

Original Article

Isolated yet Living and Working among others during Covid-19 – Santals of Birbhum in India

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Abstract: This article addresses the living pattern of the Santal Scheduled Tribe in India, a group of more than 6 million people, but here described on the basis of a few villages in Birbhum, West Bengal. The aim is to document how far a typical settlement and living pattern of rural Santals of West Bengal in India led to a lesser dissemination than among so many other Indian communities. In this way the article, accepts the general argument forwarded by Prof. A.B. Ota on the Scheduled Tribes in Odisha, but aims at adding content to the inner Santal perspective to his observations from outside. In this way the pandemic and the closedowns become a prism breaking the evidence regarding isolation in ways which makes implicit knowledge of integration evident.

Keywords: Working, Covid-19, Santals of West Bengal.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Indian conceptualisations of tribes are split in various pictures. One of them imagines the tribes to live in isolation in remote areas. This position was formalised in the Census of 1921 when geographical isolation and primitive conditions became part of defining tribes (Carrin 2021:2), but it had been part of administrative planning before and is still relevant (Paul 2015, Muralidhar 2019:180). Part of the reasons for its relevance is that the project frame developed for Scheduled Tribes by and large addresses rural areas. On the other hand, there have been a long and continuous migration of tribal people in India where many are found in the major urban centres where they work. In many cases such migrant people lose the connection with the 'home' they hail from, but others sustain active connections to their families living in the rural areas. That regards the early generations of working migrants who may keep contact to parents, sisters and brothers still cropping the small lands of a family farm. In some cases, they sustain even tighter connections as many males work in urban settings when their wives take care of the farm and raise children. – The closedowns during COVID-19 illuminated this known, but not so considered link between the tribal people in the urban centres and their families in India's rural villages as urban workers had to return to their village 'homes' due to the lock down.

II. COVID- 19 AND ITS ARRIVAL TO INDIA

The outbreak of COVID-19 dates back to the first week of December 2019 when patients with a yet unknown form of pneumonia with 'uncommon symptoms' were sent to a hospital in the Chinese town Wuhan. At the end of December 2019, it was identified as a yet unknown variant of Corona virus and the news media reported about the Chinese authorities' struggle to contain the dissemination of the virus by closedowns in Wuhan during January 2020. On the 30th of January 2020 it was declared a world health crisis by WHO and upgraded to a pandemic on the 11th of March 2020.

The Government of India confirmed India's first COVID-19 case on 30th of January 2020 in the state of Kerala and, almost immediately, new public health regulations began to be proposed and sometimes enforced in the country's Covid-19-affected regions. As the number of COVID-19 positive cases crossed 500 on 19th March, Prime Minister Narendra Modi asked all citizens to observe a 'Janata Curfew' (people's curfew) from 22nd March. On 24th March, the Government of India ordered a 21-day nationwide closedown, limiting the movement of India's entire 1.4 billion population as a preventive measure against the spread of the pandemic. One week later, on 30th March 2020, India's Corona virus case count was 1,263, of whom 102 had recovered and 29 had succumbed to the disease. The closedown was extended, in three more phases and with some relaxations, up to 31st May. At the end of the field collections on 1st August 2022, India's Corona virus case count stood at 4,40,36,275 and the recovery rate was 98.5 per cent according to Union Health Ministry, Government of India data.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a strengthening of India's local Panchayati Raj institutions, as the distribution of relief in many cases were entrusted to these local institutions (Paul 2022). Ad hoc civil society organisations were also locally created in order to meet the needs and the balances between the union, state and civil society new troubles in other regards (Andersen et al. 2022), but this is not the focus of the present article. The passage of the pandemic will have a very high



impact, especially on the livelihood of the people. All sectors (be it raw materials, manufacturing, or services) were grappling with tremendous uncertainty about their future. The closedowns created a huge impact on the poorest of the poor, especially people in villages who are mostly dependent on daily wage labour work. Daily wage earners had no recourse to any sort of sustainable income under this forced closedown. The nationwide closedown hit the poorest the hardest, with no reliable supply of basics like food grain, milk and medicines to fall upon. On 12th May, the Indian Government announced a Rs 20,000 trillion (US\$260 billion) stimulus package to aid the poor who have been brutally affected by the Corona virus outbreak (Ahmad and Kumar 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic not only led to an economic breakdown, but also has huge social impacts. Closedown and social distance have increased the people's perceptions of fear, agony, violence, mistrust and uncertainty, including fears of increasing domestic violence, spreading of misinformation, xenophobia and racism. The political consequences are also huge. Reports of power abuse, corruption, scam and political violence seem to increase day-by-day. So, with fears of a new recession, job loss and socio-economic crisis, a situation like this calls for resilient and strong measures and leadership at every level of public administration. So far, government institutions at the grassroots level – and especially the Panchayati raj institutions – have taken the leading role in dealing with the emerging situation (Paul, 2020).

