

# An Insight into the Land and Life of Tribals in Junglemahal, West Bengal, India

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**Abstract :** Tribes are an integral part of Indian civilization and marked for distinct difference from mainstream population in terms of their 'habitat, economy and society'(Forde,1934). At present tribes of India account for approximately eight percent of total population. Tribal groups may show variation in ethnic identity but share more or less common features. The livelihood patterns are centred on small land base, low agricultural productivity and low income from daily wages. These lead to indebtedness and finally into a vicious circle of exploitation. The life of the tribes is increasingly becoming vulnerable due to lack of assured rights to their resource base. A peep into the land of tribes from geographical perspective is therefore essential and central to apprehend the life of the people. Junglemahal and its surroundings have a long history and enriched geography that shape the tribal landscape. The present study reveals the demography, economy and culture resulted from constant interaction of geographical processes on the cultural space.

**Keywords :** ethnicity, demography, livelihood, geographical processes, cultural space

## Introduction

All places over the Earth's surface reveal complex relationship between different processes and phenomena. The people have responded and shaped their lives in a systematic way, as they interact in the natural and cultural space. The nature and the surroundings influence all spheres of life. In India, the land and the people also exhibit closeness with nature and indicate the indigeneness in their identity. In fact, the panorama of population exhibits plethora of various communities and social groups. They adhere to different religions and cultures, speak different dialects but all of them are parts of Indian society. Tribal societies are till now in the stigma of sustaining life in a traditional way with distinctive cultural space. In fact, India is noted for remarkable concentration of tribal population in the World. According to 2011 census, the tribes account for 8.6 percent of the total population in India. Nearly 80 percent of them live in remote forest areas and hilly tracts. The term 'Scheduled Tribes' first appeared in the Constitution of India, [Article 366 (25)]. Scheduled Tribes are those communities who are scheduled in accordance with

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Article 342 of the Constitution. This Article says that ‘only those communities, who have been declared as such by the President through an initial public notification or through a subsequent amending Act of Parliament, will be considered as Scheduled Tribes’.

Tribes in West Bengal are characterized by geographical isolation, economic backwardness, and distinctive cultural traits. Tribal groups are at different stages of social, economic and educational development. Though some communities have adopted a mainstream way of life with time, others have not. There are certain scheduled tribes who continue to live with extremely low level of literacy, subsistence level of economy and pre-agriculture level of technology. Tribal population of West Bengal constitutes about 5.08 percent of total tribal population of the Country. Higher concentration of tribal population is seen in the districts like Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Dakshin Dinajpur, Paschim Medinipur, Jhargram, Bankura and Purulia. In south Bengal, tribes are mainly concentrated in parts of four districts of the western region comprising Paschim Medinipur, Jhargram (from 2017) and Purulia with the largest share, followed by Bankura. These areas are named as the Junglemahal tracts of West Bengal. The tribes of Junglemahal pass their days in a simple and eventless way in the rural, remote villages.

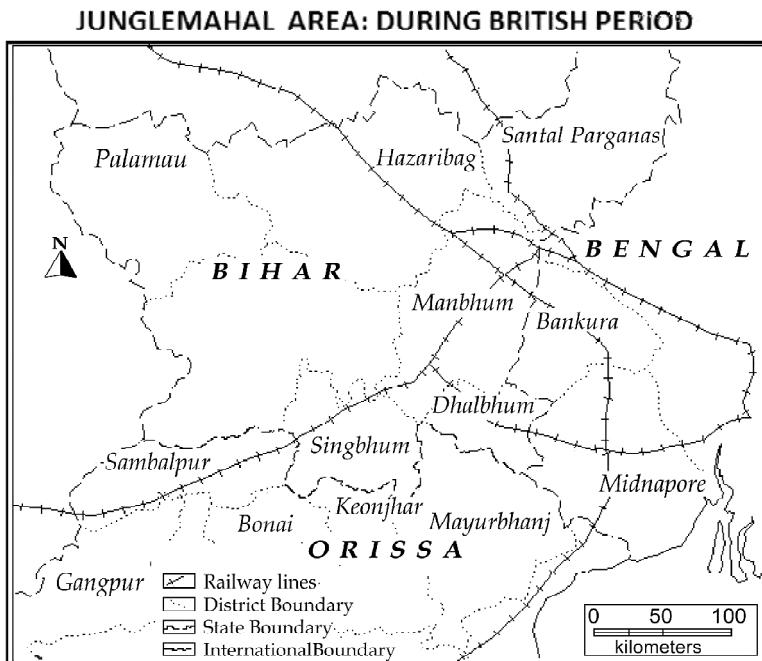
### **The Study Area and Its Historical Identity**

Jungle Mahal area in West Bengal possesses more or less similar geographical characteristics in terms of its relief, soil, drainage, climate, vegetation and terrain condition. In fact, no such area is designated as Junglemahal at present in the administrative context; although it has become familiar today to all. Actually, this is the forest tract of the Rarh region which gave the region a special identity. The districts of Bankura, Paschim Medinipur, Purulia are treated as Junglemahal presently. In fact, the very name is the legacy of the British in India. During the imperialistic period, they observed this area (the then undivided Bengal, Bihar, Orissa) as an important revenue earning unit and termed it as *mahal* and *parganas* (Figure 1). During British period the entire area was a territory of the tribes like santal, munda, bhumij, lodha and others. They were against the British invasions into their land. In fact, that was the phase when the dispossession of the tribes from their own land had started. That's why the then Junglemahal witnessed revolutions like *Santal Bidroho*, *Chuar Bidroho* from 1855-56 onwards. Tribal people were at the centre of all those rebellion during that period.

By Regulation XVIII of 1805, East India Company formed Jungle Mahal district taking *parganas* and *mahals* of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa (Figure: 2). In 1833, the district was again broken up and Manbhum district came up with headquarters at Manbazar. Present Purulia district was shaped in 1956 under the State's Reorganization Act. Whatever its historical past, the physical characteristics of the newly formed area did not change a lot. Paschim Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia, in fact, possess the similar terrain features with a relational socio-cultural ambience.

The areas are parts of Paschim Medinipur, Gopiballavpur, Binpur-II (Belpahari), Binpur-1 (Lalgah), Shalboni, Jhargram, Garbeta-II (Goaltore),

Sankrail, Nayagram; Aarsha, Balarampur, Bundwan, Bagmundi, Barabazaar, Manbazaar in Purulia; Sarenga and Ranibandh in Bankura (Figure: 3). Different Gazetteers, journals and books prove the fact that indigenous inhabitants of the districts regard forest not only as a symbol of property and livelihood, but as symbol of revered God. The tribal people (Lodha, Santhal, Munda, Bhumij, Baiga, Mahali, etc.) living in the area are very much forest-dependent and that's why show close attachment to the soils of Junglemahal. At present, Govt. of West Bengal designated 23 blocks (Figure: 4) of Bankura, Purulia and Paschim Medinipur districts as Junglemahal (order no. 2071-BCW/MR- 121/11; dated 11-07-2011) and has taken various measures for the development of its people.

