19	17.92
Components of living room	Shanty	106	100.00
The account of living room wall components	Soil	106	100.00
	A bamboo twig	82	77.35
	A slip of bamboo	32	30.18
	Straw/a kill of hemp	4	3.77
	Tin	10	9.43
	Brick	0	0.00
The account of living room roof components	Straw/a kind of hemp	2	1.88
	Tin	104	98.11
	Tile	0	0.00

## 6.3 Agrarian Land and Cultivation Situation of Respondents

Majority of agricultural operations in Bangladesh are mostly land-based. But the target groups of the Santal community (76.4%) were far behind in terms of their cultivable land ownership which severely limited their ability to create viable livelihoods. As depicted in below table, 79.24% respondent didn't own any leased agrarian land at all. To a share cropper 76.41% of the respondents informed that they didn't have any leasing land. A little number of women (34.0%) replied that they were able to meet up the yearly expense in these terms. Since they work on the land owned by mainstream people, they get very little profit by farming. A certain portion of the profit had to pay to the money lender. Most of the people are found without own land although farming is their main occupation (Ghosh, et. al., 2020).

Agrarian Land and Cultivation Status	Quantity	Santal	
		(N=106)	
		n	%
Own cultivable land	No land	81	76.41
	1-5	21	19.81
	>5	4	3.77
Lease agrarian land	Yes	22	20.75
	No	84	79.24
Leasing land to a share cropper	Yes	25	23.58
	No	81	76.41
Meet up the yearly expense from agriculture activity	Yes	36	33.96
	No	70	66.03

#### 6.4 Animal Husbandry of Respondents

Other than land property, very few respondents possessed some other forms of physical assets and livestock. 57.54% respondents ensured they had cow. As found by the study, near about 34% of the respondents family did not own any cow and 55% in the case of goat for in this community. And, more than 90.0% of respondents' had no sheep. Although, more than half of the surveyed people had no hen. Large number of respondents (74.52%) in this community didn't own any duck. Cattle are one of the resources of Santal women in time of crisis. During the dry season they sold cattle to managed meal.

Types of Domesticated Animals	Category	Santal	
		(N=106)	
		n	%
Cow	None	36	33.96
	1-3	61	57.54
	>3	9	8.49
Goat	None	58	54.71
	1-3	37	34.90
	>3	11	10.37
Sheep	None	96	90.56
	1-3	4	3.77
	>3	6	5.66
Hen	None	59	55.66
	1-5	29	27.35
	>5	18	16.98
Duck	None	79	74.52
	1-5	18	16.98
	>5	9	8.49

### 6.5 School Going Children of Respondents

Educating a child is very important for a family. More than half of the respondents from this community had school going children who were going to the school out of their own village rather than own village. A significant finding was that, the proportion of surveyed peoples' family without school going children was 42.5%. Near about half of the respondents stated their children attain their own villages' school. Literacy Rate for 6 years and above kids was not satisfactory among this group that takes places average half of the surveyed people as positively. This table presented that about advantage and disadvantage of combined education of children. More than half of the respondents reported that, whether children getting the opportunity to receive education with all caste's together at school. They were asked about their own language alphabet. Very few respondents of Santal community replied positively. Answer being positive, children feeling problem in alphabet and linguistic receiving education in Bangla medium to the Santal is 29.2%. Almost all the families have more than 2 or 3 school going children. Most of the Santal family have more than 2 school going children who learn in their own and Bengali language. They were badly affected by the severe impact of drought in case of paying educational expenses.

Concerning the Education of Children	Category	Santal	
		(N=106)	
		n	%
Children going to school	Yes	61	57.50
	No	45	42.50
Location	Own village	52	49.10
	Other places	54	50.90
Literacy rate (6 years and above kids)	Male	44	42.72
	Female	59	57.28
Advantages of co-education system	Children receive education with all caste's together at school	67	63.20
	Having own language's alphabets	4	3.80
	Children feeling problem in alphabets and linguistic receiving education in Bangla medium at school	31	29.20

