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## Echoes of Existence, Identity and Socio-political Past: A Critical Ethnography of Santhal Community of Morang district of Nepal

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### ABSTRACT

Santhals, an indigenous community in the Terai districts of Nepal, including Jhapa, Morang, and Sunsari (Bhattarai, 2012; Siwakoti, 2013; Rai, 2021). This paper explores the socio-political history and their effects on existence and identity of the Santhal community at Uurlabari Municipality of Morang district in Nepal. This study applies qualitative approach with critical ethnography as a methodological road map to dig into the life hi(stories) and lived experiences of the participants. The vignettes and anecdotes from the field participants are used as analytical tools to represent the interpretation of the life hi(stories) and lived experiences as field texts gathered through interviews, focus group discussions, participant observations and key informant interviews. Santhals are extremely marginalized indigenous group who are struggling for the better existence and identity. This indigenous group fell victim of vicious behavior of the later immigrants (outsiders) during the early period of immigrant settlement in the area which has caused adverse effect in their survival and identity. This research argues that the later immigrants in the area shattered the research participants' existence and identity by taking advantage of their illiteracy and lamblike character. The malicious actions of the later immigrants and lack of self-awareness caused loss of their land assets. Consequently, they are living under extremely marginalized conditions struggling for their better existence and identity at present. By focusing on their life histories and lived experiences, this study sheds light on the Santhal community's sufferings and resilience in their existence and identity.

### INTRODUCTION

Nepali society is an example of rich embroidery of ethnic indigenous diversity (Rai & Rai, 2021). This makes Nepal a unique epitome of heterogeneous linguistically, religiously, culturally, and geographically. Heterogeneity has contributed to forming varieties of geographical regionality and socio-cultural facets of Nepalese society. In this connection, Santhals, an ethnic group of people in eastern Terai have added a petal to the huge garland of heterogeneity in an epic example of social diversity. They live in Jhapa, Morang and Sunsari of Koshi province and are highly marginalized (Siwakoti, 2020). They were socially discriminated as untouchables in the society. This study deals with existence of being Santhals, identity transformation- landlord to peasant and the socio-political past that led to current conditions of the Santhal community. Historically, Santhals entered Nepal from Jharkhand and West Bengal, India, often for hunting-gathering or were brought by ruling groups like the Ranas to clear Tarai forests for cultivation (Subba *et al.*, 2017; p. 2).

According to the National Population and Housing Census (NPHC, 2021) the total population of Santhal in Nepal is 57310 which is 0.2% out of the total population of Nepal. They are also known as Satars in the Terai region of Nepal, however; they preferably chose to be called Santhals in general. They speak in their own mother tongue called Santhali language that belongs to Munda language of India (Ghurye, 1932) as cited in Siwakoti

(2018). They believe that their ancestors were the first human creation ever created in this world (Siwakoti, 2015). This study explores their socio-political dynamics, detouring their past as landlords, peasant and marginalized at present unraveling the intersecting challenges echoing with qualitative insights.

This study uncovers the Santhals' lived experiences in Uurlabari Municipality, Morang District, and explores how their identity and existence transformed their experience as early inhabitants of the area. The Santhal community is one of the aboriginal ethnic groups of Nepal with an intricate culture, social-political history, and identity shaped by both internal factors- the changing lifestyles of Santhals and external forces-socio-political changes influenced by globalization. They bear the brunt of a wide range of historical and contemporary forms of political and cultural life, as well as migratory movements. The growing trend of migration to urban areas and to other countries, driven by the need for sustenance, accelerates the interplay between tradition and globalization, which in turn alters the socio-political representation of the community and undermines their cultural heritages (Barakoti, 2023; Murmu, 2023)

Political awareness of the Santhal regarding their representation is vividly captured in their advocacy movements for political rights and representation (Mandal, 2024; Majumdar & Chatterjee, 2021). The rise of identity politics during social turbulence such as the indigenous movement after 2006 is an example of how Santhal youth

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have responded to their marginalization with activism centered on land and culture (Mandal, 2024). The aim of this critical ethnography is to document such narratives and to interrogate how the sociopolitical context of Nepal shapes the Santhal community's cultural identity and commemoration of shared history, particularly in the context of federalism and ethnic politics (Kafle *et al.*, 2024).

