
Socio-Economic Landscape: Insights From a Study of The Santal Tribe Community in Odisha

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Abstract

This study delves into the socio-economic landscape of the Santal tribe community in Odisha, India, focusing on the Mayurbhanj district. Through field surveys conducted among 280 families, key aspects such as income, savings, educational attainment, traditional occupations, landholding patterns, expenditure dynamics, and household asset ownership were analyzed. The findings reveal a community facing significant challenges, including low educational levels, limited financial resources, reliance on traditional livelihoods, and restricted access to formal financial services. Despite these hurdles, there are signs of modernization and cautious financial behavior within the community. The study underscores the need for targeted interventions to address educational disparities, enhance livelihood opportunities, promote financial inclusion, and improve overall well-being. By understanding the complex socio-economic dynamics, policymakers can formulate holistic strategies to uplift the Santal tribe community and foster sustainable development.

Keywords: expenses, income, savings, educational attainment, traditional occupations, landholding, expenditure dynamics, household assets, Santal tribe, Odisha.

Introduction

The standard of living encompasses various aspects of comfort, wealth, material possessions, and essential resources available within a particular region. Key factors influencing the standard of living include employment opportunities and their quality, income distribution, poverty rates, housing affordability and quality, access to healthcare, education standards, infrastructure development, economic and political stability, environmental conditions, and overall security. It's widely recognized that the standard of living is closely intertwined with an individual's quality of life (Jungari, 2020; Saravanadurai & Manimehalai, 2016).

Amongst the most marginalized and disadvantaged groups in many countries are indigenous tribes. In India, for instance, half of the Adivasi population lack land ownership, often relying on forests for their livelihoods. However, their land holdings are typically minimal, leading to persistent poverty and hardship. Insufficient government investment in essential healthcare services further exacerbates their vulnerability, particularly affecting the health of Adivasi women and children. India has introduced constitutional provisions such as the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, aiming to recognize indigenous peoples' rights to land and self-governance (Balarajan et al., 2011; Bouman, 1995). Nonetheless, these legal frameworks often fall short in adequately protecting the interests of Scheduled Tribes, with implementation proving to be inadequate.

This paper seeks to assess the quality of life by analyzing preliminary data collected from field surveys conducted among 280 families in Odisha's Mayurbhanj district. The surveys employed a purposive random sampling approach and utilized printed questionnaires to gather relevant information.

TribalviewofOdisha

India boasts the world's second-largest indigenous population, trailing only Africa. Despite their significant numbers, indigenous peoples remain among the most marginalized and overlooked segments of Indian society. According to Article 366(25) of the Constitution of India, Scheduled Tribes are defined as communities specified under Article 342 of the Constitution. This article stipulates that only communities officially recognized as Scheduled Tribes by the President through public notification or subsequent parliamentary acts are entitled to such status (Bakshi & Bala, 2000; Roy Burman & Harit, 1971).

Article 342 of the Constitution of India empowers the specification of tribal communities or subgroups within tribes deemed as Scheduled Tribes for specific states or union territories. This designation is applicable solely within the jurisdiction of the respective state or union territory and does not extend beyond its boundaries. India is home to 705 tribal communities, including 75 categorized as primitive tribal groups (Statistical profile of scheduled tribes in India, 2013). Among these tribes, Odisha stands out as the homeland of 62 distinct tribal communities, with 13 of them identified as particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs).

The Santal in Odisha

The Santals, one of India's largest tribal communities, primarily inhabit the districts of Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, and Balasore in Odisha, with additional populations residing in neighboring states like Jharkhand, West Bengal, Bihar, and Assam. The term 'Santal' originates from the combination of two words: 'santa,' meaning calm and peaceful, and 'ala,' meaning man. Historically, the Santals led a nomadic lifestyle before settling in the Chhotanagpur plateau. By the late 18th century, they migrated to the Santal Parganas of Bihar and later to Odisha.

