

Socioeconomic Development of Santhals: A Study of the selected villages of Purulia District, West Bengal

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Abstract: Santhal tribes are the important segments of society, mainly found in West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Orissa states of India. They are economically poor and socially backward tribes of India. However, they have rich cultural heritage. This study examines the socioeconomic development of Santhals of the Purulia district, West Bengal. It further illustrates how their social and economic conditions can be enhanced. This study is based on the collection of empirical data. A case study of eight villages of the Purulia district was conducted in the first half of 2023. A total of 824 households were surveyed, using purposive sampling methods. For the survey, the heads of households were interviewed asking several questions on their socioeconomic activities and status. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were applied to conduct and analyze the data. A structured questionnaire was designed where the questions were asked on population, education, occupation, infrastructural facilities, and income and economy. This study reveals that the Santal tribes are very poor as their socioeconomic status is low in terms of education, income, economy, and livelihoods.

Keywords: Socioeconomic development; Santhal tribes; Empirical data, Purulia District.

1. INTRODUCTION

The word 'Santa', which means serene and tranquil, and 'ala', which means man combine to form the word Santal, or Santhal (Ota & Patnaik 2020). They are an ethnic group native to India and Bangladesh in South Asia. In South Asia tribes have inhabited and co-existed with other tribes for a long time with different social cultures and formations (Phadnis & Ganguly 2001). Many ethnographers confused tribes with caste and generally they define the community as 'primitive' which was considered appropriate (Beteile, 1998). These communities belong to different ethnic lingual groups, and they maintain their orthodoxies and religious faiths. They are spread across the entire spectrum of social evolution in India ranging from Palaeolithic hunters to gatherers of forest and industrial workers (Bhagat & Chattopadhyay 2004).

In India, Santhals are found mostly in the Jharkhand state in terms of population and are also found in the states of Assam, Bihar, Odisha, and West Bengal. They are the largest ethnic minority in northern Bangladesh's Rajshahi Division and Rangpur Division and have a sizeable population in Nepal and Bhutan. The Santhals mostly speak Santhali, among the Munda languages (Eftakhar, 2019). In the past, the Santhals were leading a nomadic life. Gradually they came to settle down in the Chotanagpur plateau. The British officials exploited their lands and collected taxes as revenues and convinced them to clear the forest areas to practice settled agriculture (Sengupta, 2019). In 1832, a large number of areas were demarcated as Damin-i-koh or Santal Pargana. Santhals from Cuttack, Nadia, Birbhum, Manbhum, Purulia, Hazaribagh and other parts of Jharkhand and West Bengal migrated and started cultivating these lands as peasants (Mahto, 1994). The imposition of taxes and exploitation by Zamindars and money lenders sparked the Santhal rebellion. Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, two brothers led the Santhals against the British but were defeated (Sinha, 2020).

The tribal population is scattered all across the Indian mainland- in nearly all the states and union territories, in several pockets. The places with the maximum tribal settlements are Mizoram (94.4% of the population), Lakshadweep (94%), Meghalaya (86.1%), and Nagaland (86.5%). Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Assam and West Bengal, too, have important tribal settlements (Ministry of Tribal Affairs). The most known tribes of India are Gonds, Bhills, Santhal, Munda, Khasi, Garo, Angami, Gujjars, Pahari, Bhutia, Chenchu, Kodaba, and the Great Andamanese Tribes. Of all these tribes, the Bhil tribal group, as per the 2011 census, is the largest tribe in India. It constitutes a staggering 38% of the country's total scheduled tribal population. Among all the tribes, the Santhal tribe alone contribute to over six million population of India alone (Biswal, 2013).

In west Bengal the tribal population is 52,96,963, as per census 2011, which is about 5.8% of the total population of the state. There are around 40 ethnic groups found in West Bengal like Asur, Baigya, Bediya, Munda, Oraon, Toto, Sherpa, Tamang, etc. Among these, the Santhals are the third largest tribal community in India after Gonds and Bhills with a population of over 4.26 million (Chakrabarty, 2019). They are highly concentrated in the parts of Orissa, Jharkhand, Bihar, and West Bengal. There are 19 districts in West Bengal, out of which districts like Purulia, Nadia, Birbhum, Bardhaman, Bankura and Medinipur have the highest concentration of Santhal community (Dutta & Sinha, 2023). The Santhals of West Bengal are different from Jharkhand, Orissa, and Bihar in terms of culture, customs, rituals, tradition, and language. They usually speak the local language mainly Bengali or their native language Ol - Chiki having script (Choksi 2018). It is considered copied. Most of the Santhals follow Hinduism, while some are converted, Christians. The total population of Santhals are recorded as 25,12,331 according to 2011 (Ghosh 2024). It was noticed that there was a drastic change (+ 10.16%) in population from 2001 to 2011. The concentration of population is higher in the rural areas mainly in Purulia (27.0%), Bankura (23.82%), and Birbhum (16.23%) districts.

The main objective of this study was to examine the social and economic status of Santhal tribes of the Purulia district. It also elaborates how the social status and economic development of Santhals tribes can be enhanced so that they can live their life with the present rapidly changing world. It also describes the occupation, population, habitats, and culture of Santhals. We hypothesized that the poor socioeconomic condition of the Santhal is due to poor education and sources of income.