The Santhals' rich cultural heritage includes music, dance, and festivals, which are an expression of identity and resilience, further enriched by their indigenous ecological wisdom (Krishnamurti, 2024; Siwakoti, 2018). These aspects are critical to understanding their defiance and ingenuity in grappling with modernity, and the risk of cultural erosion (Majumdar & Chatterjee, 2021; Chakraborty, 2024). My research seeks to document the experiences of the Santhal people through qualitative methods such as interviews and participant observation, depicting the meaning making as they negotiate their identities within the socio-political changes in Nepal (Kadariya, 2024). This study explores and reveals the circumstances that led to the loss of Santhals' identity and existence, explicitly telling life stories of the lost land, representing the critical voices from the study area.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The Santhal community, a tribal ethnic group belongs to the largest groups of Indian subcontinents who belong to Proto-Australoid community. They use their mother tongue, the Santhali language, which is derived from the Austroasiatic family, indistinctly related to Vietnamese and Khmer (Soren & Jamir, 2020; pp. 82). They further note that their mother tongue basically belongs to the Munda, Mahli, Bhumij, Ho, Kharia family of Austroasiatic languages.

Ojha (1983) writes that although human habitation in the early years in the Terai was very sparse, due to the unhealthy malarial climate prevalent in the region, various localities in the central and eastern Terai had several small population centers thriving on the rich lands (pp. 21). On one hand, he believed the indigenous Tharu groups had inhabited in the central Terai who had developed immune system against malarial disease during the period. On the other hand, it is believed that the eastern Terai was inhabited by the indigenous Santhal groups who were settled by Ranas for the purpose of cultivating crops (Subba *et al.*, 2017; Barakoti, 2023)

The literature mentions that the Santhal community is one of the earliest indigenous groups in the eastern Terai region of Nepal, with historical roots tracing back to ancient settlements in the plains. Traditionally reliant on hunting, fishing, and forest-based livelihoods, the Santhals have undergone significant socio-economic transformations due to modernization and geopolitical shifts, leading many to transition into agricultural wage labor (Subba *et al.*, 2017; Barakoti, 2023; Siwakoti (Olee), 2018; Rai, 2021).

The Santhal community, one of the largest tribal groups

in Asia, has a rich tapestry of history and cultural identity embedded in the socio-political fabric of Nepal. Historical narratives reveal that colonial impact significantly shaped the socio-political consciousness of tribal communities, including the Santhal. Studies emphasize how colonial constructions of race continue to influence identities in post-colonial contexts, urging that identity must be understood through historical and cultural lenses (Reddy & Gleibs, 2019). This colonial legacy intertwines with contemporary socio-political environments, as seen in the Santhal's struggles for cultural preservation, land rights, and political representation within larger national dynamics (Mandal, 2024; Chakraborty & Kesharwani, 2024).

The interplay between socio-political environments and identity construction is notably complex for the Santhal community. Evidence indicates that tribally aligned political movements often radiate from an acute awareness of their socio-political realities. Activists and intellectuals within the community underscore the importance of maintaining cultural practices while adapting to the pressures of a modern, changing socio-political landscape. The narratives constructed around their identity not only serve as reflections of past struggles but also as frameworks through which they navigate present-day challenges (Reddy & Gleibs, 2019; Mukherjee, 2020).

