

## Mahali Culture and Social Change in West Bengal

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**Abstract:** Ethnographic study and analysis in Anthropology is the very base of anthropological researches in India and abroad. Mahali or Mahli is an artisan community involved in traditional bamboo craft. The present paper is outcome of ethnographic study and situational analysis of the Mahali tribe of West Bengal. An attempt has been made to present the indigenous Mahali Culture along with the socio-cultural changes in the changing modern scenario. Mahali people are master craftsmen and produce fine basketry along with doing labor work. Lots of changes are coming in the Mahali society and culture due to the impact of migration, acculturation and modernization. Their living standard is little bit uplifted by various tribal developmental programs and facilities provided in the Mahali areas, but still they are living in low socio-economic condition.

**Keywords:** Bamboo-craftsmen, culture, social system, socio-cultural change, acculturation, modernization.

### **Introduction**

Mahali or Mahli is a tribal bamboo craftsman community residing in the states of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar and Odissa. A minor migrated population is also found in the adjoining areas of Bangladesh. In West Bengal and Odissa they are called Mahali whereas in Jharkhand and Bihar states they are known as Mahli. Also in the Purulia district (West Bengal), situated at the border area of Jharkhand and West Bengal, they call themselves Mahli. Chota Nagpur plateau area of Jharkhand is considered as their native place and from there they had migrated to the adjoining regions and states. According to a few scholars Santhal Pargana is their main cultural area. They had been brought to West Bengal from then undivided Bihar as laborers for indigo cultivation during British rule. Mahali is a Dravidian tribe of labor class who were mainly palanquin bearers and does bamboo craft work (Risley, 1891, 2, 40). Mahalis are considered as an inalienable branch of the Santal tribe; their principal occupation is to make bamboo-baskets and other similar types of utensils (Roy, 2012, 19). They are short to medium statured people with a broad face and almost flat short nose. They are basically basket makers and a marginal people. In West Bengal, they speak in Bengali and Santali languages. In Bihar and Jharkhand, they use the Sadari language.

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### **Demography**

**Table 1 : State-wise Mahli / Mahali population in India**

<b>Place</b>	<b>Total Popu- lation</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Rural</b>	<b>Urban</b>
India	259623	130051	129572	229355	30268
West Bengal (Mahali)	81594	40740	40854	73038	8556
West Bengal (Mahli)	2609	1329	1280	2167	442
Jharkhand (Mahli)	152663	76631	76032	134322	18341
Bihar (Mahli)	4132	2169	1963	3880	252
Odisha (Mahali)	18625	9182	9443	15948	2677

Source : Census of India, 2011

The total population of Mahali / Mahli in India is 2,59,623 out of which major population around 88.34 per cent lives in rural areas. In West Bengal state schedule tribe list Mahali (no. 26) and Mahli (no. 27) are enlisted on two different numbers as different groups. Jointly, the total population of Mahali / Mahli in West Bengal is 84,203 out of which 42069 are male and 42134 are female. Their sex ratio in West Bengal is around 1002, which is gradually decreasing though the population has increased slowly in last two decades. They are mainly distributed in North & South 24 Parganas, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Nadia, Uttar & Dakshin Dinajpur, Purulia, Bardwan, Bankura, Birbhum, Malda, Murshidabad, Paschim (west) & Purba (east) Medinipur, Howrah, Hooghly, Kolkata and Coochbehar districts of West Bengal.

### **Life Style**

Mahali people live in multi-caste villages with other caste people in separate hamlets. The village is surrounded by fields. The Mahali live with other groups of people like the Santhal, Ho, Munda, Bhumij, Bhuia, Kurmi and others. It is interesting to note that the Mahali houses are similar to the Santali houses, but not as clean, besmeared or with designs like the Santali houses. Mahali houses are made up of mud, wood, bamboo, *Kosi* grass and mud tiles. They live in rectangular shape houses with a sloping roof thatched with either grass and fodders or mud tiles. The walls are made up of mud. Their houses generally composed of two rooms, a veranda and a courtyard. The house possesses a door and there are no windows. The door is of bamboo made called '*Tati*'. A verandah is present in front of the house and the back of house is used to grow vegetables.

