



“Migration and Cultural Adaptation among Tribal Communities of Purulia District: A Socio-Historical Analysis”

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ABSTRACT

This study examines migration and cultural adaptation among tribal communities in the Purulia district of West Bengal from a socio-historical perspective. It explores how historical marginalization, environmental stress, and limited livelihood opportunities have shaped patterns of seasonal and permanent migration among groups such as the Santhal, Munda, and Bhumij. The paper analyzes the economic, social, and ecological drivers of migration and highlights its impact on cultural identity, social structure, and traditional practices. It further investigates how tribal migrants adapt to new socio-cultural environments through changes in language, occupation, and lifestyle. While migration provides economic benefits and exposure, it also leads to cultural erosion and social challenges. The study emphasizes the need for inclusive development policies to balance economic progress with cultural preservation.

Keywords: Migration, Cultural Adaptation, Tribal Communities, Purulia District, Socio-Historical Analysis, Livelihood, Identity, Seasonal Migration.

1. INTRODUCTION

Migration, as a socio-economic and cultural phenomenon, has long been an integral part of human history. It represents not only the physical movement of people from one place to another but also a complex process of transformation that affects identities, livelihoods, and social relations. In the Indian context, migration assumes a distinctive character when examined in relation to tribal communities, whose lives have historically been shaped by close interaction with nature, traditional subsistence practices, and strong community bonds. The Purulia district of West Bengal provides a compelling setting to study this phenomenon, as it reflects a unique combination of ecological vulnerability, historical marginalization, and socio-economic deprivation that has driven significant patterns of migration among its tribal population.

Purulia, located in the western part of West Bengal and forming a transitional zone between the Chotanagpur Plateau and the Bengal plains, is predominantly inhabited by tribal communities such as the Santhal, Munda, Bhumij, and Oraon. These communities have traditionally depended on agriculture, forest resources, and manual labor for their livelihoods. However, the region's harsh climatic conditions, characterized by irregular rainfall, frequent droughts, and low soil fertility, have made agriculture increasingly unsustainable. Over time, these environmental constraints, combined with structural socio-economic challenges, have compelled a large section of the tribal population to migrate in search of alternative means of survival.



From a historical perspective, the roots of migration in Purulia can be traced back to the colonial period, when British land revenue policies disrupted traditional systems of land ownership and resource management. The introduction of the zamindari system led to the alienation of tribal lands and the erosion of customary rights over forests and natural resources. This not only undermined the economic base of tribal communities but also weakened their social and cultural autonomy. As a result, many tribal households were pushed into cycles of indebtedness and dependency, laying the foundation for migration as a coping strategy. Even after independence, despite various land reform initiatives and development programs, the region has continued to lag behind in terms of industrialization, infrastructure development, and employment generation, thereby perpetuating the conditions that necessitate migration.

In contemporary times, migration among tribal communities in Purulia manifests in multiple forms, including seasonal, circular, and permanent migration. Seasonal migration is particularly prevalent, with individuals and families moving to nearby states such as Jharkhand, Odisha, and Bihar, or to urban centers like Kolkata, Delhi, and Mumbai during agricultural lean periods. They typically engage in low-skilled and labor-intensive occupations such as construction work, brick kiln labor, agricultural labor, and domestic services. Circular migration, characterized by repeated movement between the place of origin and destination, is also common, reflecting the precarious nature of employment and the continued attachment of migrants to their native villages. In some cases, migration becomes permanent, leading to long-term settlement in urban or semi-urban areas.

While economic necessity remains the primary driver of migration, it is important to recognize that migration is not merely a response to poverty or environmental stress. It is also shaped by social factors such as lack of access to education, healthcare, and basic infrastructure, as well as by broader processes of globalization and market integration. The expansion of labor markets and the demand for cheap, flexible labor in urban and industrial sectors have created new opportunities for tribal migrants, albeit often under conditions of exploitation and insecurity. At the same time, social networks and kinship ties play a crucial role in facilitating migration, as migrants rely on established contacts and community members for information, support, and employment opportunities in destination areas.