The Santhal community is recognized as an indigenous, aboriginal, and ancient ethnic group with a significant historical presence in Nepal's eastern Terai region, primarily concentrated in the Jhapa and Morang districts. They are considered among the earliest inhabitants of this eastern plain area, having historically migrated or been brought from India specifically for agricultural purposes (Barakoti, 2023; Siwakoti (Olee), 2018; Kadariya, 2024). Kadariya (2024) finds that the identity at present is the byproduct of historical forces and the circumstances they faced, the force that held them consistently evolving and adapting to the changing realities in the place they have been residing for generations. The ever evolving identities of the Santhals have captured their ways of life in the place of their residence. The anthropological research from Haldibari rural municipality of Jhapa district highlights the changing nomenclature and self-identification throughout the history of their lives. For example, Santhals refer to themselves as the first human being as 'Hor' meaning 'man' whose ethnic nomenclature and identity have been ever changing from Kherwal to Saountar, Sountar to Santal, Santal to Satar, and then to Satar to Santal or Santhal. It readily reflects the continuous process of identity transformation (Kadariya, 2024; p. 8). The Santhals' traditional livelihoods revolved around hunting and fishing; however, societal modernization and geopolitical shifts have compelled a transition towards daily wage labor, predominantly within the agricultural sector (Subba *et al.*, 2017; Rai, 2021).

Culturally, the Santhals hold strong beliefs in folk medicine and traditional healers, attributing illnesses to

divine wrath or the influence of evil spirits (Barakoti, 2023). They are also described as a nature-worshipping community (Kadariya, 2024; Rai, 2021; Soren & Jamir, 2020), for example, they celebrate Baha festival dedicated to flowers in February to March welcoming the spring season of flowering. They also celebrate Sohrae festival to enjoy the harvest of their crops performing rituals in the paddy fields and is combined with pomp and enthusiasm (Soren & Jamir, 2020; pp. 10).

The literature mentions that long-standing injustices against the Santhal people have engendered an enduring fragmentation within the community, a fissure that invariably colors its political engagement within contemporary governance (Dutta & Sinha, 2022; Martinez-Damia *et al.*, 2024). Such fragmentation affirms that ethnic identity, rather than receding, continues to exert decisive leverage in socio-political arenas, often orientating decision-making and shaping the degree and form of Santhal communal solidarity (Greaves *et al.*, 2018). Empirical evaluations further demonstrate that the political comportment of indigenous groups tends to operate within ethnic imaginaries, thereby embedding the persistent enterprise of claiming rights and identity within a broader and frequently indifferent national framework (Dutta & Sinha, 2022).

Majority of the literature have explored and discussed about Santhal's origin, livelihoods, social and political movements, their struggles making and unmaking of their identity, resilience and coping up with the socio-cultural and environmental challenges, migration and marginalization and in different other dimensions (see for examples Barakoti, 2023; Bohra & Massey, 2009; Kharel *et al.*, 2019; Siwakoti (Olee), 2018; Chakraborty & Kesharwani, 2024; Dey, 2015; Kadariya, 2024; Gartaula & Niehof, 2013) so on.

However, literature concerning the harms of their existence and identity caused by the social, cultural, and political power dimensions historically connected to their land authority is rarely addressed. The research gap centers within a structural invasion upon their social, cultural and political indigenous environments and loss of their identity as a landlord. This study tries to address such a nuanced dimension of the Santhal community through critical paradigm of ethnographic study.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### A Critical Ethnographic Engagement: Paradigm and Positionality

Within the qualitative paradigm of the study, I select critical ethnography as a methodology. Critical ethnography is used as an approach in this study that probes social structures and asks critical structural questions rather than descriptive ones. I observed the power imbalance and socio-political hegemony transcended by the new social force- the hill immigrants. In this epoch an ethnographic critique of social structures involves examining inequity, and the interplay of domination, resistance, and the overshadowed voices that constitute social worlds of the

Santhal community. This was quintessentially the case for the Santhal community, an ethnic indigenous community in Nepal, as critical ethnography aimed to dismantle hegemonic narratives about the Santhals, rather than simply describe their socio-political realities. I believe that research reflexivity is the necessity of acknowledgement of positionality, and of constructing knowledge not as an external or dispassionate observer, but as an active participant.

For this study, I blended the multifaceted stories which in the context of the community, framed the ethnographic discourse by exploring the history and the contemporary issues of the Santhal community and investigating identity, cultural resilience, and socio-political activism, with an emphasis on ethnography and its potential to untangle the multifaceted layers of indigenous life within modernity (Chen, 2011; Paudel, 2017).