The Santals speak the Santali language, belonging to the Munda group of the Austro-Asiatic subfamily of languages. Their script, known as "Ol Chiki," was devised by Pundit Raghunath Murmu. According to the 2001 census, their population in Odisha stood at 777,204, with a sex ratio of 976 females per 1000 males and a decadal growth rate of 23.41%. However, their literacy rates are relatively low, with males at 55.86% and females at 24.75%.

Traditionally, Santals have distinct dress patterns and adornments, with men wearing handloom loin cloths, shirts, and napkins, while women opt for green or blue checkered sarees. However, modernization has led to a shift towards mill-made clothing and lighter ornaments. Previously, heavy silver ornaments were common, but now plastic, glass, and light silver ornaments are preferred. Tattooing, once a prevalent tradition, has largely become obsolete.

Santal villages typically feature agricultural fields, pastures, ponds, graveyards, and a communal worship area known as "jaher era" or "jaher." The jaher, located on the village outskirts, is a sacred grove of sal trees believed to house their deities. Santal villages are spacious, with houses arranged linearly on both sides of wide village streets. The houses, called "olah," are large, clean, and adorned with colorful paintings on the outside walls. Constructed with wooden planks, cow dung, and mud, the houses are thatched with local tiles or straw and feature spacious rooms, a sacred place for ancestral worship called "bhitar," and a kitchen (dakaolah).

Agriculture is the primary occupation of the Santals, with both men and women actively involved. They also engage in seasonal forest collection for additional income and sustenance. Rice is their staple food, often accompanied by boiled green leaves, vegetables, and non-vegetarian dishes like fish and meat. Rice beer, known as "handia," is popular, especially during festivals and rituals. Santal society is patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal, with kinship relations classified into affinal and consanguineal groups. The tribe is divided into exogamous clans, and marriage between sub-clans is prohibited. Religion plays a significant role in Santal life, with animistic beliefs centered on various deities, spirits, and ancestral worship. Naike serves as the religious headman, assisted by Kudam Naike, while the Ojha acts as the traditional healer and shaman, possessing the ability to communicate with spirits through trance.

Social Control

The Santals possess a well-structured political organization that operates at various levels: village, inter-village (pirh or pargana), and regional (disam). At the grassroots level, the village is considered the most crucial unit. A traditional village council, known as "atumonehor," comprises key functionaries such as the Manjhi (secular village headman), Jog Manjhi (deputy village headman), Parmanik (assistant to the village headman), Gadet (secretary to the village headman and messenger), Jog Parmanik (deputy Parmanik), Naike (village head priest), and

Kudam Naike (assistant to the village priest). All household heads are members of the village council. The Manjhi presides over council meetings and resolves disputes related to theft, conflicts, divorce, property partition, adoption, land disputes, and violations of social customs and traditions at the village level. Meetings typically occur at the "manjhi than."