One of the most significant aspects of migration is its impact on cultural adaptation. For tribal communities, culture is deeply embedded in their everyday practices, including language, rituals, festivals, social norms, and relationships with nature. Migration disrupts these cultural patterns by placing individuals in unfamiliar socio-cultural environments where they are required to interact with people from different linguistic, religious, and social backgrounds. This interaction often leads to processes of adaptation, negotiation, and transformation, as migrants seek to balance the demands of their new environment with their traditional cultural identities.

Cultural adaptation among tribal migrants in Purulia can be observed in various domains. Linguistically, migrants often acquire new languages or dialects to communicate effectively in their host regions, leading to bilingualism or even language shift among younger generations. Occupationally, they transition from traditional livelihoods such as farming and forest-based



activities to wage labor and service-oriented jobs, which require different skills and work cultures. Socially, migrants may adopt new norms and practices related to dress, food, and behavior, reflecting the influence of urban lifestyles and consumer culture. At the same time, they often strive to maintain their cultural heritage by celebrating traditional festivals, practicing customary rituals, and forming community associations in destination areas.

However, the process of cultural adaptation is neither uniform nor unidirectional. It involves both continuity and change, resilience and vulnerability. On the one hand, migration can lead to the enrichment of cultural experiences and the development of new forms of identity that are more flexible and adaptive. On the other hand, it can result in the erosion of traditional knowledge, weakening of community bonds, and a sense of cultural dislocation. The pressures of assimilation, discrimination, and marginalization in host societies further complicate this process, as tribal migrants often occupy the lowest rungs of the socio-economic hierarchy and face barriers to social integration.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF PURULIA DISTRICT

The historical evolution of Purulia district is deeply intertwined with the broader socio-political and cultural transformations of eastern India. Situated on the western fringe of West Bengal and forming part of the Chotanagpur Plateau region, Purulia has long been a zone of cultural convergence and tribal habitation. The district is characterized by its rugged terrain, undulating landscape, and semi-arid climate, all of which have played a significant role in shaping its historical trajectory and patterns of human settlement. In ancient and early medieval periods, the region that now constitutes Purulia was part of various indigenous tribal chiefdoms and small kingdoms. It was historically associated with the larger cultural region of Manbhum, which had a distinct identity marked by the presence of tribal communities such as the Santhal, Munda, Bhumij, and Oraon. These communities maintained a subsistence-based economy centered on agriculture, forest produce, and pastoral activities. Their social organization was largely egalitarian, and their cultural life was deeply rooted in nature worship, customary traditions, and community-based practices. The relative isolation of the region allowed these communities to preserve their cultural autonomy for centuries.

During the medieval period, the area came under the influence of regional powers such as the Mughals and later the Nawabs of Bengal. However, due to its difficult terrain and limited economic resources, Purulia remained largely on the periphery of administrative control. This peripheral status meant that traditional tribal systems of land ownership and governance continued with minimal interference. The situation began to change significantly with the advent of British colonial rule in the late 18th century.

The colonial period marked a turning point in the history of Purulia. The British East India Company introduced new land revenue systems, most notably the Permanent Settlement of 1793, which established the zamindari system. Under this system, large tracts of land were assigned to zamindars (landlords), who were responsible for collecting revenue from the peasants. This fundamentally altered the traditional landholding patterns of tribal communities, who had previously enjoyed communal rights over land and forests. The imposition of private property rights and the commercialization of agriculture led to widespread land alienation

among tribal populations, pushing many into tenancy or landlessness. Furthermore, colonial forest policies restricted access to forest resources, which had been a vital source of livelihood for tribal communities. The introduction of laws regulating forest use curtailed traditional practices such as shifting cultivation, hunting, and gathering. These changes not only disrupted the economic base of tribal societies but also undermined their cultural and spiritual relationship with nature. As a result, many tribal groups experienced increasing economic hardship, social dislocation, and marginalization.