Study Area

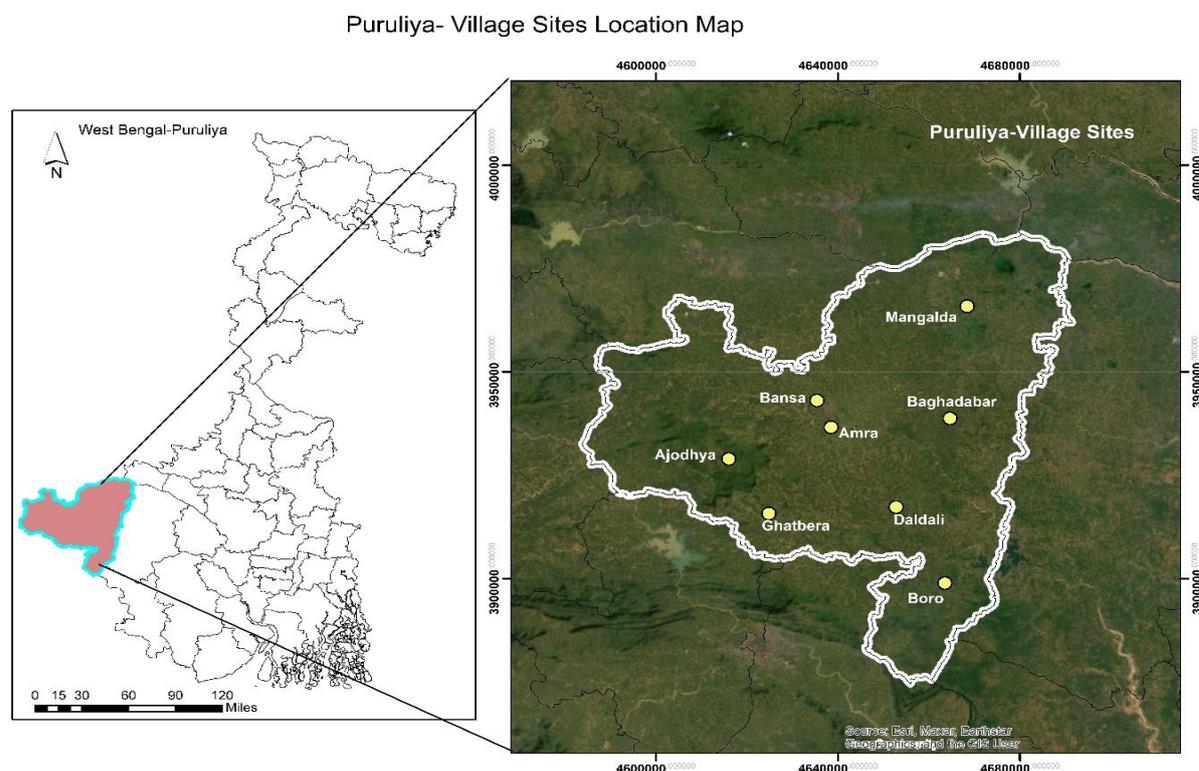


Figure 1: The study areas

Purulia district is situated in the western part of West Bengal, India, lies between 22°42'N to 23°42'N latitude and 85°49'E to 86°54'E longitude. Covering an area of approximately 6,259 square kilometres, it forms a transitional zone between the Chota Nagpur Plateau and the Gangetic plains, with undulating terrain characterised by hills, forests, and rivers (Mandal & Sanyal, 2023). This region, characterised by its undulating terrain and semi-arid climate, rocky landscapes, significant forest cover, making it ecologically significant (Mishra & Bauri, 2024). The climate is tropical, with distinct summer, monsoon, and winter seasons. The main drainage system of the Purulia district is river Kangsabati, Bamni, Damodar and Muruguma lake (Figure 2). The average rainfall is about 1100-1500 mm, with the monsoon dominating between June and September (Goswami & Majumdar, 2023). Purulia's unique geological formations, including ancient rock formations and laterite soils, have shaped its diverse landscape (Dolui, et.al, 2016).



Figure 2: a) Hundru falls in the Ajodhya Hills, a significant natural attraction of Purulia, b) Muruguma Lake at the foothills of Ajodhya Hills

Source: By authors

The district is bordered by Jharkhand to the west, Bankura to the east, Paschim Medinipur to the south, and Bardhaman to the north (Mishra & Chatterjee, 2020). Purulia is home to various tribal communities, each with its distinct cultural heritage such as Santhals, Mundas, and Oraons, who constitute a significant portion of the population (Majumdar, 2024). The district has a predominantly agrarian economy, supplemented by small-scale industries, forest produce collection, and traditional crafts (Karmakar, 2022). Due to its geographical location and socioeconomic factors, Purulia faces challenges such as water scarcity, soil erosion and poverty (Guha & Hazra, 2024).

2. METHODOLOGY

The study used a mixed method, combining both quantitative and qualitative research. For collection of empirical data on social and economic status of Santhals, a case study of eight villages was conducted with a total of 824 households were surveyed using purposive sampling method. The heads of households were interviewed by asking questions of the family size, their education, age, income, and occupation. The age of each respondent varies from 36 to 54 and most of them are illiterate. The Purulia district has a total of 12 community blocks, of which, we chosen eight development blocks. From each block, one village was selected. The selected villages are Baghmundi, Balarampur, Hura, Jhaldah 1, Jhaldah 2, Manbazar, Raghunathpur 1, Raghunathpur 2. The selection of each village was based on (a) the Santhal population should be more than 600, (b) the village should have a contact person or resource person who may be accessible through block-level administration to approach the villagers and (c) the proximity of the village from the researchers' shelters during data collection should be considered.