In this article, we aim at investigating some of the consequences for a group of marginalised citizens in India. Our focus is on persons belonging to the Santal tribe in the rural settings surrounding Bolpur town in Birbhum District in West Bengal. First, some words to introduce the Santals and their ways of being marginal. Several states in India have decided to deem the Santals as being a Scheduled Tribe (ST). The concept was introduced by the Constitution of India to allow 'proactive affirmative action for recognised members of STs. The Constitution of India does not define the concept of Scheduled Tribe and it has not been substantially defined later leaving inclusion or non-inclusion for political decision of needs except that the members are not castes as another category; Scheduled Castes have been created for bona fide discrimination of castes. Individuals belonging to STs are allocated benefits regarding admissions to education, appointment to government jobs, and there are developed special electoral rules regarding reservation of seats for STs in elected bodies in the political system. What interests us here is that development projects directed towards persons of ST-background only address the rural sector in one way or the other. In this way the STs are considered as rural, and in the general conceptualisation as isolated. As one of the present authors have summarised, they are “habituated in remote and less accessible areas” (Paul 2015:295) where they “depend on the soil or forest products for their livelihood” as he states with reference to other scholars.

Nevertheless, the Santals are not always living in isolation to that degree. Many earn a living in the neighbouring areas as workmen, construction workers and daily labour. These professions are most common among males. Women are also working in these trades, but following the gender segmentation on the work marked it is more common that they seek work with cleaning and cooking in the surroundings of their villages. Besides this, numerous Santal males and women are migrant labours following the agricultural seasons or as migrants that are more permanent to urban areas. One of the aims of this article is to illuminate these connections through a gaze on Santal migrant workers who returned to their home villages. Urbanization is very common all over the globe. Among the ST community seasonal migration is very common. In the study area it was found that a good number of Santal male members migrated for search of job and engaged in diverse activities:



Figure 1: Diagrammatic Representation of Occupational Diversification among the Santals

In the ancient period, tribal people were isolated beside the jungle, river or remote locations because they were engaged in hunting, farming and fishing activities but now there are multiple division of occupation that are high in their society. During COVID-19 due to lock down rural and urban people suffered a lot. Urban areas were affected most by COVID-19, but various non-farming works were available for them in urban areas. On the other hand, the rural tribal people had to get back in their agriculture fields and cultivation during the closedown and they had limited scope of work.

In the following sections, we will give a short presentation of our evidence and access to data. We will analyse the evidence for the **isolation** of the Santals that regards first and foremost the settlement pattern and the organisation of their religious life. Hereafter we will address the closedowns regarding the problems they created for the Santals and how they faced them. Finally, we will return to the limited possibilities of generalisation due to the categories utilised in official statistics. We hope that the need to deepen the understanding of isolation and its limits will be evident.

III. DATA COLLECTION AND STATISTICAL OVERVIEW

The collections of primary data were carried out from 26th July to 2nd August 2022 in three villages: **Ghosaldanga** about 11 km from Bolpur, **Kartikdanga (Bora Bagan)** about 9.4 km from Bolpur and **Nildanga** in the vicinity of Bolpur which is only about 0.3 km away. Ghosaldanga and Nildanga are laid out along a single village street, whereas Kartikdanga is a large village with several hamlets, where we visited Bora Bagan. Here the houses are placed as a cluster.

The group of researchers was already familiar with the village setting and the inhabitants collected data from each of the villages, and respondents were open to being interviewed. Although we are confident that the villagers were honest, their responses revealed some misconceptions. We returned a few days later and posed follow-up questions in an effort to reconcile apparently contradictory remarks. In general, we were impressed with the respondents' general knowledge of the pandemic situation.

