Cinema for sustainability: Santali Cinema shaping culture, awareness and community futures in East Singhbhum

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Abstract- This research demonstrates how Santali-language films are becoming a tool for preserving culture and fostering social awareness. It places this development within the broader idea of people, planet, and prosperity. The study examines the production and distribution of Santali films in the local areas of East Singhbhum, Jharkhand. While many studies focus on cinema's artistic or cultural aspects, this paper takes a different approach. It uses a simple, literature-based qualitative method to highlight social and environmental issues affecting tribal and rural communities. Findings suggest that despite low-budget production and distribution constraints, these films carve out arenas for dialogue in villages and fairs, strengthen pride in the language and invite reflection on sustainable livelihoods and forest-ecosystem relationships as shown on screen. This paper will argue that Santali cinema in East Singhbhum has its potential to be used as an instrument of social change, education, and sustainable development, and calls for policy support, open-data archiving of films, and inclusive screening strategies to widen its impact.

Keywords- Santali cinema; cultural preservation; social awareness; East Singhbhum; sustainability; indigenous media.

I. Introduction

This study focuses at the rise of Santali-language cinema in East Singhbhum, Jharkhand and how local film production and small community screenings are slowly becoming tools for cultural pride and social learning. The context for the study comes from the growing interest in how regional and indigenous films support cultural survival, especially at a time when many tribal languages and traditions face pressure from migration, education patterns, and mainstream media. Although earlier work on indigenous cinema highlights its role in representing community identity and lived experiences (Ginsburg, 2002; Hafstein, 2018), there is still limited research on how Santali films connect with sustainability goals linked to people, planet, and prosperity.

The gap in the existing literature lies in the lack of focused studies on East Singhbhum. Most research on Santali cinema describes its history, thematic concerns, or production challenges, but few explains how the films help communities maintain their language, reflect on environmental issues, or discuss social development. This paper addresses that gap by examining how Santali cinema creates spaces for cultural expression, supports the use of the Ol Chiki script, and encourages conversations around education, forests, livelihoods, and everyday social issues. These links make Santali cinema relevant to broader sustainability thinking, especially the idea that cultural identity, environmental knowledge, and community wellbeing are interconnected.

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, it places Santali cinema within the people-planet-prosperity framework that guides current sustainability debates. Second, it shows how small village screenings and local film distribution, even with low budgets, can strengthen language use and social awareness. Third, it suggests practical steps such as community-based film archives, policy support, and wider access to screenings so that the positive impact of these films can reach more viewers.

Overall, the study argues that Santali cinema in East Singhbhum is more than entertainment. It works as a cultural bridge, a teaching tool, and a medium that can support sustainable community development when given the right support and visibility.

Gap and Contribution
While the literature acknowledges Santali cinema's cultural significance, few studies focus explicitly on its role for sustainable development outcomes particularly in East Singhbhum district and how screenings create measurable social awareness. This paper seeks to fill that gap by offering a qualitative review of secondary data, film-listing databases and localization of screenings to develop an evidence-informed perspective on media-driven sustainability in tribal Jharkhand.

II. Methods

Research Design
This study employs a qualitative research design, rooted in interpretative analysis of secondary data. It is descriptive and analytical in nature, aimed at uncovering patterns, meanings and themes rather than quantifying variables. Given the subject matter cultural media, identity, social awareness a qualitative approach is well-suited (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Sources
The data collection draws upon a range of secondary sources: scholarly articles, peer-reviewed journals, newspaper features, organisational reports, film-listing databases and archival information on Santali cinema. For example, the Santali Film Database maintained by the Frobenius Institute archives film records for Santali productions (Schleiter et al., n.d.). News articles such as India Today Hindi's coverage of village screenings provide context on distribution practices in Jharkhand (India Today Hindi, 2025).

Data Collection Procedure
A systematic search was conducted during May–June 2025 across online academic databases (Google Scholar, ResearchGate), institutional repositories and news archives. Keywords used included "Santali cinema", "Jharkhand Santali film", "East Singhbhum Santali language film", "Ol Chiki script cinema", "tribal film and sustainability". Inclusion criteria were: (i) sources in English or Hindi referencing Santali cinema; (ii) geographic relevance to Jharkhand/East Singhbhum; (iii) content relating to cultural preservation or social awareness. Sources purely commercial or lacking relevant thematic content were excluded.

Data Analysis
The collected textual materials were subjected to thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, all relevant passages were coded under broad categories: cultural identity, language/Ol Chiki script, screening/distribution mode, social awareness (education, environment, livelihood), and sustainability outcomes. Then, sub-themes were extracted (e.g., village screening model, film-festival recognition, youth engagement). The analysis aimed to interpret how Santali films serve as media-enabled sites of cultural and social sustainability in East Singhbhum.