A structured questionnaire was constructed, and questions were asked from each head of households. Collection of quantitative data and a guide for the case study in connection with qualitative data were the main tools of data collection. In order to fulfil the specific objectives of the study, data on social factors (e.g., education, gender discrimination, sanitation facilities, etc.), and economic factors (e.g., income, investment on health, unemployment/irregular employment, etc.) were collected from the respective eight villages. Apart from this, non-participatory observations, focus group discussions and informal interactions of the researcher with community members played an important role in understanding the influences of different factors. According to the data, suitable quantitative (frequency distribution), correlation and qualitative analyses methods (theme analysis) were employed.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Santals are the migrants who resided in some parts of East India about three centuries ago, preserving their language, traditions and cultural heritage. They are also considered as the descendants of pre-Dravidian people (Biswas, 2018). It is the third largest tribe in India and most of them reside in West Bengal, Orissa, Jharkhand and Bihar (Sarkar and Singha 2019).

Based on data collected through household level survey of 824 heads of households and through participatory observation, the results of this study are elucidated. In this section, socioeconomic profile, level of education, occupation, house type, income and economy, and sanitation were described.

Socio-economic Profile:

A Comparative Overview of Santhal Population in West Bengal

The comparative analysis of the Santhal population in West Bengal between the 2001 and 2011 census reveals significant demographic trends. According to the Census of India 2011, the total population of West Bengal increased from 80,176,197 in 2001 to 91,276,115 in 2011, with the scheduled tribe (ST) population rising from 4,406,794 to 5,296,953, constituting 5.5 percent and 5.8 percent of the total population, respectively (Table 1). In Purulia, the Santhal population grew from 22,80,540 in 2001 to 25,12,331 in 2011; however, their percentage share in West Bengal's total population declined slightly from 2.84 percent to 2.75 percent. Moreover, the proportion of Santhals in Purulia within the total ST population of West Bengal saw a notable decrease from 51.75 percent in 2001 to 47.43 percent in 2011, indicating a slower growth rate compared to other ST groups in the state of West Bengal. These trends highlight both the demographic growth and the relative decline of the Santhal tribe especially in Purulia, West Bengal.

Table 1: Decadal increase of Santhal population in Purulia District, West Bengal

Sl. No.	Population Characteristics	2001	2011
1.	Total population of West Bengal	80,176,197	91,276,115
2.	Total ST population of West Bengal	4,406,794	5,296,953
3.	% of STs of total population in West Bengal	5.5	5.8
4.	Total Santhal population of Purulia	22,80,540	25,12,331
5.	% of Santhal Tribe (Purulia) of Total population of West Bengal	2.84	2.75
6.	% of Santhal Tribe (Purulia) of total ST population of West Bengal	51.75	47.43

Source: District Census Handbook Purulia 2001 and District Census Handbook Purulia 2011.

This highlights a shifting demographic trend that could have socioeconomic and cultural implications. This analysis underscores the need for further investigation into the factors influencing the slower growth rate of the Santhal population, including population, including migration, socioeconomic conditions, and access to resources and opportunities.

To illustrate this trend more clearly, the following bar chart represents the growth of the Santhal population in the Purulia district in the year 2001 and 2011.

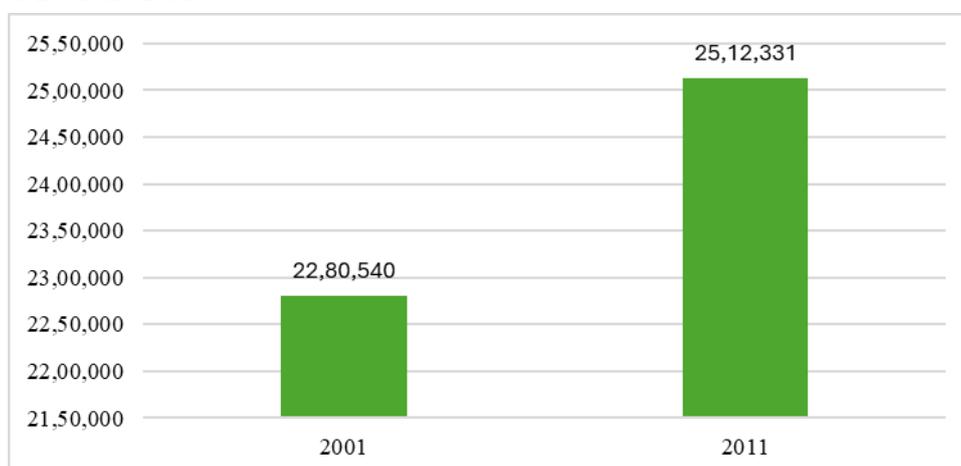


Figure 3: Decadal Increase of Santhal Population in Purulia (2001-2011)

The Figure 3 illustrates the decadal increase of the Santhal population in the Purulia district between 2001 and 2011. The bar chart shows a rise from 22,80,540 persons in 2001 to 25,12,331 persons in 2011, reflecting a growth of about 2.3 lakh individuals over the decade. This confirms that the Santhal tribal community maintains a strong demographic presence in Purulia district, forming one of the largest tribal communities in the region. The visual clearly highlights the numerical strength and sustained growth of this community despite socioeconomic challenges.

Socioeconomic Status of Santhal of Purulia District

The researchers collected information from 824 respondents living in eight villages as stated above. Only one respondent was considered and interviewed in a family during the visit, and they collected relevant family details through structured interviews. A brief idea on the respondents is given below in the Table 2. Male respondents were 87.13 per cent and female were 12.86 per cent; majority of the respondents (almost 48.78%) belonged to the age group, between 36 and 54 years; only 23.53 per cent of the respondents had studied beyond Class V; almost 9.47 per cent were daily labourers, almost 58.50 per cent are agricultural farmers, almost 25.24 percent are labourers and only 6.80 per cent are permanent job holders. Most of the respondents belonged to the low-income category and more than half, that is, 54 per cent, belonged to the monthly family income group of 'up to `3,000'. It was obvious that the SES of the respondents was poor.