The colonial period also witnessed several tribal uprisings and resistance movements in and around the Purulia region. These movements were often directed against exploitative landlords, moneylenders, and colonial authorities. Although not always centered specifically in Purulia, rebellions such as the Santhal uprising of 1855–56 reflected the broader discontent among tribal communities in the region. These struggles highlighted the resilience and agency of tribal populations in defending their rights and way of life, even in the face of overwhelming odds. After India gained independence in 1947, Purulia continued to undergo administrative and political changes. Initially, it was part of the Manbhum district of Bihar. However, linguistic and cultural movements advocating for the integration of Bengali-speaking areas into West Bengal led to the reorganization of state boundaries. As a result, in 1956, Purulia was officially incorporated into West Bengal following the States Reorganization Act. This transition marked a new phase in the district's history, bringing it under a different administrative framework.

3. PATTERNS AND TYPES OF MIGRATION

Migration in Purulia district reflects a complex interplay of economic necessity, environmental vulnerability, and socio-cultural factors. It does not occur in a single uniform form but rather manifests through different patterns, each shaped by specific conditions and motivations. Broadly, migration among tribal communities in Purulia can be categorized into seasonal migration, permanent migration, and distress migration, each carrying distinct characteristics and implications.

- **Seasonal Migration:** Seasonal migration is the most common form of mobility observed among tribal households in Purulia. It is closely linked to the agricultural cycle, particularly the lean periods when local employment opportunities become scarce. Due to irregular rainfall, low soil fertility, and limited irrigation facilities, agriculture in the region is largely dependent on monsoons and remains insufficient to sustain families throughout the year. As a result, many tribal workers migrate temporarily to nearby states such as Jharkhand, Odisha, and Bihar, as well as to distant metropolitan cities like Delhi and Mumbai.
- **Permanent Migration:** Permanent migration, although less frequent than seasonal migration, is becoming increasingly significant in the context of changing economic aspirations and opportunities. In this pattern, individuals or entire families relocate permanently from their native villages to urban or semi-urban areas in search of stable employment and better living conditions. Over time, migrants establish long-term residence in these areas, often severing or significantly reducing their ties with their place of origin.
- **Distress Migration:** Distress migration represents one of the most critical and concerning forms of migration in Purulia. Unlike seasonal or permanent migration, which may involve

elements of choice or opportunity, distress migration is primarily a survival strategy adopted under conditions of extreme hardship. It is driven by acute poverty, lack of employment opportunities, indebtedness, and environmental challenges such as droughts and crop failures.

4. CAUSES OF MIGRATION

Migration in Purulia district is not the result of a single factor but emerges from a combination of economic hardship, environmental stress, and social constraints. These causes are deeply interlinked, reinforcing one another and creating conditions in which migration becomes not merely an option but often a necessity for survival among tribal communities.

- **Economic Factors:** Economic insecurity remains the most immediate and visible driver of migration in Purulia. One of the primary issues is the lack of adequate employment opportunities within the region. The district has limited industrial development, and non-farm employment options are scarce, particularly in rural areas where most tribal populations reside. As a result, a large segment of the workforce remains either unemployed or underemployed, compelling them to seek work outside. Low agricultural productivity further aggravates this situation. Agriculture in Purulia is largely rain-fed and subsistence-oriented, with minimal use of modern technology or irrigation facilities. Poor soil quality and unpredictable rainfall patterns reduce crop yields, making farming an unreliable source of income. Consequently, households are unable to sustain themselves throughout the year, especially during lean seasons.
- **Environmental Factors:** Environmental conditions in Purulia play a significant role in shaping migration patterns. The region is prone to frequent droughts due to erratic and insufficient rainfall. These droughts not only damage crops but also reduce water availability for drinking and irrigation, severely affecting rural livelihoods. Repeated crop failures force farmers and laborers to look for alternative sources of income outside their villages. Soil infertility is another major challenge. Much of the land in Purulia is lateritic, which is low in nutrients and less suitable for intensive agriculture. This limits the variety and productivity of crops that can be cultivated, thereby restricting income potential from farming activities.
- **Social Factors:** Social factors also play a crucial role in influencing migration decisions. Limited access to education and healthcare facilities in rural Purulia restricts opportunities for human development. Poor educational infrastructure leads to low literacy and skill levels, which in turn limits employment options within the region. Migration becomes a pathway not only for earning income but also for accessing better services and opportunities in urban areas.

