

# A Comparative Analysis of Ritual Performances of Women in Rural Communities, In Bengal, India

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**ABSTRACT:** *Women nurture. This has been the expectation, experience, the timeless lore and historic fact of our lives. Not until this century have we started to ask the meaning and cost of this age-old assumption. Throughout history, women bonded together as they did traditional “women’s work”. They wove understanding, consolation, and support even humor through communal cooking and sewing and childcare. Today, however, many women do “men’s work, their jobs and careers are often based on male role models and, in the process they’ve become more and more isolated from each other. Even stay-at-home moms are experiencing this sense of isolation (Biziou, 2009).*

*This paper attempts to describe three communities namely Hindus, Muslims and Santals in Birbhum West Bengal and exhibits how ritual domain is a part and parcel of women’s life in India. It throws light on the women world in ritualistic performances in rites of passage and ceremonies organized by the communities. The study focuses on life-cycle rituals of these communities on one hand and points out that each one of them has a great bearing in the life of an individual. On the other hand, it concentrates on ritual ceremonies performed in the villages and the way these festivals inculcate a sense of belongingness and solidarity.*

**Keywords:** Rituals, Women, Rites of Passage, Ceremonies, Rites

## INTRODUCTION

The status of women in rural India is a sort of a paradox and has two sides in a coin. If, on one hand she is mutely suffering the violence afflicted on her by her own family members and the problems have become the part and parcel of life and fate, on the other hand it reaches at the peak of ladder of success by unexpressed solidarity of the women’s rituals. These rituals were simple, built up of a few basic principles. Women-only, recognized the sociality of a place or date or event, together in the women’s world.

The communities under study are the Hindus, Muslims and Santals in the rural set up, are more or less conservative in their religious beliefs and acts that affect to a great extent the status of their women. The idea of purity and pollution, a characteristic feature of the caste-based Hindu society, is also diffused in varying degrees among the Santals and the Muslims of the locality. Women of the communities are more vulnerable to pollution than their male.

Vulnerability starts with restrictions imposed on women to prevent menstruating women from coming in contact with men, their activities and possessions. For instance, in all three communities it has been found that, women are prohibited from preparing food for the male members and to touch the sacred place of household during their period of menstruation. There are also phases of life in the rites of phase and ceremonies where they maintain separation but at the same time enjoy an honored position.

## Research Methodology

The researcher was a participant observer, to analyze the situation and gather explanatory qualitative data. Other than participant observation, techniques such as questionnaire and interview methods were used. The research design was exploratory in nature where the researcher not only looks at the existing literature but also gathers information from the field. The present study clubs both the literature and the field data.

The need of studying rites of passage and annual ceremonies comes from the understanding of rituals being a tradition and an ordered sequence of communal action. To develop a comparative analysis of three communities qualitatively, it is essential to understand the type of ritual life the communities lead. It also enables the researcher to understand how the sacred purpose is achieved by means of an inter-play between the sacred and the mundane world.

## Rites of Passage

The rites and rituals of any community can be clearly seen in the rites of passage of a community. Among Hindus, with the birth of a child, a number of rituals and rites as well as restrictions have to be followed by the mothers. When the child is still in the womb, the mother is given a *shaad* on an auspicious day in which the women give her a warm reception. She is entertained with items of food she likes and offered new clothes. This ceremony is particularly held by the women of the family such as mother, grandmother, sister-in-laws of her own and

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other related families of the village. In this ritual, a stone, which is used to grind spices and a lighted earthen lamp, are placed before the woman. Both the grinding stone and the lamp are covered with lids. The woman is then asked to lift the lid; if she lifts the lid of the former she would have a male child, and if she lifts the lid of the latter, she would have a female child. A son is preferred to a daughter. A woman giving birth to a male issue is more appreciated to a woman giving birth to a female issue. But among the Santals this kind of difference is not noticed.

After the child is born, the mother is secluded for a month's time in a separate room. Nobody except the attending elderly women of the house is allowed to touch her or enter the room, and doing so the person would be polluted. The number of days of confinement for the mothers varies in terms of the sex of the new-born child; normally, if the child is a male one the mother has to remain in confinement for more days. All the communities are patrilineal and the males are considered to perpetuate the family heritage.

After the period of confinement is over the mother and the child are bathed and purified; the mother with her baby is then re-habilitated into the normal domain of the domestic life. No restriction is, however, observed by the husband during this period.