Within the methodological study of the Santhal community in the Morang district, the function of critical ethnography stands out as an essential method. It has been noted that critical ethnography serves the purpose of engaging with the power relations, socio-political concerns, and the lived realities of minorities, particularly in the context of their world (Masta & Secules, 2021), (Yarahmadi *et al.*, 2024). This approach helps to illuminate the myriad factors that shape and are shaped by the Santhal identity, their cultural practices, and the social and structural inequities that accompany the injustices on Santhal community. Critical ethnography is not just a matter of chronicling the so-called Santhal echoes of existence. It is also a way of voicing and challenging the socio-political power relations in which the Santhal are situated (Adhikari, 2023).

### Data Generation Strategies

I employed engaged ethnographic data generation strategies to enhance my in-depth understanding of their past. For this, Majhi Hadam, Pranik, Jog Majhi, Godit, and I engaged in social and cultural activities from April to June of 2025. This engagement provided me with huge space to unveil subtle dimensions of Santhal's life hi(stories). The delicate details of their social, cultural, economic and political life hi(stories) which prompted significance and relevance for their study.

The critical ethnographic data generation is rather complex, to address this complexity I used participant observation, informal engagement for in-depth understandings, and community work (Adhikari, 2023). Involving myself in watching participants entailed not only attending to their social life as ethnographic rituals but as a researcher I engaged myself in a community's life to acquire genuine experiences about the relationships and activities that take place (Salisbury & Pruitt, 2002). Fieldwork, which is the practical phase of ethnography, facilitated a critical examination of claims made by the community and helps render its portrait (LeCompte *et al.*, 2010). Apart from participant observation, individual narratives were given significant space obtained through

engaged participation.

This approach allowed me to be eyeing into different angles to be explored which is pivotal for grasping the complex realities of the Santhal community. It is demonstrated that incorporating different sources of data enhances understanding of social complexity through the work of Ako-Arrey's critical interpretive analysis in qualitative research method (Wang *et al.*, 2022). Moreover,

writing reflective diaries can improve the reflexivity of a researcher, allowing them to examine their subjectivity and preconceived ideas over the course of the research (Dasli & Sangster, 2021). Reflective diaries help the researcher engage more with the data collected, which is also known as reflexivity, leading to deeper insight.

The following table represents the research participants and their demographic information.

**Table 1:** Demographic Information of Research Participants

S. No.	Pseudo Name	Age	Occupation 1	Occupation 2
1	Bhaktiman	83	Farmer	Shaman
2	Baburam	49	Farmer	Pranik (Village priest)
3	Biren	40	Farmer	Godit (Messenger)
4	Gangi	37	Farmer	Housewife
5	Shahado	78	Farmer	Jog Majhi (Guardian of moral conduct)
6	Kailas	81	Farmer	Majhi Hadam (Elected village headman)

**Data Analysis Strategies**

In critical ethnography, data is typically analyzed thematically and framed within an interpretive context that goes beyond the mere responses provided, paying greater attention to the data provided. Often, researchers apply a critical discourse analysis lens to the community's dialogue and investigate the associated power relations to highlight the prevailing socio-political dynamics (Yarahmadi *et al.*, 2024). The responses were transcribed, and a three-step coding hierarchy was followed to select the themes to accurately represent the voices of the participants. The cyclical iterative process was followed for coding the data. First stage commenced with open coding followed by axial coding and ended with selective coding that helped to assign themes from transcription and memo written during the data gathering process. This interpretive approach is described by Carspecken's work, which stresses the importance of understanding and critiquing the socio-political contexts that shape the lived realities of marginalized groups through a reconstructive analysis (Bidabadi *et al.*, 2017). An iterative approach that allows for enhanced understanding of the research context leveraging the community's ongoing participation is also effective (Masta & Secules, 2021). Furthermore, to assess the voices of the participants, vignettes and excerpts are concurrently used to make the discussion vibrant and to critically present the meaning making process.