### 6.6 Food Habit of the Respondents

Healthy and sufficient food taking habit is very important for sound health. Almost all of the respondents from Santal community were taken one time food in a day and this ratio for this community was also applicable in terms of taking meal for three time in a day. More than three times inadequate food taker respondents of the Santal was 92.5%. More than half of the respondents from this community stated that they have taken hobby food according to their liking which is 67.9%. About 22.6% of the respondents informed that they have taken hobby food in a month. A few number of respondents of this community had never taken any hobby food. Most of the respondents of this community habitat to taken sort



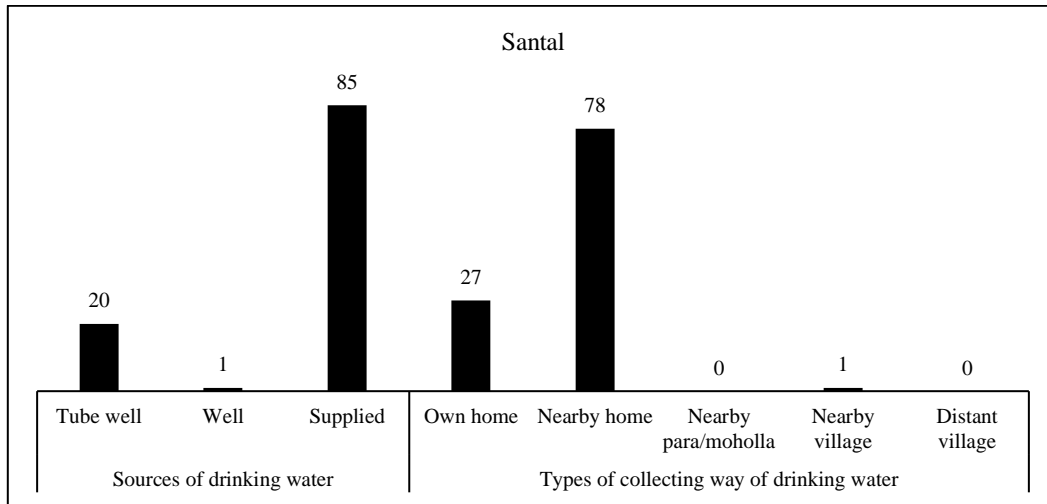
of cake according to their liking. In the dry season there was seen considerable changes in their food habit. They spend their day eating dry foods sometimes as they unable to purchase rice. They took two times meal in a day and sometimes it was hard to manage one time meal for many families.

Food habit		Category	Santal	
			(N=106)	
			n	%
Daily	1 time	In proportion to	106	100.00
	2 times	In proportion to	106	100.00
		Inadequate	0	0.00
	3 times	In proportion to	106	100.00
	More than 3 times	Inadequate	98	92.45
In proportion to		8	7.54	
Occasion of family	Protein food	In a week	42	39.62
		In a month	28	26.41
		According to liking	36	33.96
	Hobby Food	In a week	2	1.88
		In a month	24	22.64
		In a year	6	5.66
		According to liking	72	67.92
		Not at all	2	1.88
	Sort of Cake	In a week	1	0.94
		In a year	1	0.94
		According to liking	103	97.16
		Not at all	1	0.94

### 6.7 Access to Drinking Water Sources

There were numerous water sources in the region. Large number of respondents (85.0%) ensured about their source of drinking water was supply water. The distribution of water by public utilities, commercial organizations, community endeavors, or individuals, usually via a system of pumps and pipes, is referred to supply water. The figure below also depicts the number of respondents and their collecting way of drinking water. Large number of respondents from Santal (78.0%) had collected water nearby home. That means, they had no personal watering system at their own house. A few number of the respondents from this community indicated their own home as collecting way of drinking water. The government had provided a number of deep tube well which could not meet the water needs of the entire villagers. Those who did not get tube well facility had to fetch water from far away which costs a lot for them during drought.