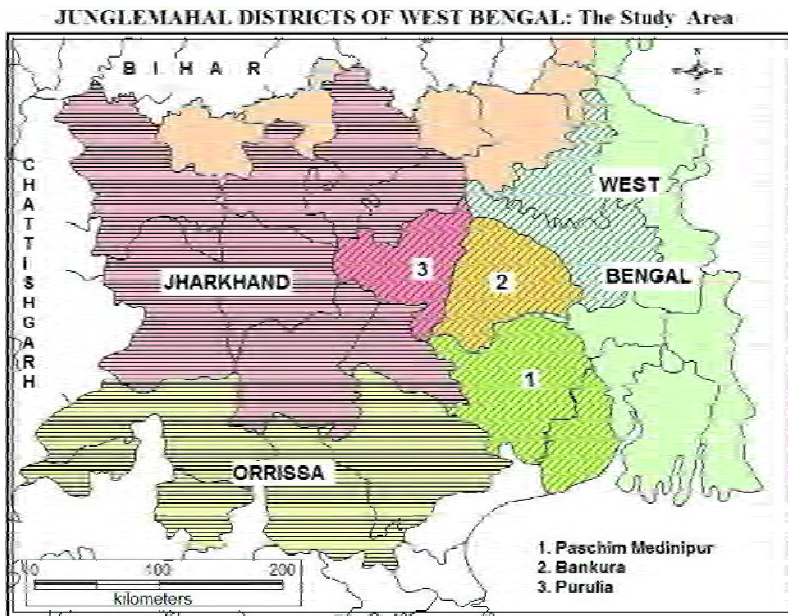


**Figure 1:** Jungle mahal in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa during Imperial time<sup>19</sup>

### Relevance of the Work

Research on tribal groups in India usually carried out by historians, economist, physiologist, health consultants, anthropological experts. The origin, lifestyles, diseases, health conditions and different economic problems in terms of availability of various project impacts are the subject matter of their concern. Literature review on different tribal studies in India specially in some specific scattered pockets have been carried out. In west Bengal, evaluation of LAMPS (Large area multipurpose

societies Schemes), ITDP (Integrated Tribal Development Project), displacement of tribes, drop out pattern from schools, progress of education, tribal women laborer and various case studies of different tribal groups have been done by the researchers. Present work mainly keep focus on the spatial characteristics of enriched history and deep -rooted culture of actual inhabitants of the area. No doubt, the tribes of jungle mahal are literary the son of the soil. The study in present context is a real reflection of the status of the indigenous people in their own land.



**Figure 2:** Study Area in West Bengal

*Map drawn by author*

## Objectives

The objective of the present work includes

1. to highlight the spatial distribution of tribal population in Junglemahal districts,
2. to identify and analyse the demographic features of the tribal communities,
3. to showcase the case studies of Lodha, Bhumijand Santals in socio cultural space and economic environment.

## Methodology

Thematically, the present research work is an integrative one. Actually, the work is linked with regional, social and economic geography. Adoption of statistical techniques is essential for analysing various parameters. The required database is

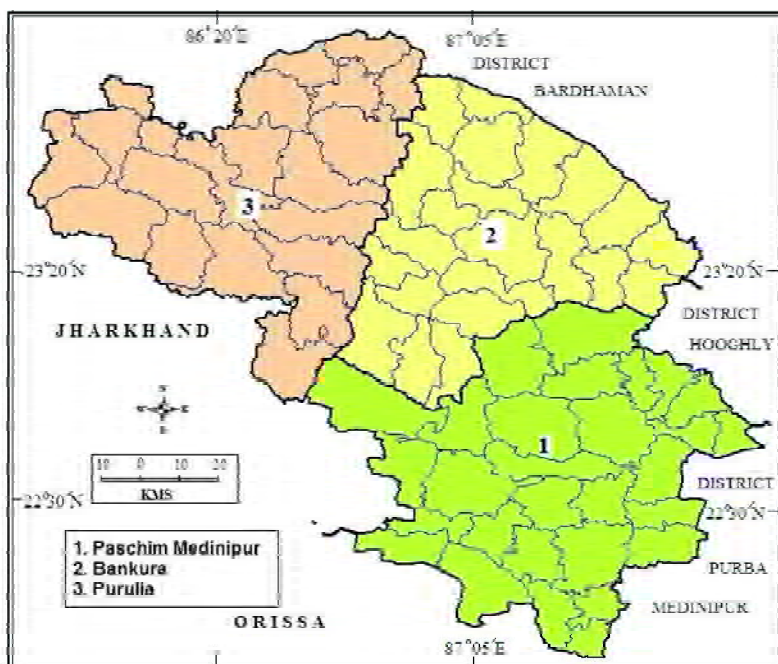


Figure 3: Janglemahal Area in three districts

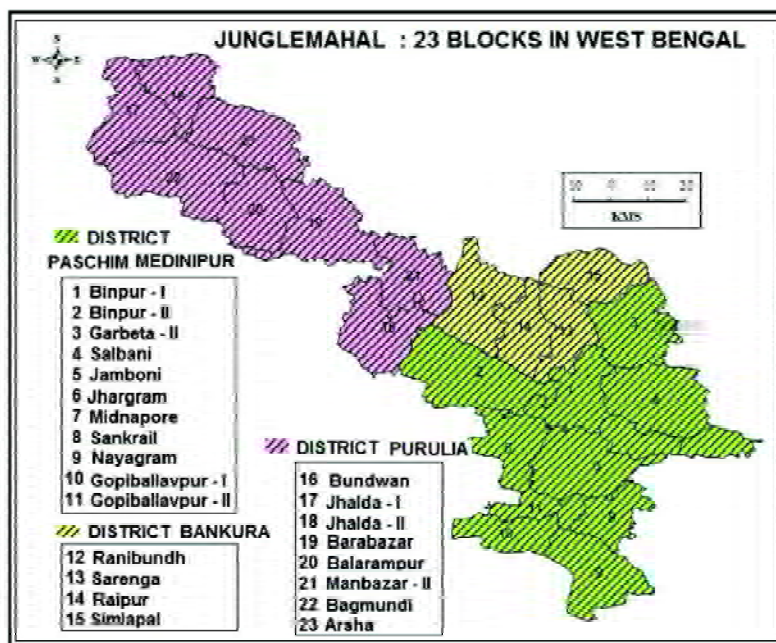


Figure 4: Designated area of Janglemahal

(source: [www.bcwdwb.gov.in](http://www.bcwdwb.gov.in), by author)

constructed by acquiring information both from the primary sources (field survey) and the secondary sources (Survey of India toposheets, reports, journals, books, gazetteers, maps, census of India etc).

