

# ***BAHA FESTIVAL: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE SANTAL COMMUNITY IN BANKURA DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL***

**ANJAN MAJI,**

*M.A-DEPARTMENT OF SANTALI, SIDHO KANHO BIRSHA UNIVERSITY, PURULIA, WEST BENGAL, INDIA*

**ABSTRACT:-** The Baha Festival is one of the most vibrant and sacred celebrations of the Santal community, honouring the arrival of spring and the blooming of Sal flowers. In the Santal-inhabited regions of Bankura district in West Bengal, the festival reflects the community's deep connection with nature, ancestral deities, and the seasonal rhythms guiding their agricultural life. Ritual performances, flower offerings, rhythmic dances, and musical gatherings embody unity and collective joy. Through these practices, the Santals express gratitude to Marang Buru, Jaher Era, and other protective deities for safeguarding the community, crops, and livestock. The festival strengthens inter-family relationships, encourages youth participation, and preserves traditional knowledge, songs, and customs. Thus, within Bankura's cultural landscape, the Baha Festival stands not only as a religious event but also as a living cultural heritage that shapes the identity, social harmony, and spiritual worldview of the Santal society.

**Keywords:** Cultural significance of the Baha Festival; celebration practices of the Santal community; ritual worship at the Jaherthan; seasonal renewal and purity; traditional music and dance; preservation of Santal identity in Bankura.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Santals are the third-largest tribal community in India and are widely distributed across the eastern states such as West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar, Tripura, and Assam. In West Bengal, a significant population resides in the Bankura district, particularly in the blocks of Gangajalghati, Saltora, Chhatna, Beliatare, and Raipur. Despite external influences and modernization, the Santals of Bankura have successfully retained their linguistic and cultural identity. Their language, Santali, belongs to the North Mundari branch of the Austro-Asiatic family and plays a central role in maintaining collective identity.

Santals follow an animistic belief system centered around the worship of nature and spiritual beings known as Bonga. Their festivals, linked closely to agricultural cycles, reinforce communal values and the relationship between humans and the environment. Among the many festivals they celebrate—such as Sohrai, Ero, and Karam—the Baha Festival, or the Flower Festival, is one of the most significant. It marks the arrival of spring and celebrates the blooming of Sal flowers, which are considered sacred.

In Bankura, the festival highlights unity, reverence for nature, and the spiritual connection between the community and their deities. Rituals, dances, and songs make Baha an essential cultural and religious expression.

## **NEED OF STUDY**

The Baha Festival holds immense cultural, religious, and ecological significance for the Santal community of Bankura. However, rapid modernization, migration, and changing socio-economic conditions are affecting traditional practices. Some rituals are being modified or forgotten, and younger generations may not fully understand the symbolic meanings behind the festival.

Therefore, this study aims to:

Document the festival as practiced specifically in Bankura district, Understand the cultural values and social relationships it reinforces, Preserve the indigenous knowledge embedded in the rituals, Contribute to the limited academic literature on the Baha Festival in West Bengal, and Promote awareness about safeguarding Santal cultural heritage for future generations.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in selected Santal-inhabited villages spread across the Gangajalghati, Saltora, Chhatna, Beliapore, and Raipur blocks of Bankura district, where the Baha Festival is actively celebrated.

A qualitative ethnographic approach was adopted. As an active yet reflective participant in the festival, I directly observed and experienced the rituals and communal activities. Detailed field notes were maintained throughout the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with priests (Nayke), village elders, festival organizers, women participants, and youth to gain multiple perspectives. To strengthen the research, secondary sources—including books, journal articles, census reports, and digital resources—were also consulted.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF BAHA FESTIVAL IN BANKURA

In Bankura, Santals observe Baha as the second most important festival after Sohrai. The three-day celebration embodies *rosko* (joy, abundance) and deep respect for nature. The festival marks the arrival of new flowers and fruits and celebrates fertility, growth, and protection. Santals worship Jaher Ayo, Marang Buru, and More Ko Turui Ko at the Jaherthan, the sacred grove. Community participation creates unity among families and strengthens inter-village relationships. Celebrated in February–March, the festival involves offering the first blooms of the season, performing dances, singing traditional songs, and sharing communal meals.