Among the Santals, the married couple receives adult respect only when they beget a child. The child is so important, that the husband can lawfully divorce his wife if she is found to be barren. Santals believe that at no time of life is a human being vulnerable and more exposed to supernatural evil force than when the child is still in the womb of the mother. The mother is protected from unsatisfied dead souls; she is not even allowed to weep if a death occurs in her family, lineage or village. The husband of the pregnant woman also observes restrictions; he should avoid contact with dead bodies. He is to refrain from eating the flesh from the head of an animal offered in sacrifice or slain in the hunt.

When the child is born, the umbilical cord is severed or cut by the *Dai ma*, (a female expert), using a sharp iron arrow. The placenta and the afterbirths are buried into the earth in front of the room where the birth has taken place. It is buried deep into the soil so that it is not eaten up by a dog or any other animal otherwise the mother may fall sick and even die.

When the child is born in a family, the entire village and even the presiding *bongas* (god and goddess) are said to be in pollution.

A ceremony known as *Met Halan* (means lifting the eye) is observed. The mother and the mid-wife sit face to face on the floor of the house. The mother fills a leaf cup with rice beer and gives it to the mid-wife who throws away its contents on her left side. This is repeated three times, and it is believed that this renders both the mother and the child security from imminent dangers. The mother stays in seclusion for three days. The cleaning ceremony after birth is known as *Janam Chatiar*. This ceremony purifies the house, village and gives the child a name and incorporates the child in the father's clan and tribe. Normally, this is held on the third day for the boy and on the fifth day for the girl.

After offering rice beer to the deity, *Maran Buru*, the mid-wife, sprinkles water on the mother and the child and assembled people take him/her home and announce his/her name. This is an essential part of *Janam Chatiar*. The name also emphasizes the social obligations of the household to its new addition as well as he/she is placed under the protective surveillance of certain supernatural being.

Among the Muslims, when a woman is pregnant, in the fifth month of her pregnancy she is given a shaad (feeding of the pregnant woman) at her mother's place. The female members of the households do this ceremony. It has been said among Muslims that if the mother's bleeding stops after the *Purnima* or full moon, then she would have a son and if it is before the full moon then she would have a girl child. After the birth of the child, on the seventh day, the mother and child bathe and both stay in seclusion for forty days. A woman can offer the *namaz* while she is pregnant, but cannot do so in those forty days. After the pollution is over, she leaves for her husband's house where the first rice-eating ceremony is held. In the sixth month, the child is fed the first grain known as *Mukha Bhaat*. Among the Muslims also a son is preferred to a girl.

The second life cycle ritual in a person's life in all the three communities is initiation. For Hindus, it is known as *Upnayana*. This is only done for boys and not for girls. It is done at the age of nine/eleven/thirteen/fifteen. Among the higher caste Hindus the boy has curd, *chira* (a type of puffed rice) before the sun rises. Then, his father or paternal uncle performs

the ritual known as *Nanimuk*, i.e. the offering of water to the ancestors. The boy wears *Garua* (Saffron) *Vastra* (cloth) for performing the ritual. His hair is thrown off. The boy begs for money, fruits, and grains as a ritual from the female relatives. This asking is known as *bhikha* (ritual begging) in Bengali.

The boy stays secluded for three days. He is asked not to see the face of the lower caste lest he is polluted. The boy himself boils the rice and vegetables in an earthen pot and eats it. The mother also has an important role in the ceremony. As a ritual the boy works from a narrow place with his mother where the ritual is after walking two steps he is asked not to throw the third step. The mother stops him from throwing the step because throwing so at the time of offering prayers would mean that the boy was entering Sanyas dharma.

During his stay in seclusion the boy has to chant *Gayatri Mantra*. In every *Ekadashi*, the boy has to perform the chanting as well as eat boiled rice and vegetables.

After the three days of seclusion, the ritual performing boy's *bhika* (ritual begging) mother is found among the villagers. This mother is searched by the parents of the boy. It is generally a close friend of his parents who is asked to perform this role. After seeing the boy's face, this mother takes the boy to her place and feeds him and gives him clothes, shoes, umbrella and utensils and takes him around the village for *dhan*. After that the boy removes the *Garua* (Saffron) *Vastra* (Cloth) and returns back to his earlier form. Then, the feast is thrown by his parents.