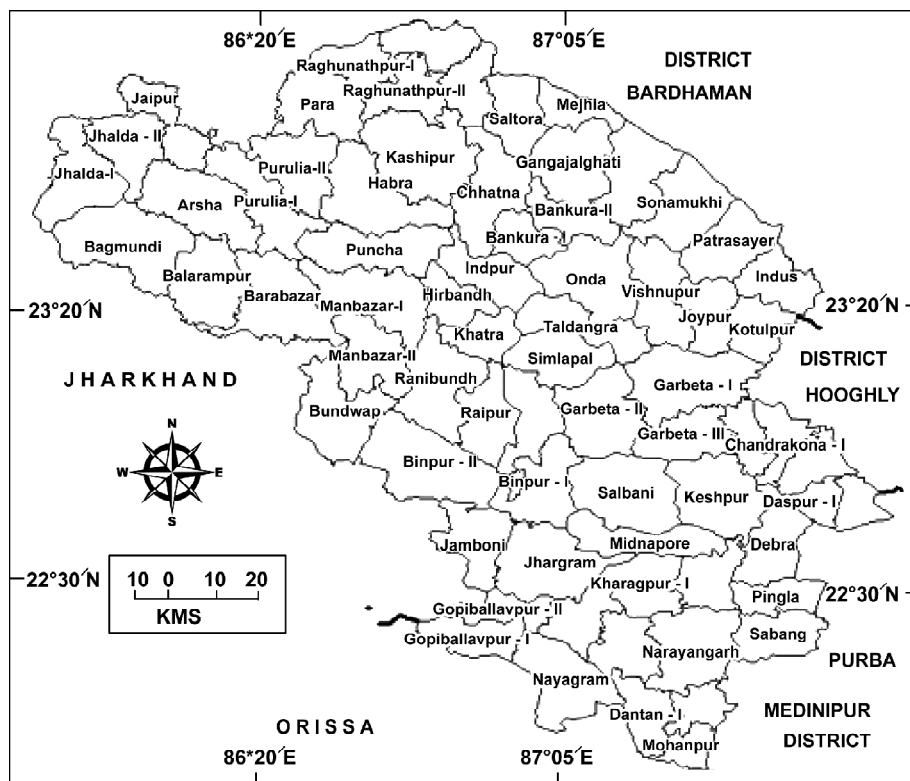


Figure 5: Base map of the study area (C.D. Block wise)

Field survey to various tribal villages help to comprehend the actual condition of their daily life. The database has been managed (storage, edit, manipulation, and analysis) entirely with statistical software using PC and has been mapped primarily by the author with the help of GIS software. General cartographic principles have been followed for representing the output of the analysis. Regarding techniques of mapping and diagram general principles and GIS has been followed. Thematic maps with proportional symbols and choropleth have been prepared with MapInfo version 8.5, TNT MIPs software.

## Results and Discussion

### Demographic Characteristics

The total population of West Bengal as recorded in 2011 Census is 91,276,115. Among them 5,296,253 persons are Scheduled Tribes (STs) that constitutes 5.8 per cent of the total population of the state. In West Bengal there are 40 scheduled

tribes, as per the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) order, 1950, as amended up-to-date. The Junglemahal districts of Bankura, Purulia and Paschim Medinipur as a whole share more than 33 percent of the total Tribes of west Bengal (Table:1).

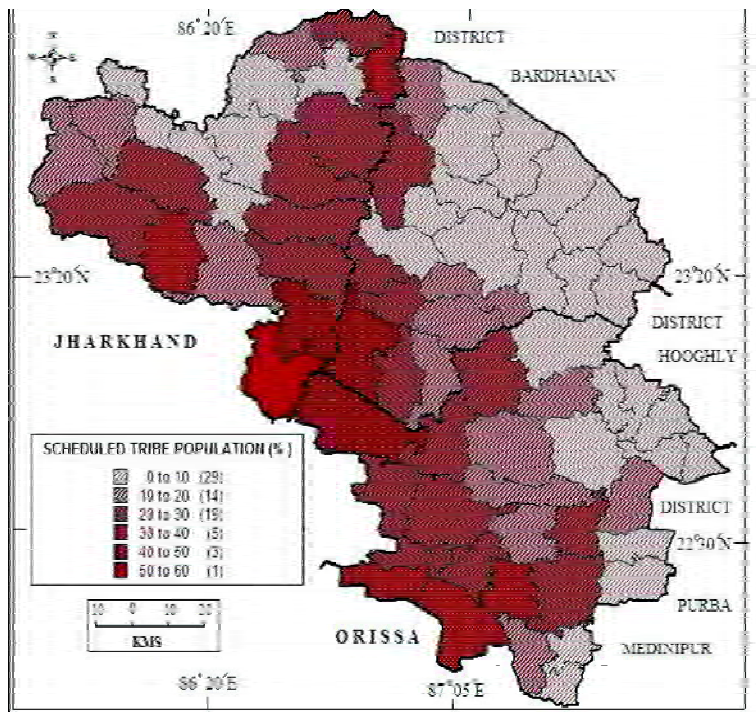
**Table 1: Scheduled tribe population in Jungle mahal districts**

| Jungle Mahal Districts | Total Population 2011 | Total ST population 2011 | % ST to total population 2011 | ST population 2011 (% ST to total) |
|------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Bankura                | 3,596,674             | 3,68,690                 | 10.25                         | 3,35,047 (10.50)                   |
| Purulia                | 2,930,115             | 5,40,652                 | 18.45                         | 4,82,264 (19.00)                   |
| Paschim Medinipur      | 5,913,457             | 8,80,015                 | 14.88                         | 7,72,177 (15.22)                   |
| <b>West Bengal</b>     | <b>91,276,115</b>     | <b>1,78,9357</b>         |                               |                                    |