The Mahali are non-vegetarian. They take pork along with other kinds of meat. They eat rice, wheat and maize; pulses, vegetables, roots and tubers as per the availability in different seasons. They like the rice-beer known as '*Hadia*' which is locally made by them. Mahali women wear *Sari* and men wear small piece of cloth (*Dhoti / Pancha*) to cover their lower body. New generation has started wearing modern dresses but old generation can be still seen in traditional usual attire. The Mahali also work on conch shells and cowries. They prepare beautiful ornaments. Now, they also use artificial and metal ornaments easily available in local markets. The Mahalis have the general practice of tattooing their names on their hands. The Mahali do dance and sing. They have got their folk songs and both men and women dance together.

### **Social System**

Mahali is a patrilineal, patriarchal and patrilocal tribal community. Mahali are divided into following sub-groups:

1. Bansphod Mahali – They are the basket makers

2. Patar Mahali or Ghasi Mahali – They do the basket making along with cultivation.
3. Solunki Mahali – They are cultivators and laborers
4. Tanti Mahali – They are palanquin bearers
5. Munda Mahali – They are cultivators and found in Lohardanga area
6. Oraon Mahali – Descendants of Mahalis intermarried with Oraon.
7. Kol Mahali – Descendants of Mahalis intermarried with Kol.

These groups are endogamous in nature. They have been further divided into several totemic clans. The clan is locally termed as *jati*. The clans are further divided into sub-clans known as *khunt*. None from the community does any harm to the clan objects, trees or animals. The old people have enough knowledge about the community norms and traditions, but the new generation, being in contact with the other communities of the area and the people, is gradually getting away and adopting new way of life.

#### **Some of the clans of Mahalis**

The Mahalis have several clans which are stated below:

- 1) **Mandi:** The totem of this clan is a bird of blue color which is locally known as ‘Neel Chakra’. When the people of this clan see the bird, they bow down and make a salute to the bird. If they happen to see any dead bird around, they observe pollution and change the earthen pots used in the kitchen for cooking food and storing drinking water. There are two sub-divisions (*khunt*) in this clan, i.e., Sada Mandi and Moor Mandi. People belonging to Sada Mandi do not use turmeric paste to color the clothes during marriage and wear white cloth, while the people belonging to Moor Mandi use the clothes colored with turmeric and wear white marriage crown of pith.
- 2) **Murmu:** The totem of this clan is Shol fish (*Opicephalus marulius*). They do not catch and eat this variety of fish and observe pollution, if they happen to see any dead fish in the pond. There are six sub-clans (*khunt*) within this clan, i.e., the Sada Murmu, Gansar Murmu, Bora Murmu, Patla Murmu, Handi Murmu and the Sen Murmu. The Sada Murmu do not apply vermilion on the sacrificing animal or bird and worship facing east direction, the Gansar Murmu make use of vermilion and keep facing south-east. The Bora Murmu does not eat Bowal fish (*Wallago attu*). The Patla Murmu makes sacrifice on Baha festival and offer liquor to the god after Sohari festival. Sen Murmu is used to cut or slice meat by keeping the animal over a stone slab which is known as *sil* or *sen*.
- 3) **Basaki or Kanti:** The totemic object of this clan is a kind of vegetable which is locally called as ‘lal not sak’ (*Amaranthus tristis*). They do not use vermilion during any sacrifice. There are three sub-clans (*khunt*) namely, the Sada Basaki, Basaki and the Lat Basaki.
- 4) **Basara:** The totem of this clan is *baj* (hawk), a large, strong bird with keen sight. The clan people bow down in front of the bird and observe pollution when they see a dead hawk. This clan is further sub-divided (*khunt*) into Sada Basara, Basara and Bitol Basara sub-clans. The Sada Basara does not use vermilion, but the Basara sub-clan people use vermilion. Bitol *Basara* is a defaulted group who has strayed from the group norms.

