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Cultural Transformation among Gen Z Santals: The Role of Academic Migration and Modernization

Suvendu Ghosh

Executive – Programs (Livelihood), Collectives for Integrated Livelihood Initiatives (CInI), E-620, Eastern Layout, Near Bortalla Durga Puja Maidan, Kangal Nagar, Sonari, Jamshedpur – 831011, Jharkhand, India.
Suvendughosh2000@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0000-4700-1252

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Abstract

The Santal community possesses a rich cultural heritage expressed through its language, traditional clothing, household practices and indigenous knowledge. However, increasing education, migration, modernization, market integration and interaction with wider society are contributing to changes in everyday cultural practices, particularly among Gen-Z. The present study examines changes in the linguistic and material culture of Santal Gen-Z in Harichandanpur Block, Keonjhar District, Odisha. A qualitative field-based approach was followed using direct observation, face-to-face interaction, informal interviews and field-level discussions. The study focused on changes in language use, traditional vocabulary, clothing, cooking utensils and eating utensils. The findings indicate increasing use of Odia, English and contemporary expressions alongside Santali, particularly in educational, employment and social contexts. Changes were also observed in clothing and household utensils, with modern garments and aluminium and stainless-steel utensils increasingly replacing traditional alternatives. Convenience, durability, affordability, market availability, time efficiency and wider social interaction were identified as major factors influencing these changes. The findings suggest that Santal Gen-Z is undergoing a process of cultural adaptation rather than complete cultural rejection. While these changes facilitate social mobility and participation in wider society, they may also create challenges for the intergenerational transmission of traditional language, knowledge and material heritage. The study highlights the need for culturally sensitive approaches to preserve Santal cultural heritage while recognising contemporary aspirations and changing lifestyles.

Keywords: Santal, Gen-Z, Linguistic Change, Material Culture, Cultural Change, Modernization, Cultural Heritage

1. Introduction

The Santal community is one of the major Indigenous tribal communities of eastern India, with a significant population in Odisha, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Bihar. In Odisha, Santals are particularly concentrated in Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar and Balasore districts. The community possesses a distinctive cultural heritage expressed through its language, traditional dress, food practices, festivals, music, dance, housing patterns and indigenous knowledge (Ota & Patnaik, 2014).

Santali belongs to the Munda group of the Austro-Asiatic language family and has a strong relationship with Santal cultural identity. The development of the Ol-Chiki script, associated with Pandit Raghunath Murmu, played an important role in strengthening Santali literacy and cultural expression (Murmu & Dash, 2012). Their study also highlighted the historical influence of dominant state languages on Santali and the role of Ol-Chiki in cultural revitalisation.

During the 2010s, research increasingly examined Santali language, script and identity beyond traditional ethnographic descriptions. Choksi (2014) discussed the relationship between Santali script practices and territorial identity, while Choksi (2017) examined Santali-language print culture and showed how language and script became important sites of cultural and political identity.

In Odisha, Ota and Patnaik (2014) documented the traditional cultural life of Santals, including dress, ornaments, housing, agriculture, festivals and religious practices, while also noting developmental changes in their contemporary way of life. Subsequently, Majhi (2017), in a study of Santals in Mayurbhanj, examined their contemporary socio-cultural life and reported the coexistence of Santali and Odia in everyday interaction, particularly in communication with outsiders.

The Santali-Odia Abhidhan published by the Government of Odisha in 2018 further recognised the close relationship between language, culture and traditional knowledge. It also noted that mainstream influence, education and electronic media are contributing to changes in tribal cultural practices and emphasised the importance of mother-tongue-based learning for cultural continuity (Majhi, 2018).

More recent research has also shown that Santali is not a static linguistic system. Choksi (2025) examined the use of Romanised Santali in digital communication and demonstrated how contemporary media create new forms of linguistic expression alongside established writing systems such as Ol-Chiki. These developments indicate that cultural change among Santals should not be understood only as cultural loss; rather, it may involve adaptation, negotiation and the emergence of new forms of cultural expression.

However, relatively limited field-based research has focused specifically on Gen-Z Santals and their everyday cultural practices at the local community level. In particular, changes in language use and material culture—such as clothing and household cooking and eating utensils—remain insufficiently examined together. Therefore, the present study investigates the changing linguistic and material culture of Santal Gen-Z in Harichandanpur Block, Keonjhar District, Odisha with particular attention to the influence of education, migration, modernization, market availability and interaction with wider society.