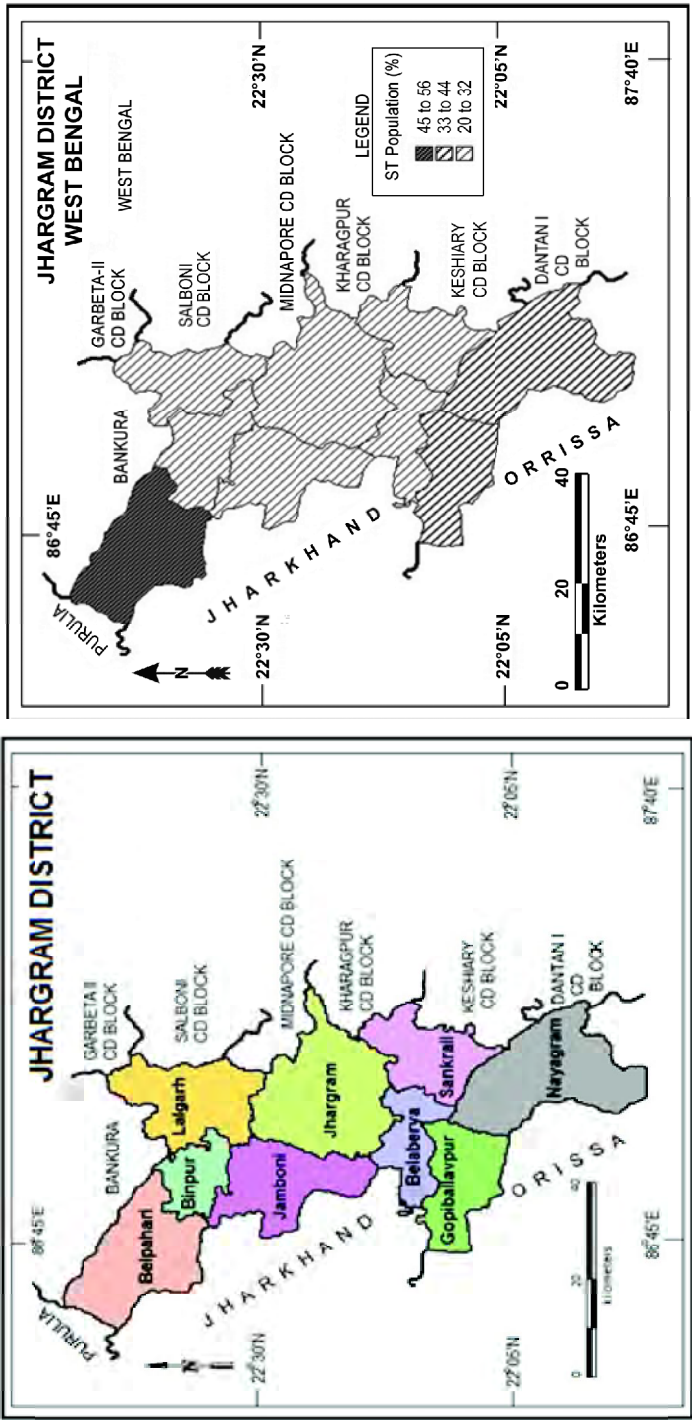
Source: PCA 2011, 2001

#### *Tribal Population: Size and Distribution*

The tribes in Junglemahal mainly live in the districts of Purulia, Bankura, Paschim Medinipur and newly formed Jhargram district of West Bengal (Figure 6

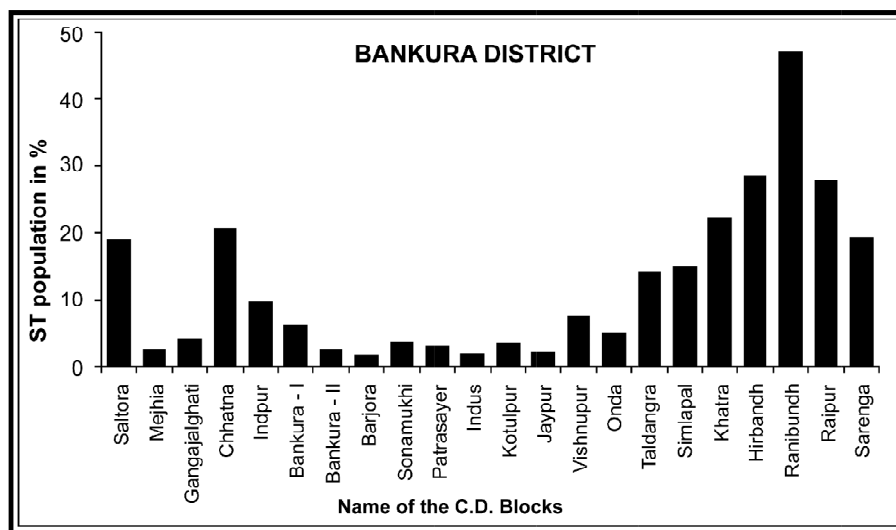


**Map 6: Share of STs in Jungle mahal Area (based on PCA'2011)**



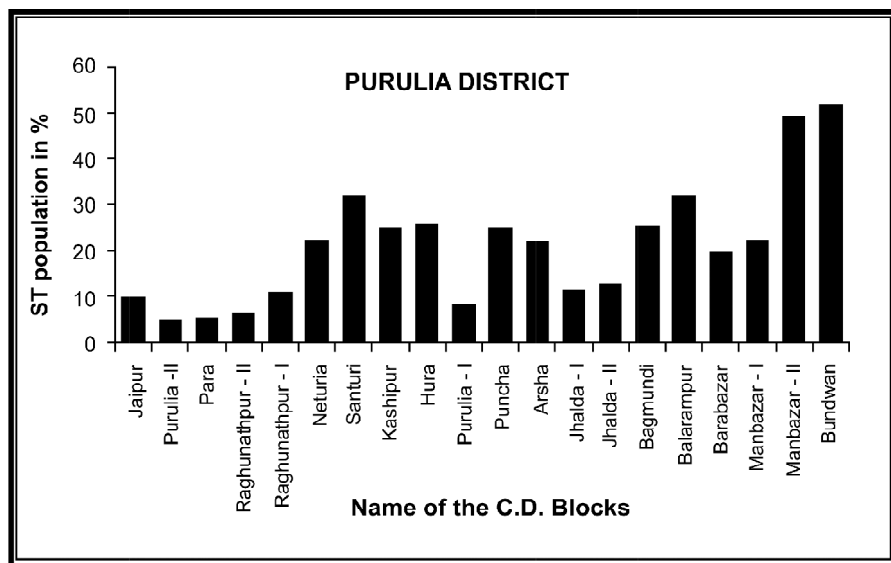
Map 7: Scheduled tribes in newly formed Jhargram district- 2017  
(source: District Collectorate, Jhargram)

and 7). Maximum concentration of tribes happens to be found in the western tracts of the region. The districts constitute 33.78 percent tribes to all tribes of West Bengal (2011). The major tribes that inhabit the jungle tracts are Bhumij, Kora, Mahali, Lodha, Munda, Oraon, Santal, Savar, Lohara etc. Bedias (the snake catchers) live in the



**Figure 8:** Percentage of STs in different C.D.blocks Bankura District

(source: PCA-2011)



**Figure 9:** Percentage of STs in different C.D.blocks Purulia District

(source: PCA-2011)