III. Results

Cultural Preservation through Santali Cinema
The findings show that Santali cinema in East Singhbhum plays a strong role in preserving language and cultural identity. The consistent use of the Santali language and the Ol Chiki script in film titles, dialogues and credits roots the films in Indigenous cultural frames. Even though "Jollywood" is small, its symbolic value is significant (Schleiter, 2010). Screenings in tribal villages allow younger audiences to engage with stories in their own language, strengthening cultural pride. Film organizations like RASCA have also introduced Santali film awards (RASCA Award, 2011), indicating institutional recognition. The findings further reveal structural constraints, such as the absence of a strong film development corporation in Jharkhand (Bharatpedia, n.d.; Business Standard, 2015). Despite these limitations, Santali films continue to emerge, signalling cultural resilience.

Social Awareness: Education, Livelihood and Environment
Findings indicate that Santali cinema acts as a tool for community education and social awareness. Reports from East Singhbhum show that films are screened in informal village spaces (night-chaupal), where children and adults watch Santali and Hindi short films (Dainik Bhaskar,2025). Mobile screening efforts by filmmaker teams using projectors and tents (India Today Hindi, 2025) expand access to media in remote areas. These screenings often include films on social issues like divorce (e.g., "Sakam Orec") and health-related narratives.

The findings also show that the rural screening model supports small-scale cultural entrepreneurship. One filmmaker earned more than ₹70 lakh over five years through village screenings (India Today Hindi, 2025), reflecting potential livelihood benefits. Environmental themes are less visible in current films, although the tribal context suggests the possibility of future ecological narratives.

IV. Discussion

Cultural Preservation
The findings suggest that Santali cinema is not merely entertainment but a vehicle of cultural memory. Its use of Santali language and Ol Chiki script strengthens identity continuity among tribal communities. Even in the absence of formal state support, the industry's persistence highlights Indigenous resilience and community demand for culturally grounded media.

Social Awareness and Education

The recurring use of films in night-chaupal settings indicates that Santali cinema provides an informal learning space. It facilitates discussions on schooling, health and social change. The mobile screening model helps bypass infrastructural limitations, making cinema a community-oriented pedagogical tool.

Livelihoods and Cultural Entrepreneurship

The income earned by local filmmakers through rural screenings illustrates how Indigenous media production can contribute to the local economy. While the model currently operates on a modest scale, it demonstrates how media creativity can support livelihood opportunities in tribal regions.

Environment and Future Potential

Although explicit environmental narratives are limited, the tribal setting, which is deeply tied to land and forests, positions Santali cinema as a potential platform for planet-focused storytelling. Future productions could integrate ecological knowledge, resource concerns and conservation themes, aligning with broader sustainability goals.

V. Sustainability Impact

Sustainability Framework: People-Planet-Prosperity

When viewed through the sustainability lens of people–planet–prosperity, Santali cinema in East Singhbhum registers across all three axes:

- **People:** By reinforcing identity, language and communal gatherings, it strengthens cultural resilience and social inclusion (especially of tribal youth).
- **Planet:** Though data is limited, the embedding of tribal ecological themes and screening in rural spaces offers opportunities for environmental awareness and sustainable-resource discourse.
- **Prosperity:** The emergent creative economy of Santali film – though small – enables local livelihoods for filmmakers, actors, technicians and distributors, often in non-urban settings. This inclusive prosperity aligns with the conference's theme.

VI. Conclusion & Future Work

This study has explored how Santali cinema in East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand functions as a medium for cultural preservation and social awareness, thereby interfacing with the sustainability paradigm of people, planet and prosperity. Through a qualitative review of literature and media reports, the analysis shows that despite structural constraints, Santali film production and village-screening models deliver important cultural and social outcomes. They reinforce Santali language and identity, create spaces for communal learning and raise social consciousness, while contributing to local creative economies.

However, for this medium to achieve scalable and sustainable impact, several interventions are needed: archiving and data generation, improved distribution infrastructure, policy support tailored to tribal media, capacity-building for community

filmmakers, and embedding ecological/sustainability themes in storytelling. In doing so, Santali cinema can move from symbolic cultural assertion to an active driver of inclusive, sustainable development in Jharkhand.

For future research, primary fieldwork interviews with filmmakers, audience surveys in East Singhbhum villages, quantitative modelling of screening economics would strengthen the evidence base. Moreover, mapping viewer behavioural changes post-screening (e.g., in education, environment or livelihood practices) could deepen understanding of cinema's impact in indigenous settings.

In sum, "screening sustainability" is not simply a metaphor here: it is a practical proposition. By situating indigenous cinema at the nexus of culture, communication and community development, this research suggests that regional film can be a significant, though under-explored, lever in the effort to build equitable, culturally rooted sustainable futures.

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