Objectives:

1) To identify the linguistic Change in the Gen-Z Generation.
2) To identify the Change in Material Culture.
3) To Assess the Effect of these Changes in Environment, Nature and their Tradition.

2. Literature Review

The Santal community is one of the major tribal communities of eastern India, with significant populations in Odisha, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Bihar. In Odisha, Santals are mainly concentrated in Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar and Balasore districts. Their cultural identity is closely associated with the Santali language, traditional dress, festivals, music, dance and indigenous knowledge (Ota & Patnaik, 2014).

Language plays an important role in maintaining Santal cultural identity. Santali belongs to the Munda group of the Austro-Asiatic language family and has its own Ol-Chiki script. Choksi (2017) highlighted how Santali writing, print media and the Ol-Chiki script have contributed to the development of linguistic identity and cultural consciousness

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among Santals. Similarly, Murmu and Dash (2012) argued that language and the Ol-Chiki script have become important markers of Santal identity and cultural revitalisation.

Studies on social change among Santals indicate that modernization, migration, education, market integration and interaction with wider society have influenced traditional cultural practices. Majhi (2017), in a study of Santals in Mayurbhanj, observed the coexistence of traditional cultural practices with increased use of Odia in interactions outside the community. Das (2016) also examined social transformation among Santals and highlighted changes in language and traditional material culture associated with processes of modernization and mainstreaming.

Government documentation further emphasises the relationship between language, education and cultural continuity. The Santali-Odia bilingual dictionary developed by the Government of Odisha notes that language, culture and traditional knowledge are interconnected and that mainstream influence and electronic media are contributing to cultural change (Majhi, 2018).

The relationship between language and cultural identity is not static. Choksi (2021) examined changes in the use of the Santali dual pronoun as an honorific and showed how linguistic practices have been influenced by education, dominant Indo-Aryan languages and changing ideas of respect and cultural identity. This study is particularly relevant to the present research because it demonstrates that linguistic change can occur through everyday interaction and changing social relationships rather than simply through complete replacement of one language by another.

3. Research Methodology

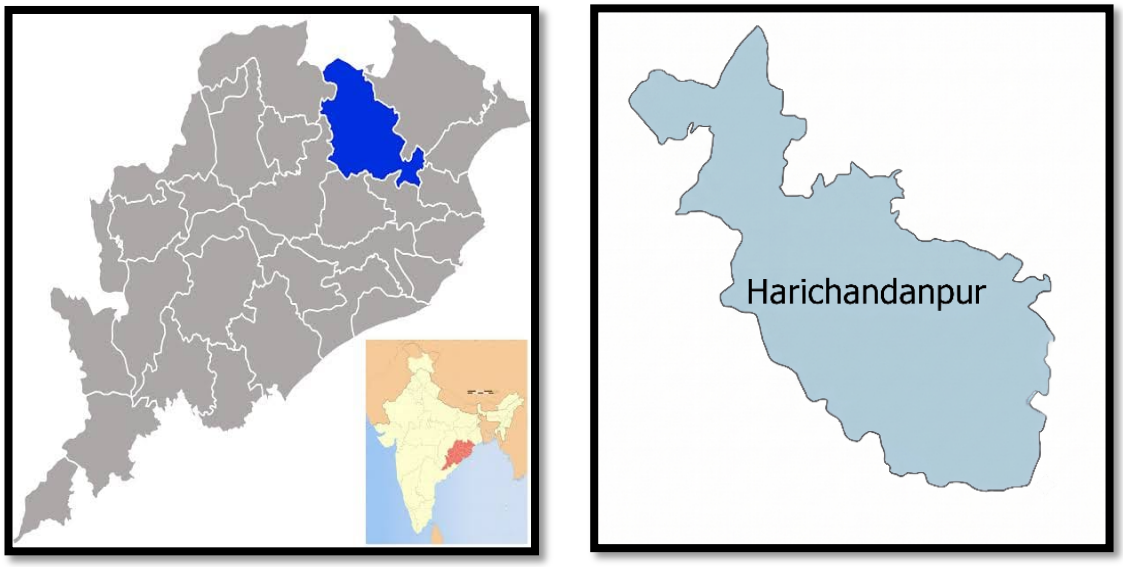
3.1 Study Area

The study was conducted in Harichandanpur Block of Keonjhar District, Odisha, India, with a particular focus on Santal communities and the cultural practices of Gen-Z. Harichandanpur Block represents a socially and culturally diverse rural area where Santal communities continue to maintain distinctive linguistic, social and material traditions while simultaneously experiencing increasing exposure to education, migration, markets, modern communication and wider social interactions.