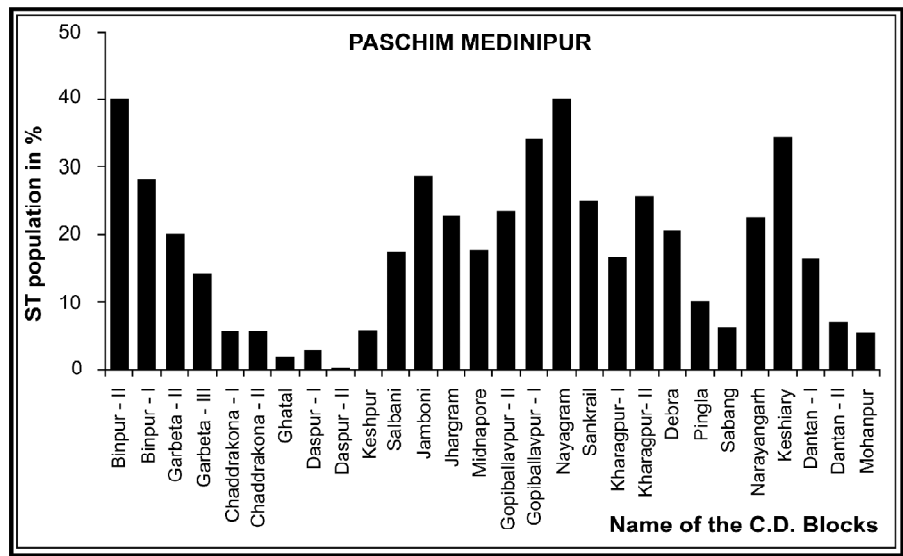


Figure 10: Percentage of STs in different C. D. blocks Paschim Medinipur District  
(source: PCA-2011)

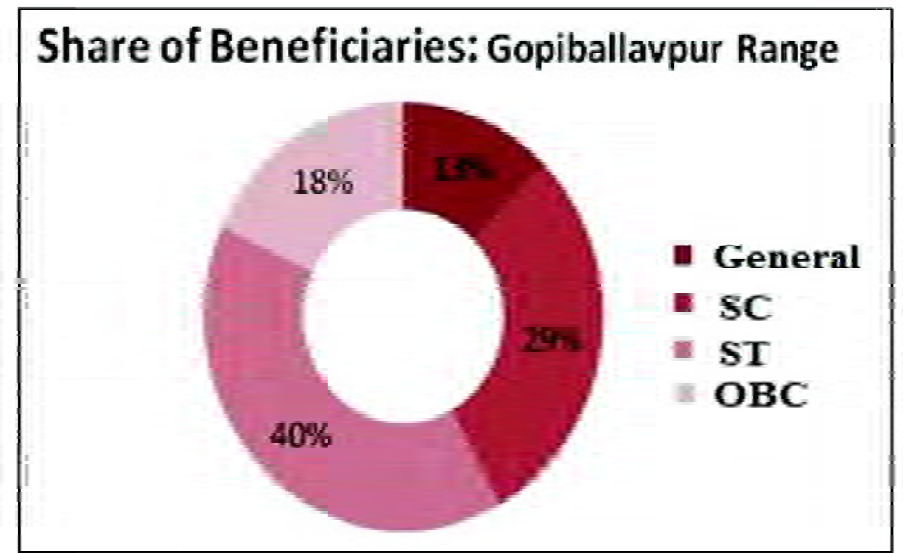


Figure 11: Maximum share enjoyed by tribal beneficiaries in Gopiballavpur Forest Range  
(source: DFO office’2017, Jhargram)

hilly and forested terrain of Baghmundi block of Ayodhya hills in Purulia district. Bhumij also shows maximum share with 19.64 percent in Purulia, followed by 11.49 percent in Paschim Medinipur and 10.80 percent in Bankura (Table: 2). Santals form

the largest share contributing more than 60 percent of tribes compared to others in Junglemahal terrain.

**Table 2: Tribal groups and their share in jungle mahal districts**

| Name of major tribes  | Percentage to total STs in the Districts' 2011 |         |                   |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------|---------|-------------------|
|                       | Bankura                                        | Purulia | Paschim Medinipur |
| Bedia, Bediya         | -                                              | 1.19    | -                 |
| Baiga                 | -                                              | -       | 1.51              |
| Bhumij                | 10.80                                          | 19.64   | 11.49             |
| Kora                  | 3.64                                           | 6.25    | 1.73              |
| Lodha, Kheria, Kharia | 0.58                                           | 0.93    | 3.43              |
| Lohara, Lohra         | 0.11                                           | 0.69    | 6.10              |
| Mahali                | 0.54                                           | 1.90    | 1.47              |
| Munda                 | 0.47                                           | 1.92    | 7.90              |
| Oraon                 | -                                              | 1.59    | -                 |
| Santal                | 82.37                                          | 63.70   | 63.06             |
| Savar                 | 0.69                                           | 1.30    | 2.14              |

*Source: State Primary Census Abstract for scheduled tribes'2011*

In Bankura district, Santals are largest in numbers with 82.34 percent. Bhumij shows a significant size (10.80 percent) and Kora also (3.64 percent) but the contribution of others is less than 1 percent. In Purulia Santals have the largest share with 63.7 percent followed by Bhumij with 19.64 percent and koras 6.25 percent. Munda, Mahali, Oraon, Bedia, Lodha, Savar tribes also constitute a sizable portion of the population in the district. The district Paschim Medinipur possesses nearly 90 percent tribes including Santals, Bhumij, Munda, Lohara, Lodha and Savar tribes. Mahali, Kora, Baiga are the remaining STs having population of more than 1 percent (Table:2).

The STs in the districts predominantly reside in the rural areas (97 per cent). Among Munda, Lodha, Savar and Bedia, more than 99 per cent are residing in the rural areas. Santals and Bhumij recorded a meagre 3 percent concentration in urban areas. Less than 1 percent (0.90 percent) tribes of Bankura live in town areas. Purulia has only 1.6 percent urban tribals while Paschim Medinipur features 3.0 percent concentration in urban areas (source: PCA'2011).

Bankura is one of the most backward districts of West Bengal consisting of five tribal in habited blocks namely Ranibandh, Hirbandh, Raipur, Khatra and Chatna, where share of tribes to the total is remarkable enough. The percentages of tribal

population of Ranibandh, Hirbandh, Raipur, Khatra and Chatna are 47.07, 28.40, 27.66, 22.02, and 20.5 respectively (Figure 8). Out of these five blocks, Ranibandh and Raipur blocks fall in the core of Junglemahal.

Purulia District has the largest tribal population in Junglemahal contributing 18.45 percent to total tribes of West Bengal (Figure 9). Bundwan and Manbazar II blocks share nearly 50 percent STs, followed by Balarampur, Santuri blocks. Neturia, Kashipur, Hura, Pancha, Arsha, Bagmundi, Manbazar I blocks also have a sizable amount i.e. more than 20 percent STs. Tracts of Dalma ranges in the western parts, presence of Ayodhya hills, proximity to the forest area creates conditions suitable for the habitat of the tribes.

Nearly 40 percent of STs live at Binpur II, Nayagram blocks of Paschim Medinipur district. Binpur I, Gopiballavpur I, Jambani, Keshiary share approximately 30 percent while Jhargram, Garbeta II, Narayangarh, Gopiballavpur II, Sankrail, Kharagpur II, Debra blocks have been recorded with 20 percent STs of total population (Figure 10). Almost all blocks possess a sizable number of STs except Ghatal, Daspur I and Daspur II which have a meagre contribution. The rugged landscape of Belpahari, with a projected part of Dalma hill range and presence of forest tracts provide a suitable habitat for the tribes of Binpur II and Nayagram blocks.