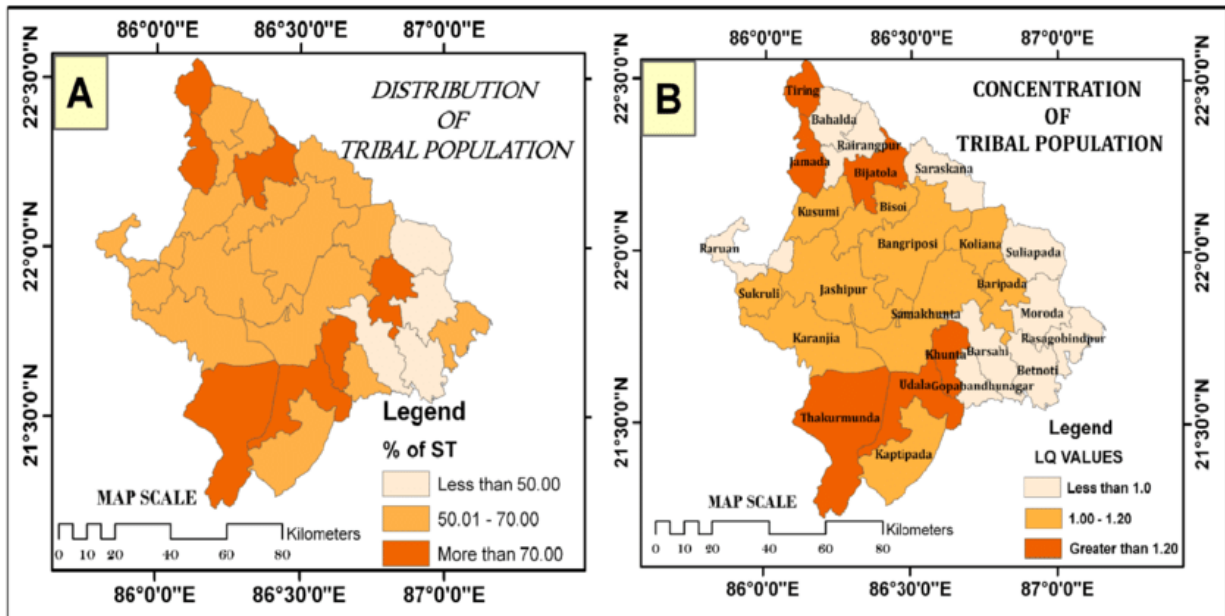
At the inter-village level, the pih or pargana council, comprising representatives from fifty to sixty villages, handles matters beyond the scope of village councils. The Pir Pargana, nominated by all Manjhis of component villages every five years, serves as the secular head. Pir Dihiri and Pir Godet are also essential figures at this level. Major offenses like incest, adultery, and inter-village disputes are adjudicated here. Individuals dissatisfied with village council decisions may appeal to the pih or pargana council. Additionally, the council organizes annual hunts, providing an opportunity for Santals from various villages to convene, discuss disputes, and participate in hunting expeditions lasting several days.

At the regional level, the Disham consists of five to ten Pirs, with Desh Pargana serving as the secular head, elected by Pir Parganas every five years. The Desh Pargana settles disputes not resolved at the pir level, consulting with Pir Parganas and Manjhis. For severe social offenses (bitlaha), Desh Pargana possesses the authority to impose physical or financial punishment, including excommunication from society. DisamDihiri and Disham Godet assist Desh Pargana in administrative tasks at the Disham level.

Area of the study

Mayurbhanj district in Odisha, India, presents an ideal setting for studying the Santal tribe, one of India's largest indigenous communities. The district's diverse geography, ranging from forests and hills to rivers and plains, shapes the Santals' interaction with their environment and influences their livelihoods, including agriculture and forest-based activities. Exploring the historical trajectory of the Santal tribe in Mayurbhanj provides insights into their migration patterns, settlement dynamics, and cultural revolution, crucial for understanding their present-day challenges and opportunities. Delving into their rich cultural heritage, including language, folklore, rituals, and material culture, sheds light on the significance of traditional practices in maintaining social cohesion and identity. Additionally, examining the Santal tribe's socio-political organization at different levels reveals insights into their governance structures, leadership roles, and conflict resolution mechanisms. Investigating their livelihood strategies and economic activities helps assess the impact of socio-economic changes and environmental factors on their traditional way of life and explores avenues for sustainable development. Finally, addressing contemporary issues such as land alienation, educational disparities, and socio-economic marginalization faced by the Santal tribe in Mayurbhanj underscores the importance of studying and addressing the challenges faced by indigenous communities for promoting cultural preservation and sustainable development in tribal areas.

Fig:1- Map of Mayurbhanj District.



Source: District Administration Map of Mayurbhanj

Objectives

The objectives of this study are

1. To assess the educational attainment levels within the Santal tribe community.
2. To analyze the standard of living experienced by the Santal tribe members
3. To evaluate the financial circumstances prevailing among the Santal tribe population.

Through these objectives, the study aims to provide insights into the educational status, standard of living, and financial conditions of the Santal tribe, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of their socio-economic dynamics.

Methodology

This paper aims to investigate the standards of living among the Santal community residing in Mayurbhanj district. Employing a descriptive research design, the study focuses on elucidating various factors influencing the standard of living among the tribe. The research encompasses data collected from 280 households within the Santal population, utilizing a self-prepared interview schedule tailored to gather insights into their financial status, occupational nature, educational backgrounds, and residential conditions. Through this exploration, the study endeavors to provide a comprehensive understanding of the living standards experienced by the Santal people in the region.