The study area was selected to examine the ongoing transformation of Santal culture, particularly changes in language use and material culture, among younger members of the community. The geographical and social setting provides an appropriate context for understanding how traditional cultural practices are being negotiated in response to contemporary socioeconomic changes.

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3.2 Research Design

The study followed a qualitative, field-based exploratory approach to understand cultural and linguistic changes among Santal Gen-Z. The approach focused on documenting observable changes in everyday practices and understanding the factors associated with these changes from the perspective of community members.

The study primarily examined two interconnected dimensions of cultural change:

1. Linguistic culture – changes in the use of Santali and other languages, changes in vocabulary, language preferences and the influence of education, migration and wider social interaction.

2. Material culture – changes in traditional clothing, cooking utensils and eating utensils, and the factors influencing the adoption of contemporary alternatives.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Primary information was collected through direct field engagement with members of the Santal community. The major methods used for data collection were as follows:

3.3.1 Direct Observation

Direct observation was used to document cultural practices and behavioral patterns in the study area. Particular attention was given to the clothing worn by younger members of the community, the use of traditional and contemporary household utensils, and the languages used in everyday social interactions.

Observation helped identify differences between traditional practices and contemporary practices and provided contextual information that could be further explored through direct interaction with community members.

3.3.2 Face-to-Face Interaction

Face-to-face interactions were conducted with members of the Santal community, particularly younger individuals belonging to Gen-Z. These interactions focused on their language preferences, educational experiences, migration and

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exposure to urban environments, clothing choices, household practices and perceptions of traditional cultural practices.

Informal and conversational interactions were used to encourage participants to describe their experiences in their own words. This approach helped obtain contextual information regarding the reasons behind the observed cultural changes.

3.3.3 Informal Interviews and Discussions

Informal interviews and discussions were conducted to understand the perceptions of community members regarding changes in linguistic and material culture. Discussions focused on differences between traditional practices and those followed by the younger generation.

The information obtained through these discussions was used to complement the observations made during field visits and to identify the major factors associated with cultural transformation.

3.3.4 Documentation of Traditional and Contemporary Practices

Relevant observations and information were documented systematically during the fieldwork. Particular attention was given to traditional Santali vocabulary and its contemporary alternatives, clothing practices, cooking and eating utensils, and the social contexts in which traditional practices continue to be maintained.

3.4 Data Analysis

The collected information was analyzed using a qualitative thematic approach. Field observations and information obtained through face-to-face interactions were organized into major thematic categories. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns and factors associated with cultural change.

For linguistic culture, the analysis considered changes in vocabulary, language preference and the increasing functional use of Odia and English. For material culture, the analysis focused on changes in clothing and household utensils, along with factors such as availability, affordability, durability, convenience, social interaction and modernization.

The findings from different sources were compared to identify common patterns and to improve the contextual understanding of the observed changes. The analysis was primarily interpretive and descriptive rather than statistical.

3.5 Scope of the Study

The study focuses specifically on the cultural transformation experienced by Santal Gen-Z in Harichandanpur Block. It does not attempt to represent all Santal communities of Odisha or India. Instead, it provides a field-based understanding of selected changes in linguistic and material culture within the specific geographical and social context of the study area.

The methodology therefore enables the study to examine cultural change as a dynamic process in which traditional practices interact with contemporary influences such as education, migration, modernization, market integration and wider social interaction.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Linguistic Changes among Gen-Z in Santal Communities

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The study reveals noticeable changes in the linguistic practices of Gen-Z among the Santal communities of Harichandanpur Block, Keonjhar District, Odisha. These changes are associated with migration, education, modernization, and increasing interaction with the wider society.

One of the important factors contributing to linguistic change is the migration of young Santal people from their villages to nearby towns and urban areas for education and employment. During their stay outside the village, they interact with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. To communicate effectively with people outside their community, they increasingly use the Odia language, along with other commonly used languages. "When my son comes home from the hostel during the holidays, I have noticed him asking his mother for food in Odia—saying things like, 'Maa, mote bhato dio' (Mother, give me rice)" Said Hrusikesh Murmu (43). Continuous interaction with the wider society has therefore influenced their language preferences and everyday communication.