**Table 3: Demographic features of tribes**

| Name of the Districts | % ST to total population in District 2011 | % ST to total population in W. Bengal 2011 | % male | % Female | Child (0- 6 age) Sex ratio 2011 | Sex ratio 2011 |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|--------|----------|---------------------------------|----------------|
| Bankura               | 10.25                                     | 6.96                                       | 49.76  | 50.24    | 972                             | 1010           |
| Purulia               | 18.45                                     | 10.21                                      | 50.27  | 49.73    | 970                             | 989            |
| Paschim Medinipur     | 14.88                                     | 16.61                                      | 49.98  | 50.02    | 982                             | 1001           |
| <b>West Bengal</b>    |                                           | 33.78                                      |        |          | 982                             | 999            |
| <b>India</b>          |                                           |                                            |        |          | 978                             | 990            |

*Source: PCA 2011, calculated by author*

### *Sex Ratio*

As per 2011 Census, the sex ratio of total ST population in West Bengal is 999, a slight increase from 982 in 2001. In both the years, it is higher than the national average for STs i.e. 990 and 978 in 2011 and 2001 respectively. Bankura has recorded the highest sex ratio 1010, Paschim Medinipur a remarkable 1001 and Purulia 989 in 2011. Child sex ratio (0-6 age group) among the tribes are distinctive with 972, 970

and 982 respectively in Bankura, Purulia and Paschim Medinipur districts respectively, as compared to the aggregate national figure (978) for the STs. (Table: 3).

### *Literacy*

Among all STs, 52.17 per cent of the population are literate in Bankura, 46.24 per cent in Purulia and 51.56 per cent in Paschim Medinipur, which is more or less at par with the West Bengal i.e. 50.30. The male literacy rate has been recorded at 31.8 per cent in Bankura, 39.23 per cent in Purulia and 30.69 in Paschim Medinipur. Purulia displays the lowest female literates with 17 per cent only, while it is slightly higher in Paschim Medinipur and Bankura respectively (Table: 4).

**Table 4: Literacy status of scheduled tribe population**

| <b>Name of the Districts</b> | <b>Literacy of STs to total Population in %</b> | <b>Literacy of STs (male) to total Population in %</b> | <b>Literacy of STs (female) to total Population in %</b> |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| Bankura                      | 52.17                                           | 31.80                                                  | 20.36                                                    |
| Purulia                      | 46.24                                           | 29.23                                                  | 17.00                                                    |
| Paschim Medinipur            | 51.56                                           | 30.69                                                  | 20.87                                                    |

*Source: PCA 2011, calculated by author*

### *Economy and Society*

Majority of the tribes in rural areas live in deplorable conditions amidst severe poverty. They do not have permanent livelihood practices. Nearly 50 percent of the population consists of non-workers. The working class constitutes main and marginal worker groups. Main workers include 22.1 percent, 19.67 percent, 24.21 percent in Bankura, Purulia and Paschim Medinipur respectively (Table: 5). Little share of the working class has been able to get job for more than six months. Among them, in rural areas most of them are landless. So, they usually act as agricultural laborers in the field of local cultivators and landlords. Marginal workers used to get jobs in the localities for less than 100 days in most cases. Those who live in or in proximity to forests, collect forest products like wild fruits, resins (*dhuna*), fire woods, *sal* leaves etc. Some of them are forced to migrate to the adjacent districts of Bardhaman, Howrah, and Hooghly etc. for their livelihood. These incidents are known as *namalkhata*. They usually act as agricultural labour, wage labour, daily workers in brick kilns and small shops etc.

The economy of the tribes in some areas is centered on the forests. More than 60 percent people belong to tribal group of Binpur II block (Sadar Belpahari), in the newly formed Jhargram district which has been carved out of Paschim

**Table 5: Working Status of scheduled tribe Population**

| <b>Name of the Districts</b> | <b>Total worker in %</b> | <b>Main Worker in %</b> | <b>Marginal Worker in %</b> | <b>Non worker in %</b> |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| Bankura                      | 50.47                    | 22.10                   | 28.37                       | 49.53                  |
| Purulia                      | 49.96                    | 19.67                   | 30.29                       | 50.04                  |
| Paschim Medinipur            | 51.57                    | 24.21                   | 27.36                       | 48.43                  |
| West Bengal                  | 50.86                    | 22.40                   | 28.46                       | 49.14                  |

*Source: PCA 2011, calculated by author*

Medinipur. Nearly 40 percent STs are recorded in Nayagram and Gopiballavpur I area. There is a close association between forest area and tribal population in these areas because of nearness to forest. In the Gopiballavpur forest range the beneficiary groups include all categories of population which shows that the largest share i.e. 40 percent is enjoyed by the ST population (Figure:11). Largest share is also observed in the Forest Protection Committees meant for part of Joint Forest Management System. In some of the committees the participation of the tribal population is really noticeable (Figure:12).

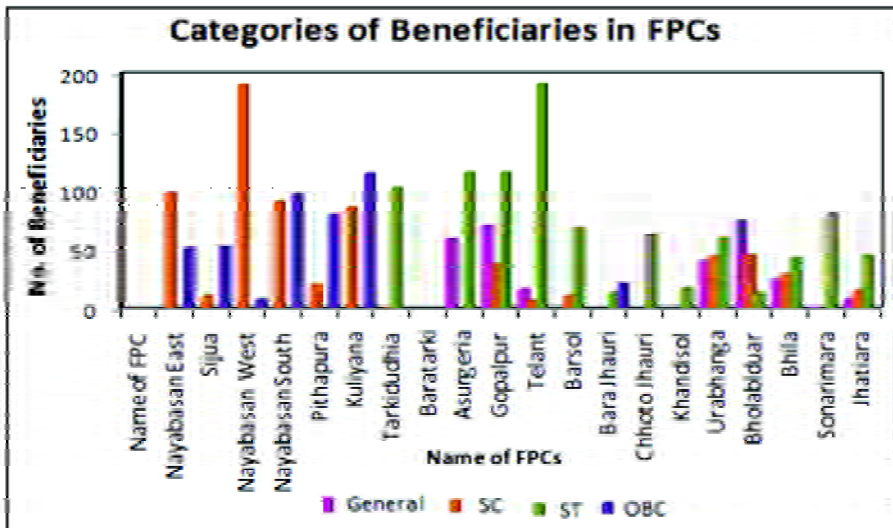
**Table 6: Social aspects**

| <b>Name</b>       | <b>Number of ST Households</b> | <b>Total ST Population</b> | <b>Family Size</b> |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|
| Bankura           | 79,048                         | 3,68,690                   | 4.66 (5)           |
| Puruliya          | 1,06,880                       | 540652                     | 5.06 (5)           |
| Paschim Medinipur | 1,98,105                       | 880015                     | 4.44 (4)           |
| West Bengal       | 3,84,033                       | 1789357                    | 4.66 (5)           |

*Source: PCA 2011, calculated by author*

Many tribal families in Junglemahal solely count on forest -based activities like hunting, gathering and selling of minor forest products (roots, mahua, tendu, wood, lacs and herbs). A close relationship between the forest and the tribes is clearly noticeable in the Jhargram district. The land use of the district reveals a larger share of forest in some of the blocks. Incidentally, those blocks with high concentration of forest tract coincides with the maximum share of ST population. Binpur II has 28 percent forest coverage with 16 percent ST population (Belpaharisadar). Nayagram and Gopiballavpur are the home for 26 percent tribes in an area of 26 percent forest land (Figure: 13.a and 13.b). Binpur I also exhibits a similar scenario with equal percentage of concentration (11 percent) of forest and STs. This clearly indicates the role of forest in the life of the tribes and their dependency on forests.