Among the Santals, the initiation is the second life cycle ritual for them, which is marked by purification rites called *Caco Chaiter*. This is performed when the child grows up. This ceremony is believed to give an individual the responsibility and privilege of a full-fledged member of the tribe. No Santal boy is married or can perform funeral ceremonies, unless he has undergone this ceremony. The headman ascertains the day of initiation. Women rub oil and turmeric on the bodies of all village men. Rice beer is drunk to the accompaniment of singing and dancing. Later, an old man recites all tribal lore. The subject is declared free from all impurities and when he is initiated into drinking beer, he becomes entitled to full rights and responsibilities. After initiation, a person is reborn in the society. The traditional

ceremony among the Santals is of cicatrization of boys on their wrists, one, three, five and nine made by a burnt rag called *Sika* which ensures child's life i.e., protection from harm. The women have tea that marks as identification sign to be shown to God. This is also a religious compulsion for women. Among Santals in Bengal, this ceremony is done for both boys and girls. In the mother's house, this is done for the girl on the right hand and in the affinal house it is done on the left hand. It has been said that if tattooing or *sika* is done, the person would take this to the heaven and if rebirth is taken, then it would help them to gather food in the next life. Among the Muslims, the boy is circumcised at the age of five. Elaborate ceremonies are not performed but it is essential for all the male members in the Muslim society.

The third life cycle ritual is marriage in the three communities, which differ from each other. Among Hindus, the girl is selected by the bridegroom's parents and the dowry or *pon* is decided. This is given as '*Stridhan*' on the day of marriage. On the day of marriage, women smear the girl with turmeric and after she takes her bath, she performs the ritual of *nanimuk* i.e. the offering of water to the ancestors of her natal house.

On the day of marriage, *Khoi* (a type of grains) is fired by the married woman of the village. In this ceremony also the girl has to take part, which signifies that she would cooperate with her affinal members in the household chores.

In the evening the groom arrives and rituals take place. There is exchange of garlands and smearing of vermilion on the forehead of the girl. The Mantras are recited from the scriptures and the marriage is over. In morning the bride leaves for her affinal house and the affinal house throws a feast on the next day.

The Santals, on the other hand also have a monogamous type of marriage. The average marriage age of a boy is twenty and of a girl is fifteen years. The marriage ceremony, which takes place, generally follows after the *Shiva Ratri*. The middleman arranges for the marriage, counts the day with a *sal* (a small leaf) leaves. The bridegroom's party proceeds with a lamp before the marriage day and is not allowed to enter the village. In Santal community, they rest in the clubhouse. Village head (*Majhi*) has a main role in this ceremony. Other

people, who play an important role, are the secretary (*Jog majhi*), coordinator (*Paranik*), water man (*gotiet*) and the priest (*naeke*).

At night, the bridegroom's party comes and contacts the secretary (*Jog majhi*). The food that the groom's party intakes, is at their own expense. Bride's price has to be paid Rs. 12 and a cow but generally Rs. 11 is kept and Re. 1 is for the mother-in-law. Eleven to twelve tons of paddies is also given to the bride's father. *Pandals* are prepared where the groom rests. *Pandals* among Santals are of two types - *Chandowa* (where marriage takes place) and *Mandho* (where meal is served). The groom's side does all the arrangements related to marriage. When the bridegroom's party approaches the bride's house its entry is barred till it assures some riddles. In the marriage place the bride is lifted in a basket held high up by the groom's elder brother while the bridegroom is carried on the shoulder of his brother-in-law. The couple stands with the groom facing the east and the bride facing the west, and throws rice and sprinkle water over each other with mango leaves. If the basket is kept down then fine has to be paid. The bride generally does not allow the groom to put vermilion on her forehead as she holds her sari with her teeth. The groom applies vermilion on bride's forehead and the assembled shout *haribol*. After the marriage takes place, the girl washes the feet of the groom's relatives. This is done primarily to wash off the pollution of elders carrying the basket. After marriage, the girl never touches the clothes and bed of the elder ones. The girl on the next day proceeds to the affinal house and similar rituals take place as in the case of Hindus. If the reception of the groom is not good towards the bride's family, then the bride goes back to her natal house. This ceremony of marriage is known as *Bapla* in *Santali* language.

Among the Muslims, formerly the bride is selected and; meher and dowry are settled. On the marriage day, women smear turmeric and oil on the boy and girl at their own place. The *Moulvi* gives the time of marriage and all community men gather at the girl's place. The boy arrives and sits in a different room. The *Moulvi* seeks the consent of the boy and the girl separately. *Kalma* is read and community men are given sweets. Muslim women are provided a minor security provision of *meher* given by the husband at the time of marriage against any possibility of divorce. A very few women are able to assert their claim. Generally, the amount payable is negligible.

In the rural areas the meher ranges from Rs.51-501/-. There is no compensation for the insecurities inherent in the system.