**Significance and Relevance**

The importance of critical ethnography in the research of the Santhal community stems from the particularities of their identities and the societal framework that surrounds them. This methodology not only documents Santhal's cultural heritage but also acts as a tool for confronting systemic inequities. Researchers who advocate for Santhal voices automatically take their identity politics as a site for

struggle. This advocacy eases the burden of normative narratives produced about indigenous communities (Watson, 2010; Marcus, 2013). As a result, critical ethnography advances understanding of the intersections of socio-political histories and contemporary identity and experience, contributing to Nepal's indigenous rights and identity reclamation discourse.

As a final note, the ethnographic approach stands out as the most critical for understanding the Santhal of Morang district. Researchers can advance richer and deeper representations of their lives alongside critical reflections about the socio-political contexts of the Santhal community with integrated techniques of data generation and analysis.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Theme 1: Struggle and Exodus**

Early immigrants from Hill added a new dimension of security in the life of Santhal in the area in the decade of 1950s. The peaceful isolated living with environmental adaptations against fatal malarial epidemic (at least for others-non-Santhals) was deteriorated by 'Pahariyas' incoming encroaching toiled and tilled land of Santhals. The immigration event from 'Pahad' brought a pandora's box to the indigenous Santhal that added socio-political struggles into the life of peace-loving laymen Santhals consequently many followed the path away from their original homeland to border area with India and other districts of Nepal. After introduction of democracy in 1951, internal migration from Hill to Terai was accelerated caused by rapid population growth in the hilly region and control of malaria in Terai (Piya & Joshi, 2016; Khatiwoda, 2014; Bohra & Massey, 2009).

Since Santhal were only the early settlers of eastern Terai and some Tharu population in the central Terai, other communities did not have access to this virgin land due to the tropical climatic condition and wide spread of Malaria.

As Ojha (1983) notes that various localities in the central and eastern terai lived with sparse population cultivating crops on the fertile land (pp. 21). The early 1980s studies indicate that Terai land was sparsely populated by malaria immuned indigenous group. The post malarial eradication brought hazard of hill migration toward Terai in search of fertile land for cultivation resulting in a heavy deforestation process systematically (Chalise,1983).

### **Kailas at his 81 describes his community's struggles against odds**

I have heard that many of the people like you, say that our ancestors were originally from India or somewhere else, but my great grandfathers belong to this land. They fought with the tropical climate and environment in the isolated jungle. They fought with wild animals to live and protect their crops, families and houses. They invented ways to defeat the fatal malarial disease which was preposterous to other communities and made us separated and isolated for centuries from outside world (Ojha, 1983; Chalise, 1983). Our community lived with tranquility with enough hunting and gathering grounds and also performing agriculture. But when Hill immigrants arrived with new language and power of authority, our community began falling the victim of language gap and innocence upon the legal procedures.

I see this epoch as the commencement of liberal politics because the secluded and entrusted land and forest belonging to Santhals were initiated as official possession to individual Pahariyas which were left behind before for only Santhals in the east and Tharu in the central Terai (Ojha, 1983) which later emphasized government mechanism by consent that shaped the public policy on land possession. This power relation between weak and old (Santhal) and strong and new (Hill immigrants) caused systematic and structural differences causing Santhal population to be at the end of the social, economic and political hierarchy.

Regarding the originality, various scholarships have been found arguing that because of the migratory habit and adoption of shifting agriculture, and, they have no recorded history, due to which it is difficult to determine their origin (Murmu, 2009; Siwakoti (Olee) (2018). However, my participants believe that they were only the 'Adibasi' – the original residents of the study area. Niraula (2009) comments that Santhals are originally an indigenous ethnic group of Nepal holding their own distinctive cultural and social behaviours, language and social systems that has added a petal to the diversified culture of Nepal. The question is new social and political power immigrated from Hills have deterred the originality that has caused them to be in the mayhem like being and identity.

### **Bhaktiman, 83 years old participant, remembered his old days**

We were only the dwellers until 1960s. We used to cultivate crops freely and peacefully; we hunted wild animals freely.