Table 2: Frequency and Frequency Percentage of Socio-economic Indicators

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Sex Composition		
Male	718	87.13
Female	106	12.87
Total	824	100
Age in years		
From 18 to below 36	62	7.52
From 36 to below 54	402	48.78
Above 54	360	43.70
Total	824	100
Educational Standard		
Illiterate	397	48.30
Primary	233	28.27
Secondary	122	14.80
Tertiary	72	8.73
Total	824	100
Occupation Engaged		
Agriculture Worker	482	58.50
Labourer	208	25.24
Daily Wage Worker	78	9.47
Govt. Job Holder	56	6.80
Total	824	100
Sanitary Facilities		
Fully Subsidized	383	46.00
Partially Subsidized	296	36.00
Self-Financed	145	18.00
Total	824	100

Source: By authors

Level of Education

The educational level is remarkably poor among the Santhals in the Purulia District. As per the study, almost 48 per cent are illiterate and only 28 per cent are able to cross the Class V standard. Qualitative data obtained through case studies and non-participant observations provide evidence that families with poor educational attainment are more prone to diseases throughout the year. Education can provide proper knowledge, improved communication skills, it also helps in

increased earning potential, critical thinking and problem-solving skills that empower people both economically and socially, on the other hand, lack of access to education can deepen poverty, spread diseases because of unhealthy lifestyle, improper well-being and widen inequity and take away the opportunity to live. Accordingly, poor education plays a vital role in the lack of awareness on good health. Here, we can also refer to the Human Development Report (UNDP, 2003) that states: 'Education, health, nutrition and water and sanitation complement each other, with investments in anyone contributing to better outcomes in the others.' Thus, there are obvious evidence to support the claim that there is a positive relation between education, personal growth, civic engagement, economy and health.

Table 3: Level of education (n=8)

Variables	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Illiterate	28	84	49.63	20.459
Primary	17	46	29.13	9.804
Secondary	6	29	15.25	8.207
Tertiary	1	15	9.00	4.840

Source: By authors

The Table 2 highlights significant disparities in education levels across the eight surveyed villages. Illiteracy is notably high, with a mean of 49.63 and a wide variation (SD = 20.459), indicating uneven access to basic education. Primary education shows moderate attainment (mean = 29.13, SD = 9.804), suggesting a bottleneck in transitioning beyond this level. Secondary education (mean = 15.25, SD = 8.207) and tertiary education (mean = 9.00, SD = 4.840) are markedly low, reflecting limited access to advanced education. These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to reduce illiteracy and improve access to higher education, with a focus on villages showing the greatest educational deficits.

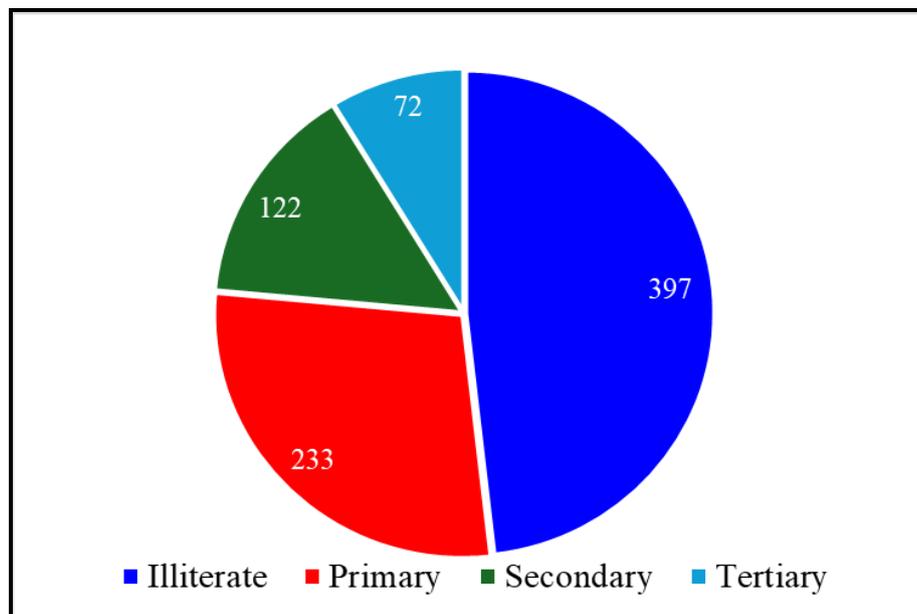


Figure 4: Level of education (%) of Santhals of the surveyed villages

Source: By authors

Figure 4 illustrates the largest segment, 48% of the population, consists of individuals who are illiterate. This indicates that nearly half of the household heads have no formal education. Nearly 28% of the population has achieved primary. This shows a limited level of basic education within the community. Around 15% of the population has achieved secondary education, suggesting that some efforts toward formal education are visible in the Santhal community, though still not universal. And only 9% of the population has attained tertiary education (college or university level). This highlights a significant gap in higher education access among the Santhal tribe. The high illiteracy rate and low educational attainment suggest limited access to quality education in the village. The predominance of agriculture and

daily wage labor indicates a reliance on primary sector activities, which might be associated with lower income levels and vulnerability to economic shocks. The high percentage of illiteracy reflects challenges in accessing education, possibly due to socioeconomic barriers or lack of infrastructure. The predominance of primary and secondary education levels over tertiary education underscores the limited progression toward advanced learning. The limited tertiary education might affect socioeconomic mobility, as higher education often correlates with better employment opportunities and economic stability. Thus, the pie chart, therefore, illustrates the pressing need for initiatives to improve educational access and quality within the Santhal community.