The last life cycle rituals, which the three communities undergo, are of death of a Hindu, Santal and Muslim. Among the Hindus, the last ritual is performed as follows. As soon as a subject dies, the relatives of the deceased are informed. He/she is laid down in the northern side with new clothes and rituals are performed. In case of a married girl, she is smeared vermilion in the forehead and clad with her marriage dress. Same rituals are performed for male and females. Then the dead body is burnt in the pyre.

The clan members follow restrictions and the rule of pollution for ten days. On the eleventh day, last rituals are performed. From thirteenth day, the clan members start living their normal life. In case of a woman who gets widowed, she has to follow strict rules until she is alive.

Among the Santals, with the death of the deceased, which is known as *Balaca Johar*, all the relatives are informed when the death takes place. After the arrival of the relatives, the deceased Santal is laid straight with the head upside while burning. As in the case of Hindus, the girl cannot enter the ceremony, so it is among the Santals. The skull of the deceased is kept in a house of his descendents. The whole village remains polluted till the final rituals of the deceased have been done. No seclusion of the clan or the community is maintained after the death of a Santal.

Among the Muslims, the deceased is clad with new clothes and is taken to *Qabristan*. He is buried in the ground. *Kalma* is read and after coming back, on the next day a feast is thrown to the villagers. On fourth day, a death *milad* is done (the gathering of people and reading of *Quran* and feasting them). There is a strong belief among Muslims that there is no birth after one dies. Other than celebrating the turning point in the life cycle of an individual, which is marked, with rituals of symbolic expression of certain collective sentiments Brain, was of an opinion that there is a psychological importance of rites of passage. According to the psychological approach, all people have a psychic need to have the support of ritual at transitions in their lives. Brain asserts that western societies do not have initiation at puberty, instead of ritual; we have disturbed teenagers and infantile adults. At the age of eighteen teenagers are magically converted into adult .

In the Indian system, particularly in a rural set up, the rites of passage are not only a psychological approach and moving from one transition to the other but it is also bound with responsibilities, status and identity.

### Annual Ceremonies

All the three communities celebrate their annual ceremonies all over the year. In the case of Hindus community starting from the month of *Baishak* (April-May) villagers celebrates the *Ganesh Utsav*. Following it, in the month of *Jaisto* (May-June), Goddess *Sosthi* is worshipped. Following it in *Ashad* (June-July) *Manasa Puja* is done by all villagers. In the month of *Sravan* (July-Aug.) *Julon* is done. In the month of *Bhadra-Ashwin and Kartick, Janmashtami, Durga, Laxmi, Kali and Kartick Puja* is performed. In festivals such as *Sosthi, Manasa Julon and Laxmi puja* women play an important role as it is their festival. They pray for the welfare of the family and children. Here, men have nothing to do. The festival is observed by the fasting the whole day and offering prayers to the deity. In case of *Durga and Kali puja* women's role is restricted to the households for arrangement of the *puja* (prayers) and men offer prayers to the deity, especially the *Brahmins*.

The month of *Agrahayan* generally brings prosperity for the villagers as at that time harvesting is done and then, the villagers decide a day when the new rice is to be cooked for the first time. Women prepare a number of items for offering to goddess *Laxmi* and *Lord Narayana*. For lower caste, the Brahman priest goes to worship in their hamlets. Children roam from one house to the other to accept *chira*, fruits, coconut and sweet-meat of different kinds. All these form *Nobanno*.

In the month of *Pous, Pous Sankranti* is done on the last day of the month and on this day people of *Ballabhpur* worship Goddess *Sidhosori*. The occasion is held behind *Amar Kutir* industry of rural development. In the sacred place, no idol is worshiped but an earthen pot is placed with mango leaves put into it. All the villagers come together to celebrate the festival. Women perform fasting and offering fruits to the goddess. The prayers are offered by the Brahman priest. After the offering is over, the eatables are distributed. Villagers say that the month of *Pous* is a month of prosperity. Following *Pous* month, in the month of *Magh, Saraswati and Sitola*

*Sosti* take place and the year-ends with *Basonti Puja* and *Chaitra Sankranti*. Villagers say that they have thirteen festivals whereas there are only twelve months in the calendar (Table1).