The tribes in rural landscape live in small hamlets near the vicinity of the forests or in small houses with thatched roofs. Santals, bedias, mahalis, mundas often live with other communities while lodhas, kharias, sabars prefer to stay aloof from people of other castes. The size of the family of the tribes constitutes either 4 or 5 that clearly points that it is not too small or large (Table: 6). They are endogamous people. Intercaste marriages are rare in their society. The totemic objects associated with the clans are considered to be sacred. They have a distinct cultures and festivals of their own.

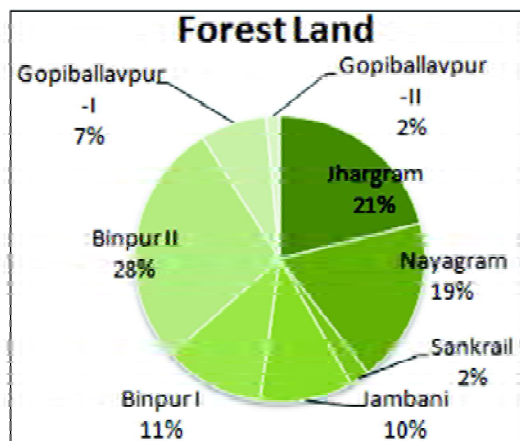


**Figure 12:** Large number of scheduled tribes act as beneficiaries in different Forest Protection Committees (source: DFO office'2017, Jhargram)

## Case Studies

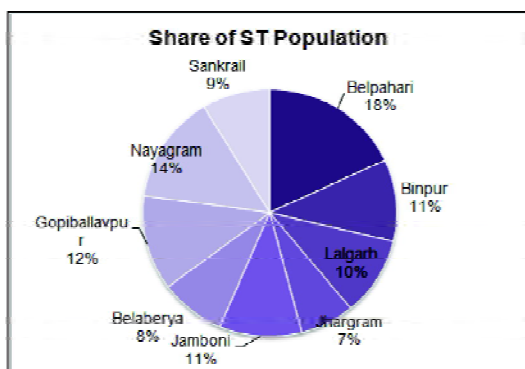
### *Case Study I: Lodha Tribe of Paschim Medinipur*

“Lodha” in junglemahal lives mainly in the close proximity to forests and prefer to stay far away from the mainstream population. From the very beginning, this tribe has been regarded as a criminal tribe by other communities. Actually, the term “Criminal Tribe” had been imposed by British Govt. as this community indulged in robbery and theft during that period. The Lodhas are believed to be the descendants of a powerful tribe called ‘Savaras’. Thats why, they are called Lodha- Savars in some instances. Some anthropologists suggest that the word ‘Lodha’ is a corrupt form of ‘Lubdhaka’, the trapper. Lodha clans are highly sensitive to their totems, which is part and parcel of austic civilization. The Lodhas are generally known to the common people as Lodha-Savara or Kheria-Savara (Bhowmick, 1963). In fact, they are two distinct endogamous tribes with different traditions and customs.



a

**Figure 13:** (a) Forest area is maximum in Binpur II (b) Binpur II (sadar Belpahari) share maximum ST population (source: PCA-2011)



b

Literacy rate is nearly 15 percent and women literacy rate are very insignificant. Economic plight and a sense of inferiority complex restrain them from sending their children to school. Lodhas collect various forest products and firewood from forests and hunt small wild animals since generations. Some of them have recently taken to agricultural practices which provide both food and fuel for them. They are still reluctant to pursue agriculture, which requires continuous hard labour to grow crops. They collect *sal* leaves from the forests, stitch them and sell in the local market. Some of them collect fuel wood to sell it in the local small shops.

Major problems faced by the Lodhas include dependency on the forest, stigma of criminality, poverty, ill health, malnutrition and livelihood insecurity. The survey of some typical lodha villages reflected that they are mostly day labourers in agricultural season. They earned little subsidiary income by collecting fire wood, kendu leaves, sal leaves and seeds from the forests and rearing country birds and pigs. They work for 100 -120 days in a year and livelihood mainly centred around collecting roots and tubers during lean period. At present, the lodhas do not live exclusively in the forest covered areas, but have spread out in other deforested

regions where they are found to be working as agricultural and non-agricultural labourers or cultivating their own farmland (Panda and Guha, 2013). Most of the families had very small landholding. Landless families are also common in every settlement. '*Nijo Griha Nijo Bhumi*' (NGNB) or 'My Home, My Land' project of Govt. seems to be helpful in this regard.

Distribution of Job cards and *patta (legal paper of land)*, electricity and latrine, house under Indira Awas Yojana are Govt. initiatives for their development. Presently, Lodhas have been notified as PVTGs (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups) in terms of backwardness in different development indicators. Earlier they were termed as PTGs (Primitive Tribal Groups). Isolations, poverty and low level of education have turned the life of Lodhas really vulnerable. Increasing awareness among the communities is the first and foremost need. Social security pensions and food rations through Public Distribution System (PDS) may be the way out for their survival. Mahasweta Devi, the renowned litterateur and social activist, had focused upon the misery of Lodhas of West Bengal and unfolded the woe and grief of lodhas emphatically through her writings<sup>5</sup>. The Government of West Bengal established the Lodha Development Cell at Midnapore in 1981 under the Project Officer, I.T.D.P, to motivate the lodhas to participate in the programs initiated by the State Government for all round development of the tribe<sup>3</sup>. Participation of the Lodha women in SHG movement nowadays proves their spirit of self-help and willingness to be organized for welfare of the families.

### **Case Study II: Santals**

The Santals represent more than half of the total ST population of the state of West Bengal (51.8 per cent). They belong to proto-austroloid group and used to live in the Chhotonagpur plateau terrain of Orissa, Jharkhand (then Bihar), western part of West Bengal and Santal Parganas along Raj mahal hills. The area of their settlement is known as '*Damin-i-koh*' (the hilly skirt). The Junglemahal districts are the home land of the santals. It is said that the word "Saontal" (santal) means the inhabitants of the region of '*Saont*' or '*Samantabhumi*'. Some sources state that Chhatna in Bankura district is that '*Saont*' or '*Samantabhumi*' land of old days. From there, they migrated in search of livelihood. By nature, they are very industrious and hardworking. Walter Hamilton opined that the santals were despised by the inhabitants of the plain land as low castes. The Zamindars gave them no leases of land, but they are mild, sober, industrious people and remarkable for sincerity and good faith. During the British period, they were against the zamindari system and colonial power. As a result, there were incidents of Santal rebellions in the Junglemahal area under the leadership of Sidhu, Kanhu and Birsas. In the civilized world, this event was recognized as '*Chuar Bidroho*'. The Santals took a united stand to protest against the continuous exploitation by the zamindars and imperialists.