A. Settlement pattern of Santals

Traditionally, Santals are clustered in villages, hamlets or streets within larger settlements on the plains of West Bengal. This settlement pattern has enabled them to sustain their Santali languagespoken by 7.6 million (Census of India **2011**). While Santals have a sense of community, they also have a sense of immersion: early reports on Santals in the 1790s indicate that it was not unusual for community members to speak Hindustani or Bengali. Today Santals are generally bilingual. In the two Santal hamlets near Bolpur we met with some Santals who are primarily Bengali speakers. Some educated Santals in the Bolpur area have created new hamlets by building their houses near each other but outside the 'village' areas, hereby moving a step away from the social control in the village environment. Still others are live scattered among Bengali-speaking neighbours. The present study has been conducted in the Santal villages instead of the Santal hamlets growing adjacent to Bolpur town, as they are in strong interaction with the urban area and acculturation took place among them.

Anthropological literature on Santal villages in Birbhum sometimes state that there are other backward classes and Scheduled Castes like Blacksmith, Barber, Dom etc. who practice their caste-based occupation in Santal hamlets and villages, and they live in a cluster separately within the village (e.g. Datta-Majumdar 1956; Troisi 1978:46). Compared to Bengali villages, it is easy to recognise Santal villages as the houses are painted of typical earth colours with a dark plinth near the ground, red ochre above and yellow or white at the top under the roof. Where many villages in West Bengal form a cluster around a core, Santal villages are often laid out along a single village street with only one or a couple of houses behind each other along the village street, which consequently may be very long, sometimes 500 to 700 metres or even longer. The houses are changing from the traditional mud houses, thatched with rice straw, to brick or concrete houses with thatched or sheet metal roofs.

The main crop around Birbhum is rice and the fields are typically placed in low terraces surrounding the villages, whether it is a Santal or a non-Santal village. In the early 19th century, Santal villages "were situated between the cultivated plains and the thick jungle in order to protect their more fortunate neighbours from deer and wild swine." (Ward 1827, quoted from O'Malley 1910:98-99). Today, it is difficult to discern any pattern in the distribution of Santal villages and non-Santal villages in Birbhum.

B. COVID-19 in Birbhum

Regarding the possibility of investigating the hypothesis of this article is a regrettable fact that there do not exist any statistical evidence on the distribution of COVID-19 cases broken down in urban compared to rural and neither any statistics regarding different ethnic groups. Therefore, we limit ourselves to report the number of officially registered cases of COVID-19 in Birbhum District (Figure 1).

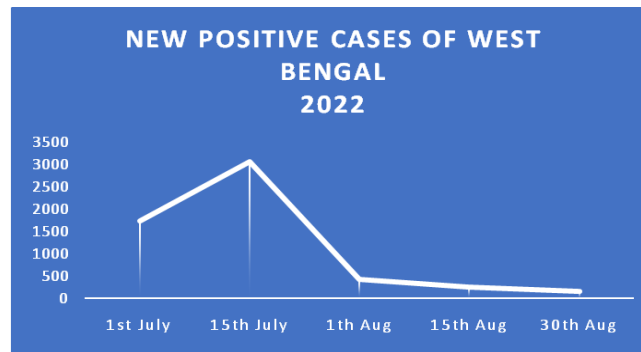


Figure 2: Line Graph of COVID-19 in West Bengal

Isolation seen as a general denominator and it is evident that COVID-19 peaked in Birbhum at **41,197** on 1st November 2021 whereas it peaked in India at **34,285,612** according to the Ministry of Health Affairs (Government of India), indicating a delay of dissemination to Birbhum. In this regard one may consider the Birbhum district as isolated due to its distance from Kolkata. In comparison, Sundarbans nearer to Kolkata is possible to commute to daily work in the suburbs of Kolkata from some areas in Sundarbans; and Sundarbans was much harder hit. But other possibilities than geographical distance may be relevant as well, so this remark is only to relativise the importance of local settlement patterns. We must state that figures on COVID-19 in India (as in the rest of the world) are prone to underestimate. In the Indian context, people were admonished to go to a test centre and be tested if they fall ill with symptoms indicating a possible infection with COVID-19. This was often impeded by the distance to the test centres, and some people were also reluctant to go to the test centres, as they knew that there would be infected people who could be contagious at test centres. During the interviews this became evident as the reports on the few people who had died of COVID-19 often were accompanied by discussions on the diagnosis. People who had been hit in the later waves were usually sure on their own diagnosis, but it was not all of them who had visited a test centre.