Tribals were mainly dependent on forests but today they are being forced to adapt to the modern world and as well as commercialization of the forest areas. Despite the Government of India's effort to come up with funded development projects and schemes for the social welfare of the tribes - very little has changed. In this context, it is important to consider the acculturation process (Behura, 1993). With independence the tribals have interacted with the non-tribals there has been a noticeable dissolution of the tribal culture into the dominant culture of the non-tribals and this, in turn, has generated new aspirations and urges (Rout, 2014). Several other factors are identified that have brought about changes in the tribal culture: the measures undertaken by the government, common facilities, the spread of education, the process of urbanization, occupational mobility, etc. Today the tribals have also induced caste systems into their society. Despite the influx of globalization, education and scientific temper if not all but most tribals continue to hold a strong belief in the magico-religious sphere and in this regard one can associate witch beliefs and witch hunting (Sarkar, 2008). In this paper, we studied the Santhal Tribe of West Bengal.

Occupational Structure

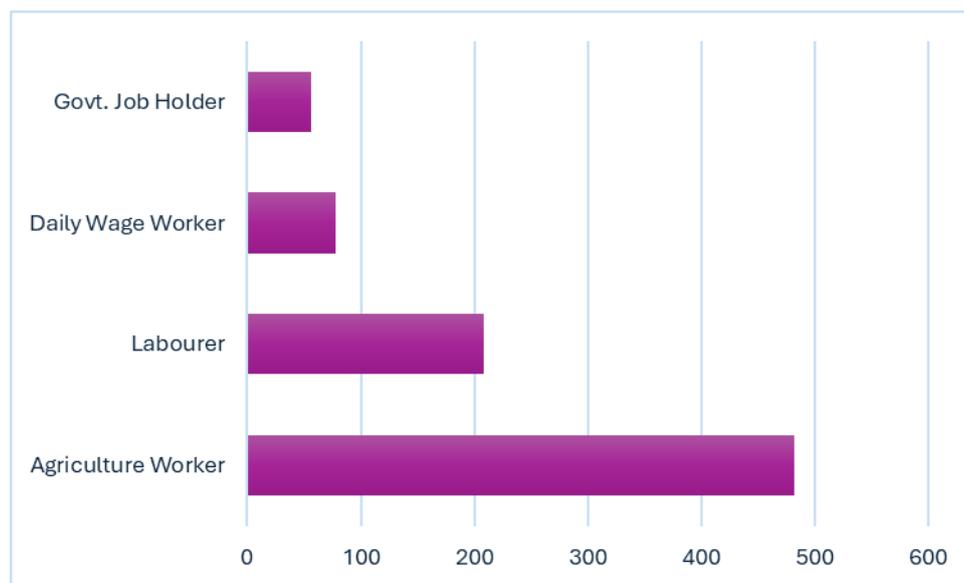


Figure 5: Graph showing Occupational Structure of the Santhals of the surveyed villages

Source: By authors

The primary source of income for the Santhals is agriculture. The vast majority of Santhal tribes lean towards an agrarian way of life. Approximately 58.50 percent of Santhals are farmers or agricultural labourers. Throughout the year, they labour in the field and receive payment from the seasonal crops. About 6.80% of the Santhals in the village under survey are employed full-time, primarily in the government sector in the Purulia district's surrounding villages and townships. The remainder of them work as workers and receive daily wages. Government programs like MGNREGA and 100 Days Work, which were specifically created for the development of rural areas, provided daily wage earners with money. The hamlet known as Jhalda 2 has the highest percentage of Santhals among the eight other villages from the eight distinct blocks of Purulia, making up 19.91 percent of the total number of farmers. The majority of the labourers in the districts are employed as cobblers, carpenters, woodcutters, factory workers, textile workers, and industrial workers. The aforementioned (Figure 5) shows that the hamlet of Raghunathpur 2 only has 1.78 percent of government employees, whereas Jhalda 2 (17.85%) and Raghunathpur 1 (17.85%) have the highest percentage of government employees.