In Bankura district, they are 82 percent among the all tribal population (Table: 2). In Purulia and Paschim Medinipur the concentration of santal communities is

the largest to total tribal population. The literacy rate is nearly 42 percent which is much higher as compared to other tribes. Some of them are engaged in services especially those living with the mainstream people and in urban areas. Most of them are landless and act as labourers. The tools of agricultural operations are mostly traditional. The poor folks collect dry leaves, firewood from the forest. Collection of *kendu* leaves and *salare* also important economic activities.

Santal group constituted twelve exogamous clan like Kisku, Murmu, Mandi Saren, Hansda, Hembram, Tudu, Baske, Pauria chore, Besra, Bedia. Ethnically the Santal, Ho, Munda belong to the same family of Kolarian race and linguistically Santals are grouped with the Munda family of language (Mundari). Santali language has its own scripts now which is known as '*OIChiki*' as prescribed by Pandit Raghunath Murmu. They celebrate the festivals on various occasions.

### **Case Study III: The Bhumij**

The Bhumij of Junglemahal belongs to the *Mundari* group and presents the second largest tribes in numbers. The *doab* regions between Kasai and Subarnarekha rivers are the original areas of settlement of Bhumij. Later they are pushed back towards Dhalbhum, Barabhum and Baghmundi area of Purulia. Now, nearly 20 percent Bhumij are living in Purulia district (Table: 2). The word 'bhumij' means "*autochthon*" related to the land. The Bhumij are actually the son of the soil of Junglemahal area. They speak in the Mundari language of the Austro-Asiatic language family. Bhumij have the surname 'Singh', 'Sardar' etc. On the eastern side of the Ayodhya range, which formed a barrier, the process of acculturation is evident. Now, the indigenous people of the eastern tract called themselves Bhumij or Sardar and speak Bengali dialects. The Bhumij mainly served as Zamindari militia and held posts like *paikan*, *ghatwali* and *chakeran* during British period.

Cultivation is the mainstay of their economy and is supplemented sometimes by other practices like wage earning, collection of minor non-timber forest produce, animal husbandry, leaf plate (*khali*) stitching, hunting, small business i.e. cycles repairing etc. During lean seasons some of them migrate to work as labourer in the areas where double cropping and multiple cropping practice continues for example Hooghly, Nadia and Purba Bardhaman districts. Most of the families possess some dry upper lands where they grow *sabai* grass. From the grass they make ropes to sell in the local market for cash. The Bhumij women besides performing their household tasks contribute substantially to their family income by participating in cultivation, forest collection, wage earning, *khali* (sal leaf plates) making etc. They also hunt and trap birds, animals etc. in the jungles making several groups. The landless usually work as wage labourers. Seasonal forest products are a subsidiary source of income for them. Some of them migrated to tea gardens of Assam and Jalpaiguri district. Those who are living in Junglemahal with other castes, easily mingle with the mainstream in terms of food habits and languages.

The houses are arranged in a linear pattern in plain areas and are randomly scattered on undulating terrain at the foothills. Their houses are very simple in

structure, made of mud walls with low roofs, thatched with wild sabai grass, paddy straw or with country made tiles (khappar). For house construction, locally available materials like bamboo and sal saplings have been used. The poor families build their houses using sal saplings, twigs and plaster on both sides with mud. The well-off families construct houses with brick walls. The walls and floors are cleanly polished with red, black or white clay by women.

The Bhumij considered their supreme deities the reverend Sun in the name of *Sing-Bonga* and *Dharam*. They worship *Jahuburu* in the sacred grove of the village at the *Sarhul* festival in the months of *baisakh* (April–May) and *phalgun* (February–March). Characteristics of Hinduism sometimes influence them to follow the Hindu religion. The Bhumij are really in a transition stage and are losing the ethnic character and uniqueness.

### Conclusion

The uniqueness of Junglemahal area with its red soil, vast forest tracts, aboriginal tribes, and ethnic culture unravel a separate eco-cultural space where the indigenous peoples found a comparatively secured habitat and entity for their growth and welfare. The land with rich natural vegetation interspersed with 'valuable' species like the *Sal* and *Piasal* is undeniably an area of commercial possibilities. The land is inhabited by many aboriginal communities like *Santhals*, *Kora*, *Sabar*, *Lodha*, *Sardar*, *Mahali*, *Bhumij* and others. They traditionally live in close proximity to forests and make it an integral part of their habitat, livelihoods and culture. Livelihood practices in this area follow a traditional pattern that is, of course, of subsistence nature. Most are underprivileged and undernourished. Much dependency on forests, absence of alternative supportive means to meet the basic needs is creating food scarcity. Livelihood options are gradually shrinking day by day. Some pro-tribal land reforms initiatives have been taken for landless tribes but situation has not changed except in some cases.

Considerable share of tribal population is facing a threat to livelihood pursuits in terms of food security. In most of the cases, the natural resource base like forest, pastures, wastelands, rivers etc. have declined due to over exploitation making their life quite hard to sustain. Animal population is also on the decline due to human interference. The children are forced to work in agricultural fields to supplement the income of the families and consequently drop-out from school at a very early age of their student life. Sufficient accessibility to educational institutions can help them to avail at least the minimum level of education. Ministry of Tribal Welfare has been trying to elevate thousands of tribal women and their families through LAMPS (Large area multipurpose societies Schemes) in West Bengal. Vocational training on conventional cottage industries like bamboo craft, *sal* leaf plate, *sabai* rope processing etc. can be imparted to the young group that may create a good employment opportunity. Dairy, pig farming and goat rearing can be a scope for them to increase income to substantial extent. Uses of various natural resource bases systematically and formulation of sustainable livelihood approach can help a lot to provide food security to the tribal population.

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### APPENDIX III

#### THE LAND AND LIFE OF THE PEOPLE OF JUNGLE MAHAL



**Photo1:** Making plates from sal leaves at Pipri

**Photo2:** Collection of mahua from the forest – dried *Mahua* is used for making deshi liquor, Baidyanathdihi



**Photo3:** Typical santal household's kitchen, Asti

**Photo 4:** House type of a Bhumij village, Chandri



**Photo 5:** Working at a brick kiln as wage labourer

**Photo 6:** Grazing of domestic animals in forest near Parihati, Gidhnifringe areas near purnapani village

*Picture courtesy: Author, captured in 2015-2016*