A strict rule observed in Bankura is that the Baha Festival is not celebrated, the village will not receive blessings, and positive events or auspicious outcomes will not occur. Women do not wear flowers in their hair and do not collect flowers and leaves before the festival concludes. This reflects reverence toward nature and the flowering cycle. Songs dedicated to ancestors ask for blessings for rainfall, harvest, fertility, and protection from diseases like pox and cholera.

## THREE-DAY FESTIVAL OBSERVANCE IN BANKURA

### FIRST DAY: UM MAHA (Purification)

The first day focuses on purification. On this day, the Santal people of Bankura take a ritual bath early in the morning as a symbol of spiritual and physical purity. Young boys bring Sal roots from nearby forests and erect them at the Jaherthan. They clean the area and construct sheds for Jaher Era, Marang Buru, and More Ko Turui Ko. Another smaller shed is made for Gosare. The sheds are purified using cow dung.

The priest (Nayke) then cleans ritual tools—including bamboo winnowing fans, baskets, brooms, bow and arrow, hunting horn, pick-axe—anoointing them with mustard oil and aromatic fenugreek powder. In the evening, the Nayke returns to the Jaherthan, cleans the sheds again, and applies sindur three times to the sacred space. Back home, he prepares a sacred altar, places the ritual tools, and performs prayers accompanied by traditional dance and music that continue throughout the night. According to belief, the deities join the community during these dances.

### SECOND DAY: BONGA MAHA (Ritual Offerings)

On the second day, men and women of the village proceed to the Jaherthan with dance, music, and singing. The Nayke carries a bamboo kulo containing Sal flowers, ornaments, broom, bow, arrow, horn, rice grains, vermilion, and oil. An

unmarried boy carries a pot of water. The sacred grove is cleaned with diluted cow dung, after which the priest collects Sal flowers and performs rituals for the ancestors and village deities. White hens are sacrificed in sequence—first to Jaher Ayo, then to Marang Buru, More Ko Turui Ko, and finally to Gosare.

Prayers for protection and prosperity are offered. Sacred food (sudu) is prepared and distributed. The meat dedicated to Jaher Era is eaten only by men, while the Nayke consumes specific portions. Other parts of the meal, often including pig or pigeon meat, are shared among all villagers. The community enjoys food, drink (hària), and hospitality together.

### THIRD DAY: BASKE MAHA (Community Celebration)

The final day is filled with both joy and emotional sentiment. Villagers gather, sing, and dance, celebrating unity and offering gratitude for blessings received. Elders bless the younger generation and express hopes for future prosperity.

In Bankura, a distinctive custom on the last day is sprinkling water on one another, similar to Holi but without colours. This act symbolizes purity, renewal, and community bonding.

### CONCLUSION

The Baha Festival in Bankura reflects how cultural traditions adapt while still maintaining their core spiritual essence. As social changes influence daily life, the festival becomes a reminder of the community's historical experiences and collective aspirations. Its rituals also encourage reflection on ecological balance, emphasizing that human well-being is inseparable from the health of the natural environment. Furthermore, Baha offers a platform for artistic expression through music, dance, and oral storytelling, allowing creativity to flourish within a traditional framework. Ultimately, the festival embodies a harmonious blend of faith, identity, and cultural continuity that continues to guide the Santal community through changing times.

### REFERENCE

1. JAHER BONGA SANTAR KA (a book on customary rituals and social activities of santals) BY-RAMESWAR MURMU
2. Census of India. (2011). District Census Handbook: Bankura. Registrar General C Census Commissioner of India.
3. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santal\\_people](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santal_people)
4. Sensus of india (2011).
5. Murmu, T. (2017). Nature, rituals, and community life: A study of Santals in eastern India. *Indian Journal of Anthropology*, 5(1),
6. Skrefsrud, L. O. (1887). *Horkoren Mare Hapramko Reak Katha*. (Recorded from Santal guru Kolean Haram). Santal Mission Press.
7. Archer, W. G. (1984). *The Hill of Flutes: Life, Love and Poetry in Tribal India*. Penguin Books.