It is disputed how and how far the introduction of the *Janata* Curfew hit the tribal populations of India (e.g., Agoramoorthy & Hsu 2022; Saini & Nancy 2022). Saini and Nancy's (2022) estimations underscore that a significant part of the ST population partake in migrant work and have had to find their way home at the introduction of the *Janata* Curfew. Regarding the dissemination of COVID-19 among STs, we have A.B. Ota's investigation on the tribes of Odisha, published in June 2020, where he argues that several factors had protected the tribes against infection. Among these factors were their isolated settlement patterns as well as the fact that they had finished most of the harvest rituals before the arrival of COVID-19 (Ota 2020:31-32). Ota and most other authors do not consider the return of migrant workers to their villages in this regard.

One of the pandemic's negative impacts was that classroom teaching ceased for nearly two years, and many school children do not return to the classroom when schools reopened in February 2022, leading to an increase in number of dropouts. However, the school infrastructure facilitated the villages with proper quarantine facilities for the returning migrant workers during the lock down. As schools are attended by all groups of the population, Santals and other people returning would be isolated in the same schools.

No interviews had been done with the Santal or non-Santal migrant labourers who had returned as those who had been fit to return to their former workplaces have already left the villages before our visit. Consequently, the interviewees were the family members and other villagers who responded to our interrogations. In one village, 15 migrant workers had returned. The wide dissemination of Santals over India is evidenced in the fact that a couple of villagers had travelled all the way from Mumbai in Maharashtra, a distance of 2,036 km. Other people had travelled by bicycle or walked for long distances.

C. Health Facilities and Impact:

The Santal people living in remote villages where proper information and knowledge on COVID are hard to reach and fall under the high risk zone. Government and non-profit organizations were trying to give clear ideas on COVID and its preventive measures, distribution of masks to people diagnosed with ARI, hand washing techniques and social distancing to the children, sneezing techniques, and more. On the other hand, COVID-19 has become the only discussion topic of healthcare, but a lot of other Communicable and Non-Communicable diseases have taken a backseat among the Santal communities. People stopped focusing on the high risk of other diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, typhoid, accidents and traumas etc., neither is they getting treatment and quality medicines for the diseases from the nearest health centres. People from remote villages had to struggle a lot in search of quality treatment for the other diseases.

People infected with COVID-19 were not just physically impacted but also underwent severe mental trauma. Family members too faced severe trauma, stigma and discrimination from their immediate surroundings. Statistics indicate this has led to some form of depression leading to mental disorientation across all ages. As per the study using the PHQ4 tool on the adult Santals, it has been found that 12 per cent of the sampled population has mild **Mental Health** issues. In normal circumstances six per cent would be affected, as per National Mental Health Survey. Mental health issues doubled, due to the fear from loss of life or loss of job, isolation, lockdowns, unemployment, the fear from infection and physical sufferings, the food crisis, the COVID-related discrimination and stigma, and the impact on the examination education system.

In addition to this, the above factors lead to an increasing rate of gender-based violence among Santal families, particularly among families where the reverse migrated workers without any working engagement and being in isolation took out their frustration within their family. Consequently, consumption of substances (local alcohol such as Hanriya and Mahuya) by Santal villagers increased by ten per cent. Substance abuse among adolescents also increased.

D. Shock

At the breakout of the pandemic the government addressed the Santals and took several initiatives to reach out to them for the awareness and knowledge on Corona virus as much as possible, specially through posters in Santali, regrettably written in official script for Santali: OlChiki (the Ol Script) which can only read by a small part of the Santals (Anonymous. *Anandabazar Patrika* 13th March 2020). However, the illustrations were easy to understand on symptoms of the virus like fever, snot and coughing and the preventive behaviour of handwashing, coughing in the clothes or tissues, avoidance of crowds and isolation at home when ill. The final row of illustrations was for admonished to be tested and vaccinated for COVID-19.

In most Santal villages, announcements were done through the mobile van by the personal announcement system, also known as the *Jagruka Rath*, to make villagers aware of COVID protocols and appropriate behaviours. Testing kits were made available in the sub-centres for mass testing of the reverse migrated Santals. Vaccination drives were also done through campaigning in different tolas of the villages.

The influence of smartphones and digitization among the Santals had made possible the use of Arogya setu app for self-assessment of COVID. The app also determines whether one's location one is in an infected area.