Housing Patterns

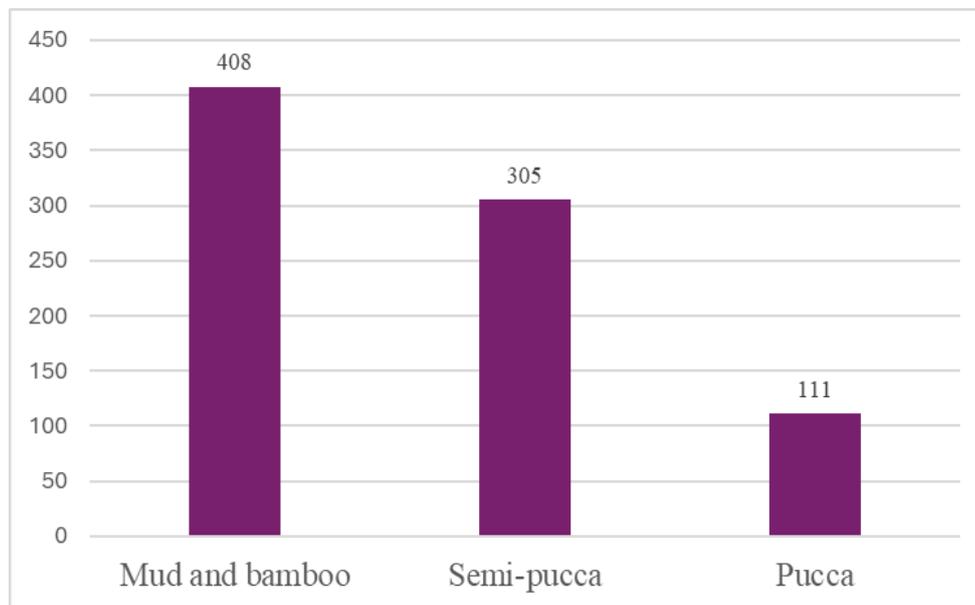


Figure 6: Distribution of households across different housing types

Source: By authors

The data presented in the bar graph (Figure 6) reveals a significant disparity in housing conditions among the households of the Santhal Tribe of Purulia District surveyed. Among the 824 households studied, 408 (49.5%) reside in mud and bamboo houses, which indicates a challenging socioeconomic condition of the Santhals. Around 305 (37%) of the households are residing in semi-pucca houses, and a relatively low proportion of households, only 111 (13.5%) inhabit pucca houses which reflects the prevalent economic constraints within the community.

The Santhal community, known for their rich cultural heritage and traditional lifestyle, often face socioeconomic challenges that directly impact their housing conditions. This distribution highlights a stark economic challenge, with the majority unable to afford durable, permanent housing structures. Most of the Santhals in the region are deprived of basic facilities and constrained by limited resources, leading them to rely on traditional building techniques and locally available materials and forest resources such as mud, bamboo, straws, woods, leaves, thatch and other recycled materials. This can result in housing structures that are less durable and more vulnerable and susceptible to damage from weather extremes, such as heavy rain and cyclones, which are very common in the region. The data indicates that the transition towards semi-pucca and pucca houses has been slow since ages, because of limited access to financial resources and government housing schemes.

The Santhal houses, especially the housing structures which are made from natural resources, are usually in a rectangular shape and are divided into five different parts (Ahmed, 2017). Figure 7 represents the traditional housing types of the Santhals in Purulia.

- i. Bonga Orah (Worship room)
- ii. Gitich Orah (Bedroom)
- iii. Gora Orah (Cowshed)
- iv. Daka Orah (Kitchen)
- v. Racha (Courtyard)

Like many other tribes, the Santals believe in four types of supernatural powers—the benevolent spirit (which includes worship in the family and community level regularly for a healthy life), the protective spirit (which prevents them from ill occurrence), the malevolent spirit (an evil spirit which controls all kinds of diseases in the community) and the ancestor spirit (Sonowal & Praharaj, 2007)

Table 4: Level of House-types (n=8)

Variables	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Mud and Bamboo	31	77	51.00	17.205
Semi - Pucca	20	62	38.12	14.377
Pucca	3	25	13.88	7.415

Source: By authors

The analysis of house-type distribution (Table 4), based on the provided descriptive statistics, reveals significant variations in housing conditions among the studied population. The data indicate that Mud and Bamboo houses constitute the most prevalent form of housing, with values ranging from 31% to 77% and an average of 51.00% (SD = 17.205). This suggests that a substantial portion of the population still resides in traditional and temporary structures, reflecting economic limitations and a lack of access to permanent housing. The relatively high standard deviation further signifies notable variability within this category, indicating disparities in housing conditions across different households.



Figure 7: a) mud house with tiled roof called Khapra Ghar and open verandah called Racha, b) painted mud house with decorative wall motifs called Patikar, c) traditional outdoor kitchen called Daka Orah, d) simple mud house with thatched roof.

Source: By authors

In contrast, Semi-Pucca houses, which represent an intermediate stage between temporary and permanent housing, have a mean value of 38.12% (SD = 14.377), with a minimum of 20% and a maximum of 62%. The lower mean percentage, as compared to Mud and Bamboo houses, implies that while some households have transitioned to more durable structures, the overall prevalence remains limited. The variation within this category suggests that certain segments of the population have been able to improve their housing conditions, yet a significant portion still lacks access to fully stable housing.

The Pucca houses, which denote the most permanent and well-constructed dwellings, exhibit the lowest mean percentage at 13.88% (SD = 7.415), with values ranging between 3% and 25%. This finding highlights the stark contrast in housing accessibility, indicating that only a small fraction of the population has achieved permanent housing security. The relatively lower standard deviation compared to the other categories suggests that Pucca houses are consistently scarce across the sample, reinforcing the idea that socio-economic constraints significantly limit access to high-quality housing.

Overall, the data emphasize a strong prevalence of temporary housing structures within the study population, with only a small proportion of households residing in stable, permanent dwellings. These findings reflect underlying socio-economic disparities, where financial constraints, occupational instability, and resource accessibility collectively contribute to the persistence of inadequate housing conditions. Addressing these issues would require targeted interventions, including affordable housing policies, improved economic opportunities, and infrastructural development to facilitate the transition from Mud/Bamboo houses to more permanent structures.

Income and Economy

The Santhal tribe, one of the largest and most prominent indigenous communities in India, has a predominantly agrarian economy with distinct socio-economic characteristics shaped by their cultural and environmental settings. This section explores the economic activities, sources of income, and livelihood patterns among the Santhals, with a focus on the Purulia district of West Bengal.