Income of tribes

The utilization patterns among Santal families are primarily influenced by their income sources, which encompass various sectors including agriculture, non-agricultural activities, poultry, livestock, wages, and other forms of self-employment. Within the expenditure framework, both food and non-food items, including consumer durables, are encompassed. Monthly data collection on food items and household expenses, such as electricity, communication, cosmetics, and sanitary items, provides a comprehensive understanding of expenditure dynamics. Additionally, annual data collection captures less frequent expenses like clothing, footwear, household items, and religious or cultural activities. The consumption pattern of tribal households underscores rice as a staple, with rice being a prevalent dietary component among almost all tribal households, while wheat consumption remains limited. Pulse consumption is observed among some households but does not constitute a significant portion of their diet. Moreover, indigenous communities cultivate vegetables for personal use and gather fruits, leaves, and berries from forests, both for consumption and local market trade. However, the financial constraints faced by tribal communities, coupled with limited income, restrict their ability to allocate substantial expenditure towards essential food items like rice, dal, wheat, and edible oil. This financial strain often leads to reduced consumption of these products among the tribal population. Such observations highlight the critical interplay between income levels, expenditure patterns, and dietary choices within Santal households, reflecting the broader socio-economic challenges faced by indigenous communities.

The initial study collected savings on income, income, domestic assets, and various food and non-food items used by the tribal's. Household income is a key indicator of people's livelihood. During the field study, it was found that the Santal tribe was poor and had a low standard of living. The monthly income level of Santal tribes is given below in table 1. The study analyzed the monthly income levels of households within the Santal tribe community in the Mayurbhanj district. The data, collected from 280 households, revealed a diverse distribution of income levels. Among the households surveyed, 3.21% reported a monthly income ranging from Rs 0 to Rs 3000, while a significant proportion, comprising 16.07% of households, reported incomes between Rs 3000 and Rs 7000 per month. The largest segment, constituting 38.93% of households, fell within the income bracket of Rs 7000 to Rs 11000 per month. Furthermore, 21.07% of households reported monthly incomes ranging from Rs 11000 to Rs 18000. Notably, 20.71% of households reported monthly incomes exceeding Rs 18000. This analysis underscores the varied economic circumstances experienced by the Santal tribe households, with a considerable proportion falling within the lower to middle-income brackets, while a notable portion enjoys higher income levels. Such insights into income distribution are crucial for understanding the economic landscape and livelihood dynamics within the Santal tribe community.

Table 1: Income of tribes

Monthly income level (Rs)	Number of households	Percent (%)
0-3000	9	3.21
3000-7000	45	16.07
7000-11000	109	38.93
11000-18000	59	21.07
18000 and above	58	20.71
Total	280	100

Source: Primary data collected from Field Survey

The table 2 shows the savings behavior among households within the Santal tribe community in the Mayurbhanj district. Data collected from 280 households revealed diverse patterns in saving practices. Among the households surveyed, a substantial proportion, comprising 46.79%, reported having no savings. Additionally, 16.43% of households reported savings ranging from Rs 0 to Rs 1000, while 18.93% reported savings between Rs 1000 and Rs 2000. Furthermore, 13.21% of households reported savings ranging from Rs 2000 to Rs 4000, while only 4.64% reported savings exceeding Rs 4000. These findings underscore the financial challenges faced by a significant portion of Santal tribe households, with a substantial number having negligible or no savings. Such insights into saving behavior are crucial for understanding the financial resilience and future planning capabilities within the community, thereby informing targeted interventions aimed at promoting financial inclusion and stability among Santal households.