Initially, the pandemic and the consequences of its management created panic among the Santal hamlets, as being isolated, they were not known about the virus and the only information received by them regarding the pandemic was through the Television and the Radio media. The concept used was *bhito* (Bengali) and *botor* (Santali) which may designate panic as well as pure and simple fear. In summarising statements, the media reported on how tribal villages, in Birbhum, Purulia, West Midnapore, Bankura and Jhargram had "blocked the entry-exit points of their villages with bricks, bamboo and tree logs. They even posted placards, saying: '*Grame probeshnishedh* (No entry to the village)' (Das 2020). The quarantines organised for the returned migrant workers seem to have been effectively organised as far as the Santals were concerned – remembering the non-Santal who managed to stay with his family in another part of one cluster of villages.

When asked about the cult of the Corona Devi, which had been sponsored by the central government, the villagers we talked to had not turned to her. They had called the village priest, the *naeke*, and he had worshipped in the sacred grove (*jaher than*) in the village, 'Corona do not come, save us from corona'. The *manjhi* (the leader of the village) poured Handi (rice beer) at the altar for the founding headman (*manjhi than*). In this village the altar is a thatched construction in the village street. Among the Santals it is the present leader of the village and not the village priest, who sacrifices at the altar for the founder of the village. These rituals had carried on for a long time until the treat from COVID-19 was deemed to be diminishing or over.

As we directed our questions to responses at village level we have only meagre evidence of individual religious reactions, but one Santal woman from another village said that she had prayed to Śiva. Her statement may be a case of the dissemination of Hinduism or Hindu conceptualisations of religion among the Santals who often identify their main god, the Thakur Bonga with Shiva. Whatever it is, her information documents that Santals also turn to private prayer for personal safety.

No interviewees referred to witchcraft with regard to cases of COVID-19. This is happy as such accusations may lead to mishandling, isolation, expulsion or even killing of females. In many cases the accusations are framed so that the females will lose land or other belongings to male family members (Kelkar & Natan 2020); but such issues are not linked with pandemic diseases. Our few visits to villages do not allow for generalization, but the Department of Lifelong Learning and Extension, Institute of Lifelong Learning and Extension at the Institute of Rural Reconstruction at Visva-Bharati are informed

in all known accusations for witchcraft in the surroundings of Bolpur in order to go to the village and expose the accusations as superstition and ameliorate. There were several such accusations during the pandemic, but none of them were related to COVID-19.

Like in Ota’s case of the tribes in Odisha, the first closedown in 2020 happened at a time when communal rituals and festivities relating to the agricultural seasons were few those that were held did not clash with the closedown. In 2022 the Santals referred to the fact that they had toned down the celebration of *dassai* festival. As we know from literature (Murmu, 2012), it is celebrated in the remembrance of two girls one named Ainom and another named Kajal who had selected these two girls to fight against the Santals enemies; but the enemies kidnapped both of the girls so the Santals went out of the village to find them. At that time, they wore dressed up with flowers and wore peacock feathers tied to their turbans (*dahari*). Searching the country, they hoped to find the Ainom and Kajal. They also brought *dhamasa* (traditional instrument) and *madol* (traditional instrument) to hide their A-Sar (arrow) in the dhamsas. They did not find Ainom and Kajal, so they have to go out and search for them every year at *dassai*. This festival, which normally involves visiting all the houses in the village and visits from and to other villages, had the possibility to become a spreader event, so the *dassaitour* was cancelled but the sacrifices, was carried through in the houses.

E. The Fight against Pandemic

In a survey investigating the understanding of the spread of COVID-19 among Chakma, Marma, and Tripura tribespeople in the Khagrachari hill district of Bangladesh, between 54 and 87 per cent of respondents gave the medically informed answer that COVID-19 is a virus (Morshed et al. 2021). During our interviews no strong indication for medically informed understanding were given by the respondents. On the other hand, open questions inviting to considerations has been asked. This is also reflected in the explanations of how the Santals managed to stay through. Among the Santals it was generally assumed that they managed the pandemic better than the people living around them. The reasons given were that the Santals were stronger as they tilled the fields working in the open air. It is also believed that the intake of traditional drinks/alcohols such as rice beer (*Hanriya*), *Mahuya* etc. acts as a protective gear against COVID-19. The fact being the Santal villages and hamlets had been better cordoned off than the surrounding villages. The reason being that the ongoing agricultural work within the villages and some of the villages were situated beside the main roads going through the area, impeding for police inspections regarding the closedowns.