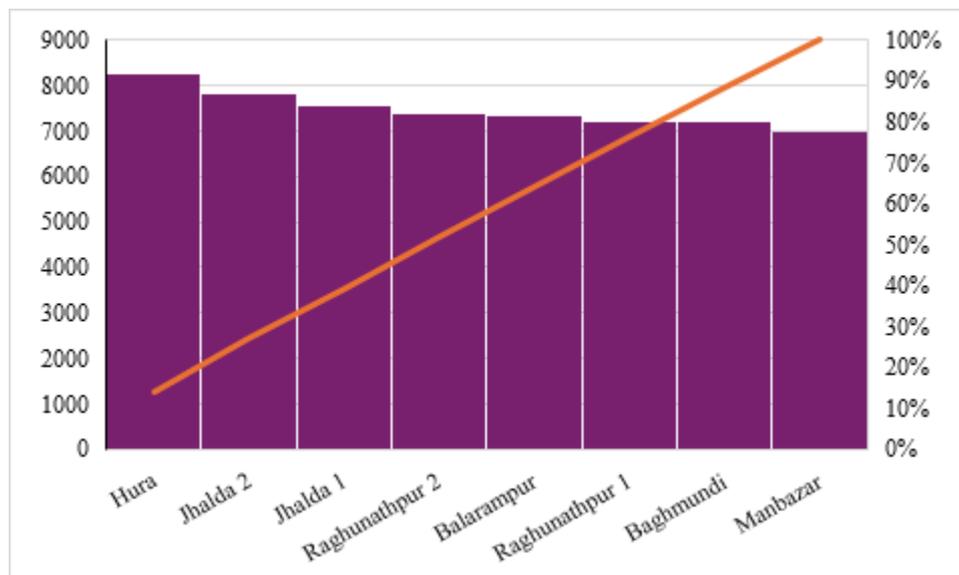


Figure 8: Income and Economy of the Santhals in the surveyed villages

Source: By authors

The Figure 8 reflects the income and economy of the Santhals in the surveyed villages of the Purulia district. The above bar chart represents the average monthly income levels across different blocks from the district. From the chart it is evident the Hura block records the highest income levels, which suggests better agricultural productivity and livelihood compared to other regions. Among these Baghmundi and Manbazar show a lower income trend compared to Hura.

Agriculture forms the backbone of the Santhal economy. Most Santhals are small or marginal farmers who rely on subsistence farming for their livelihood. Their agricultural practices are largely traditional, depending on monsoonal rains and manual labour. Key crops include paddy (rice), maize, millets, pulses, and vegetables, cultivated primarily during the Kharif season. The reliance on rain-fed agriculture often makes their livelihoods vulnerable to droughts and erratic weather patterns, which are common in the Purulia region. Landholding patterns among the Santhals reflect a significant socio-economic challenge. Many Santhals own small parcels of land, while others work as sharecroppers or agricultural laborers. Land alienation, driven by historical and economic pressures, has forced some Santhals to migrate or take up alternative livelihoods.

Forests play a crucial role in the Santhal economy, offering both sustenance and supplementary income. Santhals depend on the collection of non-timber forest products such as sal leaves, mahua flowers, tendu leaves, firewood, and honey

(Kumar & Saikia, 2020). These resources are either used for household consumption or sold in local markets to generate cash income. Sal leaf plate making is a significant activity among Santhal women, providing seasonal employment and contributing to household incomes. The forest-based economy, however, faces challenges due to deforestation, restricted access to forest resources, and environmental degradation, which have disrupted traditional Santhal livelihoods (Islam, et.al, 2015).

With limited access to agricultural land and declining forest resources, many Santhals supplement their incomes through wage labor. This includes employment in agricultural fields, brick kilns, construction sites, and small industries. In Purulia, seasonal migration is a common phenomenon, where Santhal men and women migrate to urban centres or other states in search of employment during lean agricultural periods. The informal nature of wage labor often subjects Santhals to exploitation, poor working conditions, and irregular incomes. Despite these hardships, wage labor remains a critical source of livelihood for many households (Sarkar & Mishra, 2021). The Santhals are known for their skills in crafting traditional handicrafts and artifacts. Activities such as bamboo work, basket weaving, pottery, and musical instrument making are practiced, though these crafts are often underpaid and undervalued in modern markets (Choudhary, et.al, 2024). Santhal artisans also produce traditional jewellery and textiles, contributing to cultural preservation while generating limited income (Datta & Mete, 2025).

Livestock rearing is another significant economic activity among the Santhals. Cattle, goats, pigs, and poultry are commonly raised, serving as a source of food, agricultural labor, and cash income. Livestock sales provide an economic buffer during periods of financial distress or agricultural failure. However, the lack of veterinary services, fodder, and modern animal husbandry practices limits the productivity of this sector (Rangnekar, 2006).

Several government schemes and welfare programs, such as MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), food security programs, and tribal welfare initiatives, have been implemented to improve the economic conditions of the Santhals. MGNREGA has played a role in providing employment opportunities during agricultural off-seasons, although challenges such as delayed payments and limited awareness persist (Ghoosh, 2013).

The economic vulnerabilities of the Santhals stem from multiple factors:

- Landlessness and marginal landholdings limit agricultural productivity and incomes.
- Environmental degradation reduces access to forest resources.
- Seasonal migration disrupts family structures and education, especially for children.
- Limited access to credit and markets restricts their ability to diversify incomes.
- Exploitation in wage labour and handicrafts keeps them trapped in low-income cycles.

Despite challenges, opportunities for economic development exist. Improved access to education, skill development programs, and microfinance initiatives can empower the Santhals economically. Additionally, promoting forest-based enterprises, eco-tourism, and value-added agricultural products could enhance income levels while preserving their cultural heritage (Singh, et.al, 2025).