Table-2: Saving profile of tribes

Savings	Number of households	Percent (%)
Nil	131	46.79
0-1000	46	16.43
1000-2000	53	18.93
2000-4000	37	13.21
4000 and above	13	4.64
Total	280	100

Source-Primary data collected from Field Survey

Table 3 reveals a distribution skewed towards smaller plots, with over 45% of households owning 1 acre or less. This highlights the significant portion of the community facing limited access to land resources. While a moderate percentage owns parcels between 1 to 3 acres, larger holdings are notably rare, with only a small minority possessing 5 acres or more. Such limited land access underscores potential challenges in securing livelihoods and achieving economic prosperity within the community. Addressing land distribution issues and promoting sustainable development initiatives tailored to the Santal tribe's needs are crucial steps toward enhancing their socio-economic status.

Table-3: Landholding size

Land Holding Size (in Acres)	Number of households	Percentage (%)
0-1	38	13.57
1-2	92	32.86
2-3	78	27.86
3-4	39	13.93
4-5	24	8.57
5 and above	9	3.21
Total	280	100

Source: Primary data collected from Field Survey

Table 4 shows, a significant majority, comprising 74.29% of the surveyed households, reported being actively engaged in traditional occupations. This indicates the enduring importance of traditional livelihoods within the Santal community, underscoring their deep-rooted connection to age-old practices and occupations passed down through generations. Conversely, 25.71% of households reported not being engaged in traditional occupations, suggesting a degree of diversification or modernization in livelihood choices among a minority of the community. However, the substantial majority still relies on traditional occupations for sustenance, highlighting the need for interventions that support and enhance these livelihoods while also exploring avenues for economic diversification and skill development within the community. Such efforts can contribute to preserving cultural heritage while fostering socio-economic resilience and growth among the Santal tribe.

Table-4: Currently engaged in traditional occupation

Particulars	Number of households	Percentage
Yes	208	74.29
No	72	25.71
Total	280	100

Source-Primary data collected from Field Survey

The Table 5 presented above outlines the distribution of loan amounts among households within the Santal tribe community in Odisha's Mayurbhanj district. Remarkably, a substantial majority of households, constituting 70.71% of the surveyed population, reported having no loans. This suggests a conservative approach to borrowing within the community, possibly indicating a preference for self-sufficiency or limited access to formal financial services. Among households with loans, the majority fall within the lower range, with 4.29% having loans ranging from Rs 1 to 10,000, and 11.43% falling within the range of Rs 10,000 to Rs 20,000. Additionally, 7.50% of households reported loans between Rs 20,000 and Rs 50,000, while an even smaller percentage, comprising 6.07%, reported loans exceeding Rs 50,000. Overall, the data suggests that while loans are relatively uncommon among the Santal tribe community, those who do borrow tend to do so in smaller amounts, indicating a cautious approach to financial management within the community.

Table-5: Loan of tribes

Range (Rs)	Number of households	Percentage (%)
No Loan	198	70.71
1-10000	12	4.29
10000-20000	32	11.43
20000-50000	21	7.50
50000 and above	17	6.07
Total	280	100

Source:PrimarydatacollectedfromFieldSurvey

The Table 6 presents the educational attainment levels among households within the Santal tribe community in Odisha's Mayurbhanj district. It reveals a diverse distribution of educational backgrounds among the surveyed population. A notable proportion, comprising 9.64% of households, reported being illiterate, highlighting a significant educational gap within the community. Moving up the scale, 18.93% of households reported education ranging from class I to V, while a substantial 28.21% indicated education levels between class VI and 10th. Additionally, 15.71% of households reported education up to the 12th standard, reflecting a considerable portion with secondary education. Furthermore, 17.14% of households reported having attained graduation, indicating a notable proportion with higher education qualifications. However, post-graduation and technical education levels were relatively lower, with 3.93% and 6.43% of households respectively. Overall, the data highlights both the educational diversity and the need for further educational opportunities within the Santal tribe community.

