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The Evolving Political Landscape of the Santhal Pargana With Reference to Identity, Land, and Power

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



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Abstract

The Santhal Pargana division of Jharkhand, India, represents a critical microcosm for understanding the interplay between tribal identity, socio-economic movements, and electoral politics in India's Adivasi heartland. This paper examines the historical and contemporary political dynamics of the Santhal Pargana. It argues that the region's politics is fundamentally structured by a persistent tension between assertions of tribal autonomy, often manifested through movements for land and cultural rights, and the integrating forces of party politics and state-led development. The analysis traces the political evolution from the seminal Santhal Hul of 1855 to the Jharkhand statehood movement and into the present day, where issues of displacement, resource alienation, and identity preservation continue to shape electoral choices and political mobilization. The paper concludes that while formal political power

has been achieved through the creation of Jharkhand, the core aspirations of the Santhal community self-determination and protection of their jal, jangal, jameen (water, forest, land) remain central and often contested arenas of political engagement.

Key Words

Santhal Pargana, Jharkhand, Adivasi Politics, Tribal Movements, Identity Politics, Land Rights..

Introduction

The Santhal Pargana, comprising the six districts of Dumka, Godda, Deoghar, Jamtara, Sahibganj, and Pakur, is more than a mere administrative division in eastern India. It is the historical and cultural epicenter of the Santhal community, one of India's largest and most politically significant Scheduled Tribes (Census of India, 2011). The region's politics is distinctive, characterized by a deep historical consciousness of rebellion and a continuous struggle for rights over resources and recognition (Guha, 1983). This paper seeks to analyze the unique political trajectory of the Santhal Pargana, moving beyond a mere electoral analysis to understand the socio-historical forces that shape its political behaviour.

The central research question this article addresses is: How have historical movements for autonomy and contemporary struggles over land and resources shaped the political parties, electoral outcomes, and modes of mobilization in the Santhal Pargana? The thesis posits that Santhal Pargana's politics is an

ongoing project of negotiating autonomy within the Indian state, where electoral politics is often a surface manifestation of deeper currents related to identity assertion and economic justice.

Historical Foundations: From Hul to Statehood

The political consciousness of the Santhal Pargana is indelibly marked by the Santhal Hul (Rebellion) of 1855–56. Led by Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, the revolt was a direct response to exploitation by colonial administrators, moneylenders (*dikus*), and landlords. Though brutally suppressed, the Hul established a powerful legacy of resistance against external oppression and became the foundational myth for Santhal identity and political mobilization (Guha, 1983).

This legacy of resistance provided the ideological fuel for the Jharkhand movement throughout the 20th century. The demand for a separate state, which culminated in the creation of Jharkhand in 2000, found its most fervent support in the Santhal Pargana (Corbridge & Jewitt, 1997). The region became a stronghold for political parties championing tribal causes, most notably the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), founded in 1972 by Shibu Soren. The JMM's ideology was rooted in the aspirations of the Santhals and other Adivasi groups, focusing on land rights, anti-displacement agitations, and cultural nationalism (Shah, 2010). Shibu Soren, popularly known as *Guruji*, leveraged the symbolism of the Hul and positioned himself as the inheritor of Sidhu and Kanhu's legacy, cementing a deep emotional connection with the electorate.

Contemporary Political Dynamics

The creation of Jharkhand did not mark the end of political struggle but rather its transformation. The political landscape of Santhal Pargana today is characterized by several key features:

- **The Enduring Dominance of the JMM:** The Jharkhand Mukti Morcha remains the most influential political force in the region. Its success is built on a combination of charismatic leadership (the Soren family dynasty), a robust organizational network rooted in rural areas, and its unwavering brand of “sons of the soil” politics. The party's core agenda continues to resonate, focusing on the implementation of the Chotanagpur Tenancy (CNT) Act and the Santhal Pargana Tenancy (SPT) Act, which are designed to protect tribal land from being transferred to non-tribals (Singh, 2018).
- **The Rise of a Political Dynasty:** The leadership of the JMM, and by extension the politics of the region, has transitioned from Shibu Soren to his sons, Hemant Soren and Durga Soren. Hemant Soren, who has served as Chief Minister of Jharkhand, represents a new generation of leadership one that must balance traditional tribal concerns with the demands of modern governance and development. His administration has focused on populist welfare schemes, but his arrest by central agencies in 2024 on corruption charges has been framed by his supporters as a political attack by the central Government (BJP), further entrenching a narrative of “Delhi vs. Jharkhand” (*The Hindu*, 2024).
- **The BJP's Inroads and Electoral Competition:** The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has made significant strategic inroads into the Santhal Pargana. Its strategy involves a multi-pronged approach:
 - **Development Agenda:** Promising infrastructure projects, electricity, and roads.
 - **Welfarism:** Efficient implementation of central Government schemes (e.g., Ujjwala, PMAY).
 - **Social Engineering:** Reaching out to non-tribal communities and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), whose population is significant in parts of the region, and attempting to cultivate a Hindu tribal identity that aligns with its broader ideological project (Pai, 2021).

This has made elections in Santhal Pargana highly competitive, with the BJP and JMM (often in alliance with the Congress and RJD) being the principal contenders.

- **Persistent Challenges and Mobilizing Issues:** Despite political representation, several enduring issues continue to drive political discourse and mobilization:

- **Land Alienation and Displacement:** The core issue remains the protection of tribal land from acquisition for mining, power plants (like the one in Godda), and industrial projects. Agitations against land grabs are frequent and often determine political loyalties (Xaxa, 2016).
- **Implementation of SPT/CNT Acts:** The dilution or non-implementation of these protective land laws is a perennial political hot-button issue. Parties are judged on their commitment to upholding them (Singh, 2018).
- **Migration and Livelihoods:** Poverty and lack of industrial development force seasonal migration for labour. Politics often revolves around promises of creating local employment and halting distress migration (Shah, 2010).
- **Identity and Culture:** The preservation of Santhali language and culture (e.g., demands for its inclusion in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution) remains a potent mobilizing tool (Tillin, 2013).

Conclusion

The politics of the Santhal Pargana is a complex and dynamic tapestry woven from threads of historical rebellion, cultural identity, and economic aspiration. The journey from the Hul to the halls of the Jharkhand assembly in Ranchi demonstrates a remarkable political awakening. However, the attainment of statehood has not rendered the struggle obsolete; it has merely changed its arena.

Electoral politics in the region is a constant referendum on which party or leader can best protect the community's land, culture, and economic interests from perceived internal and external threats. While the JMM's hegemony is built on its historical credibility, it faces a formidable challenge from the BJP's resource-rich and strategically astute campaign machinery. The future of Santhal Pargana's politics will likely be determined by the ability of its political actors to address the fundamental paradox of development: how to achieve economic progress without sacrificing the very land and identity that form the foundation of Santhal society. The political discourse, therefore, remains centered on the enduring slogan of *jal, jangal, jameen*.

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