Among the Santals, in the month of *Pous* (Dec.-Jan.), they celebrate *Soharay (Bandna)* by worshipping *Maran Buru* (which means great hill). This festival is celebrated for five days. In this ceremony, a hen is chopped and the blood is smeared on the God's forehead. Rice is taken from all houses and *Khichri* (mixture of dal, rice, spices) is prepared. The rice is also taken from the houses to prepare *handi* or rice beer (3/4 portion) and one-fourth portion for *Khichri*. *Handi* or *haria* is offered to the God as well as distributed among the community. The *Majhi* (head) of the village inaugurates the festival.

In the month of *Magh* (Jan.-Feb.) *Magh Moria* is celebrated where the banana stem is considered as animal, which is hunted on the edge of the banana stem. Sweets are given to the person who is the bravest and the community acknowledges him. This ceremony goes on for three days. In the month of *Magh Karam* is celebrated i.e. reciting through songs, the history of the establishment of the earth till date. The person well versed in this ceremony is honored. They also celebrate *Saraswati Puja* as the Hindus do in the month of *Magh*.

In the month of *Phalgun* (Feb.-March), *Bahi parab* (flower festival) is celebrated, which is *dol* for Bengalis. Here, the priest goes from house to house and water is poured on his feet and sal flowers are offered by the women of the house to the priest.

**Table 1: Festivals among Hindus in the village**

English month	Bengali equivalent	Festival
March	Chaitra	Pachali
April	Baisakh	Dharmaraj Puja
June	Jaisto	Ambubachi
July	Ashad	Manasa Puja
August	Sravan	Panchami Puja
September	Bhadra	Rath Jatra, Bhadu
October	Ashwin	Dak Sankanti
November	Kartik	Mut Sankanti
December	Agrahayan	Nobanno, Ithu Sankanti
January	Pous	Pous Sankanti
February	Magh	Saraswati Puja and Magh Sankanti

[Source: Mahakuma Parichaya, Bolpur, Birbhum Dist., Feb., 1995.]

Then, the priest comes in the middle of the village and sprinkles water. All the people of the village play by pouring water instead of using colours. Water cannot be poured on elders and women. It is only a game with playmates and friends. This festival also manifests the ultimate interrelationship between the Santals and their bongas (god and goddess). Hunting is done by the men-folk in *Bahi parab* (festival). The *naeke* (priest) sacrifices five fowls for the safety of the village. When the annual hunting festival *Disom* takes place in the village, women have no role in the annual hunting festival.

In the month of *Chaitra* (March-April), *Chaitra Sankranti* is held which is worshipping of *Chatak or Lord Shiva*. The role of women is only to arrange for the puja, but not prayers. In the month of *Baisakh* (April-May) and *Joistho* (May-June), marriages are held in Santal society. In the month of *Ashad* (June-July) *Arro* is celebrated when seeds are sown and spread in the fields. Goddess *Laxmi* is worshipped. In the month of *Sravan* (July-Aug.) '*Manasa Puja*' is done by family members and subsequently in the month of *Bhadra* (Aug.-Sep.) Lord *Viswakarma* is offered prayers by people who own machines, cycles etc. In the month of *Ashwin* (Sep.-Oct.) and *Kartik* (Oct.-Nov.), from the day of *Durga Shosti*, *Dasai* is celebrated where men dance with peacock feathers for five days. In the month of *Agrahayan* *Janthar* is celebrated, which a festival of harvest is done by Santals. Seasonal rites and festivals provide entertainment and diversion to the Santals. Dancing and singing hold an important role in almost all those festive occasions. They are a part and parcel of tribal religious life. Other than dancing and singing, the practice of drinking rice beer *or handi* is necessary. This drink is also offered to the bongas (god and goddess) (Table2).

Among the Muslims, apart from offering namaz five times a day throughout the year one can find them celebrating four festivals. *Shabe-raat* is generally celebrated in the month of December. This is the festival, which offers and feeds people for the peace of the ancestors.

After *Shabe-barat*, *Ed-ul-Fitr* is celebrated after fasting for thirty days i.e. eating before the sunrise and then eating after the sun set. This is done after the calling from mosque. Women do not enter the mosque. On the day of *Eid*, new clothes are worn, delicacies are prepared and offering is done to the poor. The story behind this occasion is that Allah

asked the Prophet how many days his followers could fast. Prophet assured Allah that his followers would fast for thirty days. Men and women who are unable to fast during the 30 days of fasting before *Eid*, would complete their fasting before seeing the moon of *Moharram*. During the time of menstruation, women cannot fast, so the fasting is completed before *Moharram*.