But when Pahariyas began coming into our land, some of them created havoc in our tranquil living. Especially a Rai caste man used to come at our home with gun and Khukuri to threaten and take away our belongings like chicken, duck, goat, cow, grains like paddy and maize. In doing so, our female members were not safe. Many of our people did not resist the terror and migrated to other neighboring districts or border area of India and many of them went to India. They did not return. However, some of us resisted the atrocities and hooliganism of hill immigrants and we are here until now.

Baburam, who is 49 and recently appointed Pranik of the village, referred to his father telling allegory about forceful eviction of Santhal people out of the village. He notes:

It was horrific day to remember when some of the male members were accused of murdering a person from Hill. It was committed by someone themselves due to the extreme competition of possession of land in the area by clearing forest. After this event, many Santhal members left the village to avoid unnecessary arrest and imprisonment whose land ultimately was occupied by the Hill immigrants. And later year, land officer from Biratnagar registered those lands to the Hill immigrants. This was how our community members lost their original land to Hill immigrants.

The terror perpetuated by the hill immigrants against the Santhal community in the study area was rampant. The land was structurally confiscated through the systematic means of official registration during the early period of migration from Hills. These circumstances forced Santhal community struggle for their survival against the new social forces as Hill immigrants. Imperfect and imbalance power relations between original inhabitants- the Santhal ethnic groups and the Hill immigrants as new social forces caused the loss of identity as a landlord of Terai. Thus, this paper considers the new social forces- the hill immigrants as source of power who opened pandora's box in eastern Terai low land of Nepal.

### **Theme 2: The Cause of Language Barrier and lack of Education**

When my family migrated from Pahad in 1986 (2043 BS), I heard several narratives about this community, such as, they were ignorant and innocent. I found them very friendly if they were treated well but they were aggressive to the people who disturb their family and relatives. Majority of them did not know Nepali language. They used to talk in their own language. Now, they speak Nepali very well.

There is only one person from that community who is a government official (B. Khadka, personal communication, May 16, 2025). Majority of the Santhal community lost their land due to ignorance and innocence combined with their other factors, for which next theme is dedicated to. Here I present how majority of my participants' community lost their land.

Majority of the households were strange to new people

with colorful faces, new language they speak and new culture they follow.

Basically, Santhals were hunting and gathering community (until the time that the forest remained intact for them to hunt wild animals in the study area) along with agricultural activities (Datta & Mete, 2025; Siwakoti (Olee), 2018; Dey, 2015; Kharel *et al.*, 2019). Until the early 20th century, Santhals did not have literacy and educating culture in formal sense (Carrin, 2022; Dutta & Sinha, 2022). Majority of Santhal members in the study area did not understand Nepali language due to which many of the community members lost their land to Hill immigrants officially. The event of losing land caused them to flee from the village as they did not like to remain peasant laborers under the control of new social forces- the Hill immigrants.

The new powerful group from the Hill suppressed the original power over their language and socio-economic aspects and imposed them with socio-political dominations that erased Santhal community's authentically isolated identity of Eastern Terai.

**Shahado at his 78, speaks how his family lost their land. He tells**

(Yo Sohra/Satra Saalko Kuraa ho). My family had more than 12 Bighas of land here. My father did not know Nepali language and none of us were literate enough to understand the law about paying taxes to the government office. We cultivated the land and used to run our livelihood peacefully. But some years later, two government officials arrived in our village from Biratnagar who informed my father that since he had not paid tax of his land for several years, the land is going to be taken by the government. This event took place during 1959/60 when I was a young boy. Now, I have small plot of land where I live together with my three sons' family.

**Bhaktiman has his own story to tell about the land lost. He eagerly tells**

My father expired when I was 12 years old. He had 12 Bighas, 19 Kathaa and 10 Dhur of land by that time. I was only the son to him. My mother registered the land in my name through government officials who had opened office in Biratnagar. My mother did not know Nepali language. I also did not know it. I never attended school because there were no schools anywhere in this area. My mother used to pay taxes in the office established in Rajghat at that time. But some years later, I do not remember exactly but it should be "18 or 19" Saal (i.e. 2018 or 2019 BS) which is 1961 or 1962 two of the government officials visited village and the land registered in my name was taken away and given to the Hill immigrants which I see at present many houses are being constructed. Since then, I started working in others field for my livelihood. At present, my son and daughter have been working in abroad due to which I am able to buy small land plot of two Kathaa and 10 Dhur where my small house stands on today.