- 5) **Hembrora:** The totem of this clan is *supari* (arecanut). These clan people do not eat Arecanut. This clan is sub-divided (*khunt*) into Gua Hembrom, Sada Hembrom and Bitol Hembrom. One man belonging to this sub-clan once kicked out his wife from his house and she gave birth to a male child beneath an Arecanut tree. So, this group of people is called Gua Hembrom. The Sada Hembrom do not use vermilion during worships and the Bitol Hembrom is a defaulted group among whom one woman had worked as a midwife and due to hunger she had a cock lying over a dead body.
- 6) **Hansda:** The totem of Hansda clan is a wild duck or goose. This clan is sub-divided (*khunt*) into Bodhwar, Sak and Silbindha Hansdas. One of the ancestors of the Bodhwar brought soiled water (*bodhe*) in an earthen pot to complete the rituals, so this group is named Bodhwar. The Sak Hansda is named so because they had forgotten to eat the meat of white duck during a marriage ceremony and also the women had forgotten to wear conch necklace and conch bracelet. The Silbindha are named so because they had once hunted a kite. A myth related with the Silbindha Hansda is as follows :  
“Once upon a time a big kite made its nest in a tree. It used the plough with yoke and big lumps of earth to prepare its nest. In due course of time it gave birth to its offspring and used to carry the sheep, goats, calves and children of human beings to feed them. Then the people informed to the king and requested him to kill the kite.”  
Nobody came forward to kill the kite. Then two Hansda men came forward and killed the heinous kite. Hence, the descendants of these two men are called Silbindha Hansda.
- 7) **Tudu:** The totemic object of this clan is rat. It has two sub-clans (*khunt*); namely, Sigi Tudu and Datela Tudu. There is a myth about the origin of the Siga Tudu sub-clan. The Tudu girls used to take bath in the pond nakedly which was not being liked by the house members. They scolded their daughters, but they did not heed and ignored their warnings. So, the parents became furious and planted the pointed sticks of *ikh* wood (*Fordia floribunda*) in the pond. When the girls came to take bath on the next day, they threw away their clothes and jumped into the pond. The pointed sticks pierced their bodies and they died instantly. Due to this, these people are called Sigi Tudu. The Datela Tudu are named so because their ancestors used to rear two boars and used to sacrifice them on Soharai festival.
- 8) **Kisku** – The totem of this clan is a bird named Kodilla (kingfisher). Sada Kisku and Kisku are two sub-clans (*khunt*) of this clan. Sada Kisku does not make use of vermilion and turmeric during worship and marriage respectively, while the Kisku people make use of these things.
- 9) **Soren:** Constellation pleiades is the totem of this clan. This clan is sub-divided (*khunt*) into Sak Soren and Sidap Soren sub-clans. The Sak Soren behaves like Sak Hansda people. The Sidap subclan people keep a sheave of paddy crop in front of the cattle shed and tie the bullocks with pegs there. If they eat the sheave, it is assumed that the crops will be plenty. If not so, then it is mixed with other crops.
- 10) **Chode:** The totemic object of this clan is lizard. They do not harm the lizards and give proper respect to them. This clan is not divided further into sub-clans.
- 11) **Samah:** The totem of this clan is a kind of grass (*Panicum frumtataceum*). It is believed that the land on which this grass grows abundantly gives a good paddy crop. It has no sub-clans.

- 12) **Pirahi**: The members of this clan do not eat round pumpkin.
- 13) **Khangar**: The totem of this clan is a black bird (Jackdaw). They observe complete pollution, if they happen to see any dead bird (Jackdaw). They throw away the water and cooking earthen pots of the house.

### **Political System**

The Mahali have got their own community panchayat. It is headed by the Mukhiya / Manjihadam or Parganait. Other officials are the Paranik, Gurit, Pujari or Naike and the Pargana. The Paranik helps the Mukhiya, the Gurit functions as a messenger, the Naike worships the village deities and the Pargana does the consignment of the bones into river after cremation. The social disputes, cases of adultery and divorce are solved by the Mukhiya in consultation with other members of the panchayat.