*Ed-ul-Zuha* is also celebrated by Muslims. The reason is the sacrifice of the dearest one. The story behind this festival is the sacrifice of a *Dhumba* by the Prophet. *Moharram* is being remembered by Muslims in order to mourn for Fatima's sons, *Hasan and Husain*. This mourning is not done by *Hanafi*, as they prepare an *astana* and revolve it round the villages and delicacies are prepared.

In relation to the religious scripture and the priests in the three communities, one can find the Muslims as well as the Hindus have a well-defined tradition recorded in their religious scriptures. The local rituals beliefs and acts are, to a great extent, influenced by the great traditions of the communities. The Santals, on the other hand, do not have such a great tradition of religion, although now-a-days the *More Hapram Reak Katha*, based on the verbal narration of Korean Guru, an ancient religious authority of the people largely guides their ritual behaviour. In all the communities the males are the priests, who are considered the authority; and there is a considerable difference in rituals norms between the male and the female, i.e. to say the priest for Hindus, *Moulvi* for Muslims and *Naeke* and *Manjhi haram* for Santals (Table3).

**Table 2: Festivals among Santals in the village**

Festivals	Bengali Equiv.	Month
Saraswati Puja	Magh	Feb.
Karm	Magh	Jan.
Bahi Parab	Phalgun	March
Chaitra Sankranti	Chaitra	April
Arro	Ashad	June
Manasa Puja	Sravan	July
Visva-Karma Puja	Bhadra	Aug.
Dasai	Ashwin	Sept.
Kali Puja	Kartik	Oct.
Janthar	Agrahayan	Nov.
Soharay	Pous	Dec.

[Source: Mahakuma Parichaya, Bolpur, Birbhum Dist., Feb., 1995.]

**Table 3: Festivals among Muslims in the villages**

Festivals	Bengali Calendar	Month
Shabe-barat	Agrahayan	Nov.
Ed-ul-Fitr	Agrahayan	December
Ed ul Zuha	Chaitra	March
Moharram	Chaitra or Baisakh	March or April

[Source: Mahakuma Parichaya, Bolpur, Birbhum Dist., Feb., 1995.]

### Conclusion

Thus, it has, however, been noticed that in all the communities there are some rituals that are specific to women, and the women in such rituals have some kind of exclusiveness, enjoying a world of their own. The women, specifically, of the Hindu community, have to observe ascetical austerities, and undertake penance for the well-being of their males as well as their households and the community. The Muslim women also have to read religious scriptures, say prayer (namaz) to Allah, and observe austerities to uphold the community ideology. There are many ritual performances among the Santals in which the participation of women is essential. Communal dance and songs constitute an essential element for any Santal ritual performance, and they can hardly be held without the participation of their women. In a way the Santal women seem to enjoy a better ritual position than the Hindus and the Muslim women.

Despite their vulnerability to pollution, all the rural women belonging to the communities under my study area are well aware of the complementarily in upholding the patriarchal religious ideology of their households and feel contended. Ardener, Edwin and Ardener, Shirley (1975), proposed a theory of 'muted groups' and argued that the women who belong to the 'muted group' are silenced by the structures of male dominance in patrilineal society. Women may, however, speak a great deal and their activities, responsibilities and life style may reveal some distinctive features. He thus suggests that women may have a different world and worldview even in a male-dominated society. The rural women, under the study seem to have, as in the case of 'self-help groups', a distinct world of their own also in the sphere of ritual performance. In all the communities the religion is a cultural construction of the male. Among the Muslim and the Hindu it is codified as great tradition in religious scriptures that is transmitted to the common people by their male specialists. Among the Santals religious ideas are

transmitted orally. Some Santals refer to the *More Hapram Reak Katha* for their traditional religious norms. From this study of the ritual performances in the communities it was, however, noticed that there are certain rituals, specifically the life-crisis ones, which are exclusively performed by women among themselves. In these ritual performances the women enjoy much autonomy and freedom. Among the Santals the women's ritual world is even wider. All the major national rituals of the Santal are accompanied by communal dance and music in which women's participation is essential. The religious aspect of the Santal is deeply embedded into their economic and socio-political aspects of life and the men and the women play complementary roles in the maintenance of the structural equilibrium of their society.

It may be noted here that the domestic/public division in all the communities shows considerable flexibility, and the women enjoy power, autonomy and authority. In context of modernization there seems to be developing an arena of women's social action which is valued by their societies, and it is quite commensurable to their culture. Despite the apparent economic and political freedom gained through their participation in outdoor work and self-help group formations, the women of the communities do not, however, form a separate category of persons. They are closely tied to their families and lineages, and economic and political relations are mainly embedded into kinship matrix.

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