5. CULTURAL ADAPTATION AMONG TRIBAL MIGRANTS

Migration exposes tribal communities to new cultural environments where they must negotiate unfamiliar languages, occupations, and social norms. This interaction initiates a gradual process of cultural adaptation, in which migrants adjust to their surroundings while attempting to retain elements of their traditional identity. In Purulia's context, this adaptation is neither

complete assimilation nor total preservation; rather, it reflects a dynamic balance shaped by necessity, opportunity, and social pressures.

- ❖ **Linguistic Adaptation:** Language is one of the first areas where adaptation becomes visible. Tribal migrants from Purulia, who primarily speak languages such as Santhali, Mundari, or Kurmali, often encounter linguistic barriers in destination regions. To overcome these challenges, they learn regional languages like Hindi, Bengali, or Odia, depending on their place of migration. This process enables them to communicate with employers, co-workers, and local communities, which is essential for securing and retaining employment. Over time, this leads to bilingualism, especially among younger migrants who are more exposed to formal and informal interactions in the host language. In some cases, there is even a gradual language shift, where the younger generation becomes more fluent in the dominant language and less proficient in their native tongue. While this enhances social mobility, it also raises concerns about the erosion of indigenous languages and cultural expressions.
- ❖ **Occupational Adaptation:** Migration significantly alters the occupational structure of tribal communities. Traditionally, these communities depended on agriculture, forest-based activities, hunting, and gathering. However, in urban and industrial settings, such occupations are no longer viable. As a result, migrants adapt by engaging in wage labor, construction work, factory jobs, brick kiln labor, and domestic services. This shift requires not only physical adjustment but also the acquisition of new skills and work discipline. Migrants must adapt to fixed working hours, hierarchical work environments, and market-driven labor systems, which differ greatly from their traditional modes of livelihood. Although these occupations often provide better income opportunities, they are usually informal and insecure, offering little protection or long-term stability.
- ❖ **Social Integration:** Social integration is a complex aspect of cultural adaptation. Tribal migrants frequently encounter discrimination, social exclusion, and cultural differences in host regions. Their distinct language, appearance, and customs can sometimes lead to marginalization. However, over time, migrants develop strategies to cope with these challenges. One important mechanism is the formation of community networks. Migrants often live and work alongside people from their own or similar backgrounds, creating informal support systems that provide emotional, social, and economic assistance. These networks help them navigate urban life, find employment, and maintain a sense of belonging. Gradually, interaction with the broader society increases, leading to partial integration while still preserving community identity.
- ❖ **Changes in Lifestyle and Consumption Patterns:** Migration also brings noticeable changes in lifestyle and consumption patterns. Exposure to urban environments influences food habits, clothing styles, housing conditions, and daily routines. For instance, migrants may shift from traditional diets based on locally available grains and forest produce to more market-oriented food consumption. Similarly, clothing and personal habits often reflect urban trends and modern influences. These changes indicate a blending of traditional and contemporary lifestyles. While some traditional practices and customs are retained, others

are modified or abandoned to fit the new context. This transformation reflects both adaptation and aspiration, as migrants seek to improve their standard of living while negotiating their cultural identity.