As stressed by Amartya Sen in his investigations of famines (wonderfully presented in Sen 2021:115-117 and of course in Sen 1983), most famines are not brought about by scarcity of food, but by unequal distribution of available food, and the way to prevent famines is to take steps for food allocation. This may be done in many ways and since his pioneering work much effort have been dedicated to considering how relief operations may change economic or ecologic balances towards more equal social situations or the opposite. This is beyond our considerations in the present context where we comment on the immediate initiatives for distribution of food. As we have already seen the state as well as the union governments allocated resources to this end. In one case the Gram Panchayat had managed to distribute rice one or two times, but it would have been impossible for the Gram Panchayat to engage in continuous relief. The support was funded by the Government of West Bengal and the Union, and sometimes concurrently sharing the costs for the relief. At points, the respondents acknowledged both levels of government. Both levels, led by opposing parties, came out of the crisis with a positive score to support in this crisis.

The relief was distributed through the Public Distribution System through ration card. The households with the least resources (holding ‘AAY’ or ‘PHH Priority House Holds Special priority’ cards) were usually entitled to receive 3 kg of wheat and 2 kg of rice per head a month and these rations were doubled during the lock down, besides this they could buy one kilo of pulses with subsidy. Vegetables were also provided at supported prices.

Table 1: Below We Have Mentioned the Entitled List of Relief Products

Food	Monthly Distribution Amount	Price
Rice	15 Kg Per Family Per Month	Free
Atta/Wheat	20 kg Per Family Per Month	Free
Sugar	01 kg Per Family Per Month	13.50
Rice/Wheat(PMGKAY)	05 kg Per Head Per Month	Free

F. Prevention from Infection: Reverse Migration and Isolation Pattern

Looking back at the evidence, it is difficult to estimate whether it is the isolation of the Santals, the settlement pattern or the fact that COVID-19 did not enter the rural areas in the first serious attack and that it was the less serious variants of COVID-19 which were disseminated later that protected the Santals in Birbhum against the deadly infection for a period. First and foremost, we must admit that the assumed isolation of Scheduled Tribes to remote areas in general and the Santals

in this case study is a truth with modifications. Most of the Santals in Birbhum live in hamlets and villages secluded from other groups, but similar settlement patterns are found among caste-organised groups including Muslims in Birbhum, and then the discussion comes to how to estimate whether the dissemination of the disease took different courses among the different groups. We do not have that evidence as it has not been statistically recorded. We can hope that doctors and other health workers may publish their experiences.

When it comes to the Santals' ways of protecting themselves and their villages against infection, they acted resolutely. Isolated returning migrant labours, but as we have seen this is not different from the actions on non-Santals. The one case we know about how a non-Santal who managed to stay with his family whereas the Santals returned stayed in quarantine does not offer evidence for generalisation, other cases may come up in the collections of other researchers. However, some customs prevalent among the Santals may have rendered protection to them. One of them is the *Dob johar*, i.e., receipt of foreigners and guests in front of the house. During the pandemic, reverse migrant people are received in the same way in the village where the returning villager is washed before entering the village. (Paul 2020, DST Report, Government of India).

It is important to note that, by and large, the Santals took the instructions for isolation and sanitation seriously, whether they grasped the full insight in the medical argument behind them or not. This informed consideration did not prevent them from turning to individual or collective ritual practices. In this regard we see they followed a seemingly unproblematic joint approach to medical and religious practices.

IV. CONCLUSION

The world grapples with unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. India's State and Central Governments have tried to step up to the task, similarly the Santal society also adapted to the situation. Earlier scholars used to rely on the thought that dynamic changes are very less in the tribal community but during the COVID-19 we have noticed that rural Santal people have changed their way of living. During Closedown many people lost their work, but Santal people changed their occupations and survived easily. Despite the popular phrase "Santal Celebrate Thirteen Festivals in twelve Months", the Santals celebrated all their rituals during the COVID-19 period but with many restrictions, like limited gatherings, physical distancing, use of mask and sanitizer etc. Most Santal people living the below poverty line with low digital literacy, were not able to access digital online classes on closure of schools. After all, it can be said that Covid-19 has given to people another dimension of survival in any situation.

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