The Santhal's inhabited land was challenged by the new social and political forces from the Hill how used condign authority which deteriorated the original community's existence and identity enforced heavily through the land settlement program in the Terai (Ojha, 1983). He comments that the major characteristic of land settlement in the Terai was the manpower for which the then government did not entertain Indian labor migration but encouraged Hill population to migrate and establish agriculture. The Hill immigrants were encouraged through indirect incentives (Regmi, 1971, pp. 83 as cited in (Ojha, 1983, pp. 26) and they were directly encouraged by enforcing Rapti and Morang area resettlement plans (Ojha, 1983; pp. 26; Gartaula & Niehof, 2013, pp. 31). Structural and systematic authorization of the land plots in terms of land settlement with the governmental favoritism to only one of the section of the community led to loss of identity and existence of being as powerless, leading them into exodus or staying as peasant in the study area. The lack of education and linguistic incomprehension posed a greater challenge to community's overall development process in the area. At present context, although Santhal community is grappling with challenges such as education and illiteracy, land displacement, social, economic, political and cultural assimilation, they are shining through uniting into communal group and reinventing themselves with resilience resisting the powerful others to protect their legacy upon the land and existence.

**Theme 3: Cultural Cause of Vicious Circle of Poverty**

Santhals are still fighting for their survival to live an honorable life. There are challenges and problems which are hampering in the path of their development process. They were marginalized structurally causing them to fall victim to the vicious circle of poverty by the encroachment and impeachment of new social and political forces in the past. As a poor and marginalized community now, Santhal as an indigenous ethnic community, hardly afford to take recourse to compensate power (Siwakoti (Olee), 2018, pp. 218; Chaudhuri, 1993).

There are internal and external forces responsible for evolution of vicious circle of poverty in Santhal community. The internal forces comprise cultural rituals prevalent for generations such as use of alcohol, illiteracy, hierarchical political system, etc. Similarly, external forces can be enlisted as new community with structural power, new law enforcement agency, merchants and money lenders, etc.

The scholarships ground it in the pretext that the powerful merchants and village money lenders forced them to be in the status of lower hierarchy based on the caste hierarchical structure to fit them in their customary traditions. Consequently, the Santhals were made landless laborers. They were thrown down to a status of outcast as they ignored the symbolic status of Hindu society such as culture on widow marriage and beef eating. This Hinduization process marginalized them into untouchables among the authoritative outsiders- the non

Santhals (Siwakoti (Olee), 2018, pp. 219-220; Somers, 1977, pp. 46). I believe that the entrance of new social and political groups from Hill brought the commencement of vicious circle of poverty that put them down as a marginalized and powerless indigenous ethnic group of the Terai.

**Baburam at his 49 and Biren at his 40 together voice their comment**

Fundamentally, our near past generations were also quite responsible for our suffering conditions at present. Although we obliged for many things towards them, but their way of celebrating festivals and rituals with compulsory alcohol, many taboos such as thinking of school going as non-sacred event, hierarchical Majhi Hadam system, non exposure to other communities due to lack of language learning and lack of education in the family. We believe that they were unable to understand the time and social changes taking place, for which we are suffering today. There are not any university graduate in Santhal's home right today in our place where we account for more than 1600 populations here with more than 300 households. However, we have been awaring our communitiy members in all the aspects of our life and we have organized ourselves and registered our organizations lately. We organize different awareness groups in different places in different districts like Jhapa, Morang and Sunsari. We have constructed our temple, we call it Jahar or Sarna as a religious center where we gather to perform rituals every year.