Another important factor is the limited availability of educational institutions that provide education through the Santali language. Many Santal students attend Odia-medium or English-medium schools. As a result, Odia and English receive greater importance in their educational environment, while the use of Santali becomes comparatively limited in formal settings. This situation may gradually affect the younger generation's familiarity with and regular use of their traditional language.

The study also indicates that access to government and private facilities and services requires communication with people and institutions outside the Santal community. Therefore, knowledge of the local/regional language, particularly Odia, becomes practically necessary. "When the government provides us with something, we have to sign in Odia; that is why we are having to learn the language" said Mansing (32). This creates a situation in which young people increasingly use Odia for administrative, educational, employment-related and social purposes.

Modernization and urban exposure further contribute to this linguistic transformation. As young Santal people increasingly move towards urban areas and participate in modern social and economic activities, they adapt their communication patterns to the surrounding linguistic environment. Consequently, traditional Santali expressions are sometimes replaced by commonly used modern or regional terms.

For example, some traditional Santali terms are increasingly being replaced by commonly used words in everyday communication:

Traditional Santali term	Increasingly used term
Ayo	Maa
Daka	Bhato
Galoch	Discuss
Draupurup	Meeting
Hidik	Doubt
Harbor	Byasto

These examples indicate that linguistic change is occurring not only through the adoption of another language but also through the replacement of traditional vocabulary with modern or widely used terms.

Overall, the findings suggest that Santal Gen-Z is becoming increasingly multilingual and linguistically adaptive. While this adaptation provides greater opportunities for education, employment, mobility and social interaction, the

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declining use of traditional Santali vocabulary may create challenges for the intergenerational transmission and preservation of the Santal linguistic heritage.

4.2 Changes in Material Culture among Santal Gen-Z

A significant transformation was also observed in the material culture of the Santal community, particularly in clothing, cooking utensils and eating utensils. The changes reflect the influence of modernization, market availability, changing lifestyles, convenience and interaction with the wider society.

4.2.1 Changes in Clothing

A considerable change has been observed in the traditional clothing practices of the Santal community. Gen-Z is increasingly moving away from traditional Santali sarees and dhotis and adopting more commonly available contemporary clothing such as sarees, salwar suits, trousers, shirts and other modern garments.

One of the major reasons for this change is the easy availability of modern clothing in local markets and shops. Traditional Santali sarees and dhotis are now difficult to find in ordinary shops. At the same time, the number of people involved in producing these traditional garments is gradually decreasing. "The number of people who used to weave Santali sarees or dhotis is gradually declining, because we now dress like others in order to be accepted by them" said Jasmi Murmu (36). Consequently, younger people find modern clothing more convenient and accessible.

Social interaction also influences clothing preferences. When young Santal people attend functions or programmes in urban areas, they tend to wear contemporary clothing because they perceive it as more socially acceptable and appropriate for interaction with people from outside their community.

Practical considerations have also influenced this change. For example, Gen-Z increasingly prefers trousers and shirts because pockets provide convenient space for carrying mobile phones and other essential belongings. "We are now wearing suits and shirts with pockets so that we can easily carry items like mobile phones, pens and other small things any programme" said Padan Soren (29). Thus, the shift in clothing is influenced not only by social acceptance but also by functionality and convenience.

4.2.2 Changes in Cooking and Eating Utensils

Changes have also been observed in the cooking and eating utensils traditionally used by Santal households. Earlier, earthen/terracotta utensils were commonly used for cooking and eating. Subsequently, brass utensils became common in many households. At present, however, Aluminum and Stainless-steel utensils are increasingly used.

Several factors explain this transition. The production of traditional earthen and brass utensils requires skilled artisans, while the number of people engaged in producing such traditional items has gradually decreased. In addition, the cost of producing brass utensils has increased, making them less accessible to ordinary households. "The man who used to make earthenware has passed away and his sons are no longer making clay pots; instead, they are going to work in mining areas because they earn more money there" said Kuni Soren (56).

The easy availability of Aluminum and Stainless-steel utensils in local markets has further accelerated this transition. These utensils are also considered more convenient for everyday use because they are comparatively durable and do not break easily.

Earthen utensils, in contrast, are fragile and can break relatively easily. This has reduced their practical suitability for regular household use.