Table 5: Correlation- income (%), illiterate (%), housing (%), and occupation (%)

		Income (%)	Illiterate (%)	Housing (%)	Occupation (%)
Income (%)	Pearson Correlation	1	.182	.370	.406
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.667	.367	.318
Illiterate (%)	Pearson Correlation	.182	1	.946**	.910**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.667		.000	.002
Housing (%)	Pearson Correlation	.370	.946**	1	.981**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.367	.000		.000
Occupation (%)	Pearson Correlation	.406	.910**	.981**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.318	.002	.000	

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation from the Table 5, highlights key relationships between income, illiteracy, housing type, and occupations. Income shows a weak positive correlation with illiteracy ($r = 0.182$, $p > 0.05$) and mud/bamboo housing ($r = 0.370$, $p > 0.05$), and a moderate positive correlation with agriculture workers and laborers ($r = 0.406$, $p > 0.05$), none of which are statistically significant. In contrast, illiteracy has a very strong positive correlation with mud/bamboo housing ($r = 0.946$, $p < 0.01$) and with agriculture workers and laborers ($r = 0.910$, $p < 0.01$), both of which are highly significant. Additionally, mud/bamboo housing is strongly correlated with agriculture workers and laborers ($r = 0.981$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that lower education levels and traditional housing are closely associated with agrarian livelihoods. These findings suggest that socio-economic factors such as education and housing are interlinked and heavily influence occupational patterns in the studied population. In these villages, income is likely driven by agriculture, labour, or traditional occupations rather than formal education. Even illiterate individuals can earn a stable income through farming or manual labour, reducing the immediate need for literacy but most of the villagers fall in the group of income '>3000'.

The correlation analysis between income, illiteracy, housing type (Mud/Bamboo), and occupation (Agricultural Worker and Labourer) reveals critical socio-economic patterns within the studied population. The results indicate that income does not exhibit a strong or statistically significant correlation with any of the variables, suggesting that fluctuations in income are not necessarily dependent on literacy levels, housing conditions, or occupational status within this sample. Specifically, the correlation between income and illiteracy ($r = 0.182$, $p = 0.667$), income and Mud/Bamboo housing ($r = 0.370$, $p = 0.367$), and income and Agricultural Worker/Labourer ($r = 0.406$, $p = 0.318$) are all weak and insignificant, implying that factors beyond these variables may play a more substantial role in determining income levels.

In contrast, a strong and statistically significant relationship emerges between illiteracy and housing conditions, as well as illiteracy and occupational status. The correlation between illiteracy and Mud/Bamboo housing is exceptionally high ($r = 0.946$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that individuals with lower literacy levels are highly likely to reside in substandard housing conditions. Similarly, illiteracy is also strongly correlated with employment in agricultural labor ($r = 0.910$, $p = 0.002$), suggesting that lower educational attainment limits access to diverse employment opportunities, thereby reinforcing engagement in low-income, labour-intensive occupations.

Furthermore, the most striking relationship is observed between housing type and occupation ($r = 0.981$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that individuals living in Mud/Bamboo houses are almost exclusively engaged in agricultural labor or daily wage work. This finding underscores the strong linkage between poor housing conditions and employment in informal, unstable labor sectors, reinforcing a cycle of socio-economic vulnerability. The high degree of association suggests that limited financial stability among agricultural workers directly translates to inadequate living conditions, further exacerbating poverty-related challenges.

Overall, these findings highlight a deeply entrenched socio-economic structure, where low literacy levels correlate with poor housing and labour-intensive occupations, whereas income remains weakly associated with these variables. This suggests that interventions aimed at improving literacy rates could potentially break this cycle, leading to better employment opportunities and, consequently, improved housing conditions. Addressing these disparities requires a multi-dimensional approach, integrating education, housing policies, and labor reforms to ensure sustainable socio-economic development.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The study on the socioeconomic development of the Santhal community in selected villages of Purulia district, West Bengal, highlights the persistent challenges faced by this indigenous group. Despite their rich cultural heritage, the Santhals remain economically and socially marginalized, with limited access to education, stable income sources, and basic infrastructure. The findings indicate that a significant proportion of the community continues to rely on traditional livelihoods such as agriculture and daily wage labor, which offer minimal financial security. Moreover, the prevalence of low literacy rates and inadequate infrastructural facilities further exacerbates their socioeconomic vulnerability, restricting opportunities for upward mobility.

The case study of 824 households provides empirical evidence that socioeconomic deprivation among the Santhals is a multi-dimensional issue, influenced by factors such as educational backwardness, poor housing conditions, and unstable employment patterns. While government initiatives and welfare schemes have been introduced to support tribal development, their impact remains limited due to inefficient implementation, lack of awareness, and socio-cultural constraints.

For sustainable development, there is an urgent need for targeted interventions focusing on education, skill development, and alternative livelihood opportunities. Improving access to quality education and vocational training can empower the younger generation to diversify their occupational choices beyond traditional labour-intensive sectors. Additionally, enhancing rural infrastructure, promoting financial inclusion, and strengthening social welfare programs can significantly improve their standard of living.

Overall, the study underscores the necessity of a holistic approach that integrates economic empowerment, social inclusion, and cultural preservation to uplift the Santhal community. Addressing these structural challenges through policy reforms, community-driven initiatives, and sustained government support is crucial for ensuring long-term socioeconomic progress and improving the overall well-being of the Santhals in Purulia district.

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