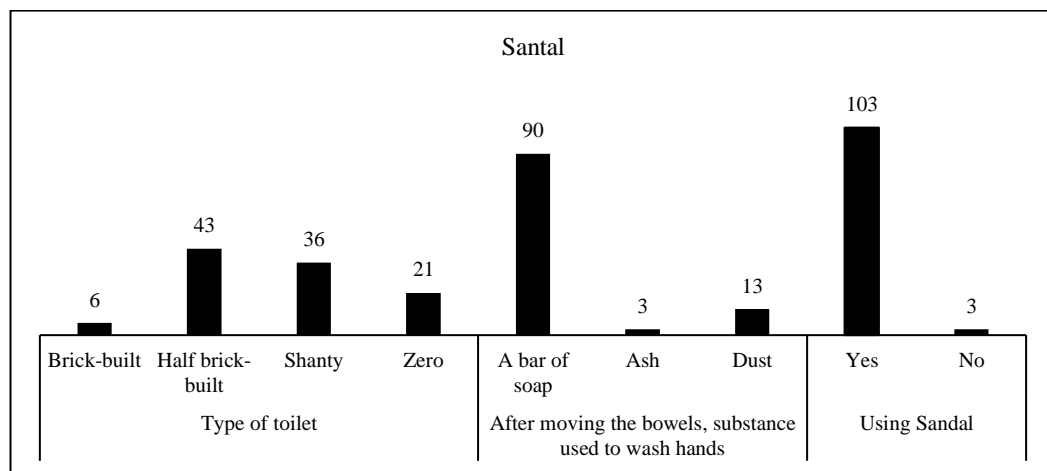
**Figure 01: Drinking Water Sources**



**6.8 Toilet Facilities of the Respondents**

Health and hygiene are an important factor in social life. According to the result, less than half of the respondents (40.6%) used half brick-built toilet. On the other hand, A few number of respondents used shanty-built toilet. About 90.0% respondents used a bar of soap after using toilet. It was notable that, A few number (3.0%) of respondents used ash and it is 12.3% for dust. Almost all of the respondents used sandal. In most of the Santal community, half brick built and shanty-built toilets were seen near their houses. Now, they didn't have to use open spaces for toilet.

**Figure 02: Respondent's Toilet Facilities**



## **7. Recommendation**

Santal community is one of the deprived and disadvantaged groups among the ethnic communities of Bangladesh. To make the future, existence of Santals community, they should be given a favorable environment for income generation with proper motivation, training and others strategies.

Education level of these women are miserable, they don't think about any alternative strategies in supporting family financially. Educating Santal and Oraon women is an important indicator that will make them aware of their livelihood. If female are educated then they will be able to think about alternative way of income. Service providers can organize old age education program by volunteer's women as their education level is so poor.

Santals women are found in unskilled in facing hazards. Different levels of training facilities in dealing with any natural calamity including drought are needed to be provided. Local authorities can arrange seminar or meeting in this regard where experts will teach them about drought fighting mechanism, cost-benefit way to reduce drought risk and so on.

Water scarcity in drought season is a common scenario in this community. It will be better if it is possible to provide access to water for irrigation throughout the year. Collaboration with local pond owner and ethnic community will be effective in this case. Again, local leaders may play role to build the deal with pond owner and themselves as a result owners give the opportunity to use water.

Necessary steps are needed to be taken to prevent exploitation in non-agricultural sector to keep the livelihood normal during drought. Women should get the opportunity in doing alternative of agricultural task in drought period. Small business, homestead gardening, handicraft, rearing domestic animals can consider for this case.

## **8. Conclusion**

This study focuses on the agrarian Santals women in Northern part of Bangladesh. Most of the time, male members of Santal family are to stay far from the village in searching of work that led women to struggle for survival. Low income women are poor to fight with the scarcity of many necessities. Being ethnic community, Santals are different from others because of their livelihood pattern and some of their special characteristics. In the dry season they have to cut the kids' educational cost as well as considerable changes in their food habit. Women are used to collect water from supply station but it kills their time. The lack of challenge free housing increased their vulnerabilities. The infrastructure of their community is also vulnerable compared to majority people of the country. A particular part of their earnings has to pay the moneylender as Santals family are deficiently land owner. They have to face difficulties in cultivating land especially in the lean season. Selling domestic animals result of coping strategies with scarcity of water. The study suggested that Government should take necessary initiatives in reducing scarcity of water crisis of Santal women and therefore,

SDGs goals will be achieved. The water crises make Barind Santla women more vulnerable in the interface of lean session with other type of socio-economic helplessness. There are many dimensions of the scarcity of water lead to socio-economic vulnerabilities in the agrarian Santal women folk are not addressed in this research, could be studied in future.

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