Table 6: Education status of tribes

Class	Number of households	Percent (%)
Illiterate	27	9.64
I to v	53	18.93
VI to 10 th	79	28.21
12 th	44	15.71
Graduation	48	17.14
Post Graduation	11	3.93
Technical Education	18	6.43
Total	280	100

Source:PrimarydatacollectedfromFieldSurvey

The table shows the expenditure patterns among households within the Santal tribe community in Odisha's Mayurbhanj district exhibit a diverse range of spending habits. The data shows that a significant portion of households allocate their expenditure within the range of 2500 to 4000 rupees, constituting 26.43% of the surveyed population. Following closely, 22.14% of households spend between 4000 to 6000 rupees. Moreover, 15.71% of households allocate their

expenditure within the range of 6000 to 8000 rupees. Notably, there is a gradual decline in the percentage of households as the expenditure range increases, with fewer households spending higher amounts. For instance, 11.79% of households spend between 8000 to 10000 rupees, while only 6.79% spend 12000 rupees and above. This data suggests varying spending capacities within the community, indicating the need for tailored interventions to address different socio-economic needs.

Table-7: Totalexpenditureoftribes

Level of expenditure	Number of households	Percentage (%)
1500-2500	21	7.50
2500-4000	74	26.43
4000-6000	62	22.14
6000-8000	44	15.71
8000-10000	33	11.79
10000-12000	27	9.64
12000 and above	19	6.79
Total	280	100

Source:PrimarydatacollectedformFieldSurvey

The table reveals the possession of various household assets among the Santal tribe community in Odisha's Mayurbhanj district, shedding light on their living standards and modern amenities. Mobile phones emerge as the most common asset, with 96.79% of households owning one, followed by watches at 87.50%. A significant portion of households also owns cycles (44.29%) and bikes (54.29%), indicating a degree of mobility within the community. Additionally, a considerable percentage of households have fans (59.29%), TVs (67.50%), and toilets (89.64%), suggesting access to basic amenities and modern conveniences. Overall, these findings provide insights into the adoption of modern technology and household comfort among the Santal tribe community.

Table-8: Availabilityofhouseholdassetsholdingoftribes

Assets	Number of households	Per cent (%)
Mobile	271	96.79
Watch	245	87.50
Cycle	124	44.29
Bike	152	54.29
Fan	166	59.29
TV	189	67.50
Toilet	251	89.64

Source:PrimarydatacollectedfromFieldSurvey

Summary of Findings

The findings from the field survey among 280 families in Odisha's Mayurbhanj district offer valuable insights into the socio-economic landscape of the Santal tribe community. The study reveals stark realities, such as low levels of educational attainment, with a significant portion of respondents being illiterate or having only primary-level education. This highlights the pressing need for educational interventions to uplift literacy rates and provide better opportunities for the community's future generations. Despite diverse income levels, ranging from modest to relatively higher incomes, a substantial proportion of households face financial challenges, evidenced by the lack of savings among nearly half of the surveyed households. Limited land ownership and the prevalence of traditional occupations underscore the community's reliance on age-old livelihood practices, emphasizing the importance of sustainable economic development initiatives tailored to their needs. Furthermore, the cautious approach towards borrowing reflects a sense of financial prudence within the community, albeit with limited access to formal financial services. Despite financial constraints, basic amenities like mobile phones, watches, and televisions are relatively common, indicating a degree of modernization within the community. Overall, these findings illuminate the complex socio-economic dynamics shaping the Santal tribe's standard of living, calling for holistic interventions to address educational disparities, enhance livelihood opportunities, and foster financial inclusion to improve the overall well-being of the community.

Conclusion

The findings from the comprehensive study on the socio-economic landscape of the Santal tribe community in Odisha's Mayurbhanj district underscore the significant challenges and opportunities faced by this marginalized group. Despite their rich cultural heritage, the Santal tribe grapples with low educational attainment, limited financial resources, and reliance on traditional livelihoods. The study highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions to address educational disparities, enhance livelihood opportunities, promote financial inclusion, and improve overall well-being. By understanding the complex socio-economic dynamics and advocating for holistic strategies, policymakers can empower the Santal tribe community, foster sustainable development, and pave the way for a brighter future. Furthermore, addressing systemic issues such as unemployment, under-employment, gender inequality, and land distribution will be pivotal in lifting the Santal tribe out of poverty and promoting inclusive growth in tribal areas. Ultimately, a concerted effort involving government initiatives, community engagement, and sustainable development practices is essential to uplift the Santal tribe community and ensure their prosperity and well-being in the long run.

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