



Voices from the Periphery presents

DETAILED SURVEY REPORT ON

Sonajhuri Hat

Shantiniketan

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Introduction

A MARKET WOVEN WITH SURVIVAL AND SONG

On the red-earth fringes of the Ballavpur forest near Shantiniketan, Sonajhuri Hat emerges each day like a cultural mirage—vibrant, musical, and deceptively picturesque. But beyond the laughter of tourists and the charm of handwoven kurtas lies an ecosystem of struggle, endurance, and asymmetrical power. This case study—based on field interviews, observations, and oral testimonies—explores the lived realities of tribal women vendors, their encounters with urban consumers, and the political economy of cultural labor in the Hat.

While Shantiniketan evokes the aura of Tagore's legacy and Baul mysticism, Sonajhuri is where the marginalized speak through their goods, crafts, and songs—albeit on someone else's terms. Here, gender, ethnicity, labor, and spectacle converge, not always peacefully.

Setting the Stage

THE STRUCTURE AND ETHOS OF SONAJHURI HAT

Held every day except Wednesday, Sonajhuri Hat is a large open-air tribal market in Birbhum district, famous for:

Handloom clothing (sarees, panjabis, skirts, kurtas)

Terracotta jewellery and cookware

Dokra figurines

Wooden toys, hand fans, and musical instruments

Forest products like honey, pickles, and mahua wine

The majority of vendors belong to Santhal, Bagdi, and Oraon communities, and an overwhelming number of them are women — a reversal of typical gender dynamics seen in other rural markets in India.

“This is our land. We don’t work for anyone here. We make, we sell, we earn,” said Rakya Bibi, a senior Bagdi woman and saree seller.

The market is located amidst lush Sonajhuri trees, offering a performative “rustic charm” that draws in urban Bengali tourists, influencers, foreigners, and even art scholars. But this visual poetry masks underlying hardship and inequity.

Observations and Interviews from the Ground

WOMEN AS ECONOMIC ANCHORS

Tribal women dominate this market—not only in numbers but in economic control. They stitch, dye, weave, and sell. Men are a minority here and often play supportive roles.

“My husband works in a garage in Bolpur. I run this stall,” said Saroj Soren, a 24-year-old Santhal woman.

“We stitch till midnight. My daughter is learning too. This is not a hobby—this is life,” said Shakti Bagdi, a blouse seller.

These women shoulder triple burdens — craft production, vending, and caregiving — all in an informal economy without legal protections, healthcare, or safety nets.



CULTURAL SPECTACLE AND COMMODIFICATION

On weekends, tourists gather around Santhal dance groups and Baul musicians, filming them, dancing alongside, and later sharing these as “authentic tribal moments.”

“They don’t know the meaning of our dance. But they copy our steps and post online,” said Madhab Majhi, a traditional drummer.

“It feels like they came to see us in a zoo,” said Saroj Soren with quiet pain.

This performance-for-spectacle dynamic reflects a broader commodification of tribal culture, where heritage is consumed but the humanity behind it is ignored.

BUYER INTERVIEWS: THE URBAN GAZE

Riya Sen, a tourist from Kolkata:

“I love the vibe here. I got such a cheap kurti! So raw, so real. It’s like entering a living museum.”

Tathagata Mitra, academic:

“I fear this is becoming a performance economy. The women work so hard, yet remain invisible in policy narratives.”

Rimika Ghosh, influencer:

“I danced with the Santhal girls—such fun content! Got 14K likes. But yeah, I wish someone taught me what this dance means.”

These voices show how urban fascination coexists with cultural flattening—an appropriation of the aesthetic, often with little regard for its socio-economic roots.



MULTIPLE LIVELIHOODS: A COMPLEX ECONOMY

Though Sonajhuri is important, most vendors revealed it is not their only income source:

Some also run shops in Bolpur or Kolkata

Some are seasonal agricultural workers

"My brother sells in Gariahat. I come here because this is my space. Here I am not anyone's worker," said Md Suman, a kurta vendor.

"We don't depend only on this. But it helps us send children to school," said SK Monir.

Thus, Sonajhuri represents both autonomy and instability—a floating economy of women, craft, and hope.



Problems Beyond the Picturesque

LOCAL EXTORTION AND FEAR

Vendors reported forced chanda (extortion) by local political party functionaries. Without receipts or negotiations, vendors are made to pay ₹100–₹300 on “busy” days.

“One man said if we don’t pay, our spot will be taken. Last year, a woman’s stall was kicked over,” said Biswajit Lohar, an Oraon artisan.

This reflects neo-feudal control over informal spaces, where vendors must negotiate with illegitimate authority just to exist.

INFRASTRUCTURAL NEGLECT

No public toilets, especially for women

No access to clean water

No waste disposal system

No child care zones, though many women come with infants

Vulnerability to climate events: Dust storms, heavy rain, heat waves

“When it rains, our sarees are ruined. No roof, no plastic. We just cried,” said Md Karim, cloth seller.

EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL EXHAUSTION

Beyond manual labor, tribal women here perform emotional labor:

Smiling at rude bargainers

Explaining products again and again

Being polite even when humiliated

Enduring harassment by customers or local men

Yet, these dimensions are unseen, undocumented, and unvalued.



Theoretical Anchors and Critical Perspectives

SUBALTERNITY (SPIVAK, GUHA)

The women of Sonajhuri are speaking subjects, but their speech is often filtered or muted—consumed as “craftswoman narratives” rather than political voices. They “speak” through goods, but rarely shape the discourse that frames them.

CULTURAL HYBRIDITY AND APPROPRIATION (HOMI BHABHA)

Sonajhuri is a liminal hybrid space—where tribal identity is performed, modified, and sold. It is a contact zone, but not an equal one. Urban buyers often engage in symbolic tourism, not ethical exchange.

FEMINIST POLITICAL ECONOMY (SYLVIA CHANT, NAILA KABEER)

Women here are part of the informal economy—unprotected yet vital. Their labor is underpaid, unrecorded, and systematically undervalued despite sustaining families and craft cultures.

SPATIAL POLITICS (HENRI LEBEVRE)

The Hat is not neutral. It produces space—where stall placement, movement, visibility, and exclusion are governed by informal power structures, not democratic rights.



Conclusion

RESISTING ERASURE, CLAIMING SPACE

Sonajhuri Hat is a paradox. It is a place of economic aspiration and cultural violence, of female strength and structural neglect, of celebrated heritage and erased realities. The women who sit on red earth, arranging bangles or folding sarees, are not remnants of the past—they are warriors of the everyday.

To truly understand Sonajhuri is to listen—not just to its songs or reels, but to its silences, coughs, sighs, refusals, and quiet dignity. Their bodies carry the memory of crafts; their fingers, the history of survival.

If we wish to honor this market, we must fight for sanitation before selfies, protection before photography, and justice before joyrides.



Voices

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FORGOTTEN MEMORIES

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