Another important factor is time and fuel efficiency. Cooking in earthen utensils generally requires more time and fuel, whereas Aluminum and Stainless-steel utensils allow food to be prepared more quickly and with comparatively less fuel. "Since forest gatherers are not allowing us to bring wood from the forest, we are cooking in pressure

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cookers; the food gets ready quickly, and as a result, we use less fuel" said Phulamani Hansda (36). Therefore, the younger generation increasingly prefers modern utensils for their everyday cooking practices.

4.3 Overall Cultural Implications

The above changes indicate that the material culture of Santal Gen-Z is undergoing a gradual transformation. Traditional clothing, utensils and other material practices are increasingly being replaced by modern alternatives because of availability, affordability, durability, convenience, time efficiency and changing social preferences.

However, these changes also have broader cultural implications. Traditional clothing and utensils are not merely functional objects; they are also components of Santal cultural identity and heritage. Their declining use may therefore contribute to the gradual weakening of traditional knowledge, skills and practices.

At the same time, the findings should not be interpreted as a complete rejection of Santal culture. Rather, they indicate a process of cultural adaptation under modernization, in which Gen-Z adopts contemporary practices to participate more effectively in wider society while retaining some traditional practices in particular cultural and community contexts.

Overall findings:

Thus, both linguistic culture and material culture among Santal Gen-Z are experiencing gradual transformation. Migration, education, modernization, market availability, social interaction and the search for convenience and wider social acceptance are important factors shaping these changes. While such adaptation may facilitate social integration and access to new opportunities, it also raises concerns regarding the preservation and intergenerational transmission of Santal language, traditional clothing, indigenous knowledge and material heritage.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that Santal Gen-Z in Harichandanpur Block, Keonjhar District, Odisha, is experiencing gradual cultural transformation in both linguistic and material practices. These changes are associated with education, migration for study and employment, interaction with wider society, market availability, modernization, and the practical need for convenience in everyday life.

In the linguistic domain, the study found that Gen-Z participants increasingly use Odia and English in education, employment, administration, market interactions, and communication outside the Santal community. Participants explained that Odia is often necessary for communicating with teachers, employers, government offices, shopkeepers, and people from other linguistic backgrounds. The findings also indicate that some traditional Santali terms are being replaced in everyday conversation by commonly used Odia, English, or modern expressions. At the same time, Santali continues to be used in family and community settings, suggesting that linguistic change is occurring through adaptation and domain-based language choice rather than the complete abandonment of Santali.

In the material domain, the study observed changes in clothing and household utensils. Gen-Z participants increasingly prefer commercially available contemporary garments such as sarees, salwar suits, trousers, and shirts instead of traditional Santali clothing. Participants associated this preference with the easy availability of modern clothing in local markets, social acceptability in urban and educational settings, and practical convenience, including the use of pockets for carrying mobile phones and other essential items. Traditional clothing appears to be maintained mainly in particular cultural, festive, or ritual contexts.

Similar changes were observed in cooking and eating utensils. Earthen and brass utensils, which were reported to have been more common in earlier generations, are increasingly being replaced by aluminium and stainless-steel utensils. Participants associated this transition with the declining availability of traditional utensils, reduced involvement of artisans in producing them, higher cost of brass items, easy market availability of modern utensils,

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greater durability, reduced risk of breakage, and faster cooking with less fuel. These findings indicate that material change is shaped not only by modernization but also by practical household considerations.

The findings suggest that these transformations should not be interpreted simply as cultural loss. Rather, they reflect a process of cultural adaptation in which Santal Gen-Z adopts contemporary linguistic and material practices to participate in education, employment, markets, and wider social life, while continuing to use certain traditional practices in family, community, and ritual contexts. However, the reduced everyday use of certain Santali terms, traditional clothing, and earthen or brass utensils may affect the intergenerational transmission of Santali language, traditional knowledge, and material heritage.

Therefore, cultural continuity among Santal Gen-Z may be supported through measures that encourage the everyday and intergenerational use of Santali, promote Santali and Ol Chiki in education and community life, document traditional vocabulary and practices, and recognize the cultural value of traditional clothing and utensils. Such efforts should not seek to prevent younger Santals from accessing modern education, employment, or contemporary lifestyles; rather, they should create space for Santal language and cultural knowledge to remain meaningful alongside contemporary practices.

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