Modern Panchayati Raj System and Gram Sabha are now playing significant role in rural social life. The impact of traditional political system is little bit reduced. Now, Mahali traditional panchayat deals only with simple local disputes. Criminal cases are dealt by police and judiciary system (court).

### **Religion and Festival**

The house deity of any clan is known as *Ork Bonga* which is normally not known to other clan people. The different clan people follow different ways of worship and make sacrifice of different colors of chicken. The Mandi clan people make sacrifice of white chicken, the Murmu of red color and the Basaki clan people make sacrifice of mixed colored chicken. The Hembrom make sacrifice of chicken facing north direction and the Hansda do it facing east. Different clan people have different ways of worshipping their house deities.

The Mahali are the followers of Hindu religion. Some of them have also embraced Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Sikhism. The chief deities of the Mahali are the *Barpahadi Deo* and *Mansa Devi*. A good number of the Mahali people are the followers of *Vaishnav Panth* and they worship *Gaurang Mahaprabhu* on the day of *Dol Jatra*. In every village, there is a sacred grove where the Mahali do the collective worship. Their deities namely *Dharam*, *Garam* and others are enshrined beneath a very old tree and this place is considered to be very sacred.

The Mahali celebrate *Hari Pooja* in the Hindu month of *Baisakh*. *Mansa Pooja* in the months of *Jyestha*, *Sravan* and *Ashwin*, *Karam Pooja* in *Bhadra*, *Kali*, *Garia* and *Goyal Pooja* in the month of *Aghan*, *Tushu Parva* in *Paush*, *Maghi* or *Akhani Pooja* in the month of *Magh* and *Sarhul Parva* is celebrated in the months of *Falgun* and *Chaitra*. In community festivals, a Brahman or a *Naike* is called, while the home worships are performed by the eldest member of the family.

### **Life Cycle**

Life cycle rituals start from the birth of a child and end at death. There are a number of rites and rituals celebrated from birth to death. Birth takes place when a woman conceives after having sexual intercourse with her spouse. She carries for nine months and then delivers a child with the help of a midwife. Other adult women of the house also are present there at the time of parturition. The umbilical cord of the child is cut and placed in an earthen pot with *doob* (grass), turmeric, arecanut and a copper coin. This pot is placed in a pit in the courtyard by the midwife. This is done to save the child from the malevolent spirits. Pollution is observed for nine days.

The purification ceremony *Mundan* is done on the ninth day after child birth. On this day the head hair of the child is shaved by a barber and he also cuts the nails of the mother, child and other members of the family. The mother and the child are afterwards taken to a nearby pond and bathed by the adult women after applying turmeric paste. They make the ritual worship there and then become free from pollution.

Naming ceremony is done by keeping a lump of cow-dung in front of the house and over that flower is placed. The women have a prime role in this ceremony. Name of the child is kept on the name of any ancestor. A feast is arranged on this day.

When the child becomes five months old, first rice feeding ceremony (*annaprasan*) is observed. The maternal uncle feeds first morsel of sweet rice to the child. The child is worn new clothes on this day.

*Sammilan* (initiation) ceremony is observed at the age of 4-5 years. The child is marked a sign on his/her arm by a burning coal and it includes the child in the Mahali community.