My participants has had the practice of drinking alcohol as a cultural pattern in every festivals and rituals they perform, whether it is religious festivals or social gatherings, occassions or ritual performances (Siwakoti (Olee), 2013). Gangi in her late 30s with two children claims:

Here in the village, all most all the boys from every house they start drinking when they reach to teen age. No households discourage the drinking habit of Santhal boys. When they start drinking they do not take their studies seriously and they fail the exam, eventually they begin leaving the school by grade seven or eight. Hardly our Santhal boys attained grade ten although school and teachers encourage for school. When they leave school, they start a business of either driving tractor or working as helpers in the village and nearby areas.

**Birendra a grade ten graduate from Santhal community of the study area adds**

Those who get dropped out from the village, they develop the habit of drinking and using even drugs due to the friend circles. They drive the tractor without license. Me and others, as responsible community members, try to convince them to achieve license through formal process but they do not like to do so. Thus, our community is still fighting and struggling against the community's poor culture based problem to stand up and walk at least with other community. We are trying our best to encourage

our children to get formal education for which our municipality is also supportive to our community at present.

My participants take their drinking culture as source of defame and marginalization, the wrecker of social, economic and political power from their ownership. The cultural philosophy established by their past generations compromised their living conditions today, for which they blame their own traditional identity (Das & Purkayastha, 2023). On the one hand, they blame their own traditinoal and cultural practices observed by their past generations which I believe to some extent it can be accepted that it was hurdle to their social and economic development. On the other hand, they feel pride to be Santhal because they have their own civilization and history whicy are being transferred verbally throughtout the generations (Siwakoti (Olee), 2018; Shamsuddoha & Jahan, 2016, pp. 206; )

In the context of use of alcohol in their commuity, there is a common proverb in Santhali community "Give me alcohol or death" (Shamsuddoha & Jahan, 2016, pp. 211). The past generations of the Santhal community used to believe that their supreme spirit commanded to brew rice beer named as Hadiya or Hariya.

In the study area, Santhal community has the culture of beer brewing system. The culture did (does) not prohibit boys for testing and making habits of drinking. It is one of the cultural processes to attain manhood and self establishment of masculinity in the community. It is a practice since generations but nowadays, community members do not want to share openly. Consequently, the male members are addicted to it from the early age. The common practice of drinking habit in the community during the festivals, occassions, ritual performances, etc. were rampant and the same tradition is being practiced in majority of households. The village headmen- the Majhi Hadam used to be drunkard, he used to be the first to taste the alcohol in every occasssion, rituals and festivals celebrated in the community. The same quality of drinking was being discussed by my participants which they find it quite unfathomably deepened into the daily life culture of their community even at present. As a result of this traditional practice, the identity and existence of original landlords of the plain land has dwindled and destroyed.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This critical ethnography has exposed how unfolding socio-political histories confront the Santhal community settled in Morang district, Nepal, in ways that are both profound and intractable. The research finds that the community's contemporary struggle is no accident of the present, but rather the cumulative reproduction of historic injury and systemic marginalization. The decisive moment occurred with the influx of hill immigrants under state-encouraged resettlement programs following malaria-conduction, which set in motion a logic of systematic land dispossession. Linguistic remove, pervasive illiteracy, and systematic deficit in legal consciousness rendered the Santhals vulnerable, and these incapacities were then

strategically capitalized upon by both the new settlers and state administrative agencies, enabling the progressive alienation of ancestral territories.

The reconstructed life hi(stories) of Santhal participants have therefore traced a heart-wrenching trajectory, from original ownership and autonomy in the eastern Terai to the condition of landless tenancy and marginalized wage-earning in what remains their part-claimed homeland. The eradication of economic supremacy has, in turn, corroded foundations of cultural and social identity, such that expropriation and dispossession have anesthetized the community's recognition of itself. Compounding this erosion, the investigation acknowledges endogenous dynamics: widespread alcohol dependency, alongside historic reticence to engage with formal educational systems, has entrenched a cycle of deprivation, and the very condition that should have served the bases of social agency has consistently inhibited a recovery of socio-political place and recognition.

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