Mahali marriage called *bapla* is done generally at the age of 18 to 22 years for the boys and 16 to 20 years for girls. They do not marry on days and months of their birth. The months of *Falgun*, *Baisakh* and *Asharh* are considered to be the most favorable months for marriage and marriages are not held in the months of *Bhadra*, *Paus* and *Chaitra*. Bride-price is given. The amount of bride-wealth varies from Rs.48/- to Rs.64/- along with minimum four saris (women's cloth), two for the bride, one for bride's mother and one for the grandmother. Bride price varies from place to place and economic condition. It also starts with Rs.12/- at some places. Mahali generally do the negotiated form of marriage. Most of the Mahali marriages are arranged by the parents and close relatives. Usually, the groom's family approaches the bride's family. One or few members of the kin groups or some of the villagers act as a 'raiber' (Marriage Broker). If girl's family approves the alliance then the broker approaches the groom's family and fixes a date for visiting the girl's house. On that day, the groom's family members along with their 'Manjhi Hadam' (village headman) visit the bride's house. When they reach the bride's house, father or elder brother of the bride receives them warmly. Members of the bride's family lay a mat in their courtyard as sitting arrangement for groom's family and also arrange a feast for them by sacrificing a goat in their honour. By this way bride's family members show their respect to the groom's family. During this visit, the groom's family members want to see the bride and they take her out of her hut; the bride washes the feet of the guests and offers water to them. If they like the bride, then they fix the amount of bride prize, which signifies the fixation of marriage and its payment signifies confirmation. Betrothal is done about 10-12 days before the day of marriage. In this ritual the bride and the bridegroom are provided with a ring and clothes by the opposite parties. Before marriage, the bride and the bridegroom are married with the mango and the *mahua* (*Bassia latifolia*) trees respectively. During marriage, the bride and the bridegroom are lifted by their respective fathers and make three rounds of the marriage booth (*mandap*) of *sal* (*Shorea robusta*) leaves which is locally known as *Chahatantala*. This is then covered with a white cloth and the couple is seated on a wooden plank. The bridegroom applies vermilion on the forehead of the bride for five times and this is repeated by the bride with black soot (*kajal*). Then the groom puts an iron armband on the arm of the bride. A small pit, in the form of a pond, is dug in the courtyard and on the four corners four banana plants are planted. These plants are wrapped by threads. The couple is then bathed by the water and the groom again applies vermilion on the forehead of the bride. Then the groom's mother kisses both of them on the forehead and in return gets salute from them. On the next day, they return to the groom's house. They are seated beneath the marriage booth and blessed by offering paddy and *doob* by the aged persons of the house. The relatives and friends give presentations. In the evening, a feast is arranged for the relatives and villagers.

They also practice run-away marriage (*angir*), force marriage (*aurapar*) and *ghar jawai* or resident son-in-law type of marriages. Mahali practice monogamy, group and sub-group endogamy and clan exogamy in case of marriage. But, in some cases, bigamy and tri-gamy are also granted. They strictly abhor parallel cousin and cross-cousin marriage and are not allowed in the community. Junior sororate is permitted. In this case, the amount of bride-price is also reduced and it varies from Rs. 24/- to Rs. 30/-. Junior levirate is also permitted in the community. Divorce is permitted. When a husband takes divorce, he pays an amount to his wife as compensation and takes back his iron armband. Remarriage is permitted.

On death, dead body is cremated. Only the dead children are buried. The Mandi and the Murmu clans keep the head of the dead body towards east, but the other clans' people keep the head towards north direction. The Hansda clan people keep the face above, while the other clans' people keep the face facing down towards the earth. After cremation, the bones are collected when the pyre becomes cool and brought to the house. It is kept near a basil plant. People enter the house after touching the fire and an iron piece. The bones are consigned into a river on the next day. Pollution is observed for ten days. The barber shaves the heads of the mourners on the tenth day and pairs off the nails. The mourners take bath and purificatory rite is officiated by a Brahman priest.

#### ***Family and Property***

The Mahali family is mostly nuclear. It is generally constituted of 5 to 7 members. The women work in the fields during cultivation, help in cattle-rearing and do the basketry work in the house along with household works. The property is equally divided among the sons. Sometimes the daughters are also given share in the parental property. But, the worship of the family deity is performed only by the eldest son.

#### ***Livelihood***

The Mahali men do the basketry work along with a little agriculture. They also work as laborers in the agricultural fields. They used to work as palanquin bearers in the past. Hence, the Santal looked them down otherwise the Mahali have got a lot of similarities with the Santal in their clan names and language. But the groups like Munda Mahali, Oraon Mahali and Kol Mahali indicate their relationships with the Munda, Oraon and Kol tribes. Mahali people traditionally earned their livelihood by selling articles made of bamboo. Some typical articles made by them are different varieties of bamboo baskets, kitchen utensils, Machi (a small stool), soop (winnowing fan), chatai (mat), raincap and umbrella for covering head and upper back portion during rain. In West Bengal, on an average 60 per cent of the Mahali (63.5 %) / Mahli (53.9 %) population work as main workers. Mahali people are ordinarily involved in non-agricultural activities with only 5.3 per cent of their main workers in cultivation and 19.6 per cent as agricultural laborers. Rests of them are mainly involved in traditional occupation and other labor works. Due to impact of migration and modernization, new ways of livelihood are also witnessed among them.

#### ***Social and Cultural Change***

As already stated above in different sections, Mahali tribe of West Bengal is witnessing rapid socio-cultural changes. They are following neighboring communities which is causing change in their cultural traits, traditions, rituals and lifestyle. Due to acculturation they are gradually adopting Hindu norms and religion. Many of them are also following other religions. Some new system have introduced in their marriage. New generation is forgetting their clan names, clan gods and associated myths. Also due to gradual impact of modernization and education their life style is

changing. Because of price rise and diffusion of culture of other neighboring caste people and urbanization most of them have left to wear their own dresses and wearing the modern dresses, traditional locally made ornaments are replaced by market made artificial and metal ornaments to decorate. They have started using shampoo, talcum powder and other cosmetics leaving herbal and traditional cosmetics. The young educated people do not want to wear the traditional dresses and play their traditional instrument and dance at their festivals. TV, video, cinema and mobile have been introduced as new entertainment elements. A small but noticeable Mahali population is also living or working in urban areas, adopting new urban life style and bringing change in the society.

Table 2 : Sex Ratio among the Mahli / Mahali population in India

Place	Total Population	Male	Female	Sex Ratio	Child Sex Ratio
India	259623	130051	129572	996	983
West Bengal (Mahali)	81594	40740	40854	1003	995
West Bengal (Mahli)	2609	1329	1280	963	942
Jharkhand (Mahli)	152663	76631	76032	992	983
Bihar (Mahli)	4132	2169	1963	905	986
Odisha (Mahali)	18625	9182	9443	1028	944

Source : Census of India 2011

Presently Mahali people are using modern health care facilities along with traditional healing practices. For health related issues they started visiting doctors, Hospitals, rural health sub centers or primary health centers (PHC). The Mahali population is increasing gradually with slow pace. But, the sex ratio is gradually decreasing. It will further decrease as visible from the declining Child sex ratio (Table-2), which may lead to social problem in future. This matter needs further social and medical investigation for proper solution. Now, Mahali people prefer middle sized to small sized families and for this they have also started to use family planning practices. They know about immunization program and use related government facilities for child health. They need more health facilities and economic assistance for all round progress of the Mahali community.

Table 3 : Literacy rate among Mahli / Mahali population in India

Place	Total Population	Literate	%	Male	%	Female	%
India	259623	117582	45.2	71399	60.7	46183	39.3
West Bengal (Mahali)	81594	38565	47.2	23223	60.2	15342	39.8
West Bengal (Mahli)	2609	1119	42.8	671	60.0	448	40.0
Jharkhand (Mahli)	152663	68406	44.8	41753	61.0	26653	39.0
Bihar (Mahli)	4132	1435	34.7	920	64.1	515	35.9
Odisha (Mahali)	18625	8057	43.2	4832	60.0	3225	40.0

Source : Census of India 2011

Literacy rate is also very low among Mahali tribe. The average literacy rate in Mahali community is about 45.2 per cent, which is very low. Further educational development is needed for awareness and overall development of Mahali society. The development programs in the area have also

affected their life, but still there is a long way to come into the mainstream. On an average, Mahali are poor people and facing low socio-economic status.

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