6. IMPACT OF MIGRATION ON TRIBAL CULTURE

Migration has a profound and multifaceted impact on the cultural fabric of tribal communities, shaping both continuity and change in their traditional way of life. On one hand, migration creates opportunities for exposure to new ideas, technologies, and social practices, which can contribute to improved living standards and broadened worldviews. Tribal migrants often adopt new languages, occupations, and lifestyles, leading to greater adaptability and integration into wider socio-economic systems. However, this process also brings significant challenges to the preservation of indigenous culture. Traditional practices such as folk rituals, community festivals, and customary forms of social organization tend to weaken as migrants spend extended periods away from their native villages. The transmission of cultural knowledge from one generation to the next becomes disrupted, particularly among younger members who grow up in urban or semi-urban environments and may feel less connected to their ancestral heritage. Furthermore, the influence of dominant cultures often leads to gradual assimilation, resulting in the erosion of tribal languages, art forms, and belief systems. Migration can also alter community bonds, as collective living patterns give way to more individualistic lifestyles. At the same time, many migrants attempt to retain their cultural identity by celebrating traditional festivals and maintaining community networks in destination areas, reflecting a resilient effort to balance adaptation with cultural preservation. Thus, migration acts as both a catalyst for socio-economic mobility and a source of cultural transformation, creating a complex interplay between loss and renewal within tribal societies.

7. GENDER DIMENSIONS OF MIGRATION

Migration among tribal communities in Purulia carries distinct gendered dimensions, shaping the experiences of men and women in unequal yet evolving ways. Traditionally, migration has been male-dominated, with men moving to urban or industrial areas in search of employment while women remained in villages, managing households, agriculture, and caregiving responsibilities. This often resulted in an increased workload and greater responsibility for women, but with limited decision-making power. However, in recent years, there has been a noticeable rise in female migration, particularly in informal sectors such as domestic work, brick kilns, and small-scale industries. This shift has contributed to a degree of economic empowerment, as women gain access to income, mobility, and exposure beyond their traditional roles. At the same time, it also exposes them to significant vulnerabilities, including unsafe working conditions, exploitation by employers or intermediaries, wage discrimination, and lack of legal protection. Migration can also disrupt family structures, affecting childcare, education, and social stability, especially when both parents migrate. In some cases, it leads to changing gender roles and greater participation of women in decision-making processes, while in others it reinforces inequalities due to insecure employment and social marginalization. Thus, the gender dimension of migration reflects a complex interplay of empowerment and

risk, highlighting the need for gender-sensitive policies that ensure safety, dignity, and equal opportunities for tribal women migrants.

8. SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES

Migration among tribal communities in Purulia produces significant socio-economic consequences that are both beneficial and challenging in nature. One of the most important positive outcomes is the inflow of remittances, which helps rural households meet basic needs such as food, education, healthcare, and housing. This additional income can reduce immediate poverty, improve living standards, and provide a degree of financial stability in otherwise resource-poor settings. Migration also exposes individuals to new skills, work practices, and social experiences, which can enhance their adaptability and, in some cases, create opportunities for upward mobility. However, these gains are often accompanied by considerable drawbacks. The absence of working-age members, especially men, can disrupt traditional family structures and place additional burdens on women, the elderly, and children. Agricultural activities may suffer due to labor shortages, leading to further decline in local productivity. Moreover, the informal and insecure nature of most migrant employment means that income is often irregular and uncertain, limiting long-term economic security. Socially, migration can weaken community cohesion and reduce participation in collective cultural and social activities. Children in migrant families may face interruptions in education, either due to frequent relocation or increased responsibilities at home. Additionally, migrants often work under exploitative conditions with limited access to social protection, which can negate some of the economic benefits they generate. Thus, while migration serves as a crucial livelihood strategy, its socio-economic consequences reflect a complex balance between improved income opportunities and emerging vulnerabilities within tribal communities.

9. CONCLUSION

Migration among tribal communities in Purulia emerges as a deeply rooted and multifaceted phenomenon shaped by historical marginalization, economic deprivation, environmental stress, and social inequalities. It is not merely a response to immediate livelihood challenges but a long-standing adaptive strategy that reflects both compulsion and aspiration. The study highlights that while migration provides essential economic support through employment and remittances, it simultaneously brings significant social and cultural transformations. Tribal migrants are compelled to navigate new environments, leading to processes of cultural adaptation that involve changes in language, occupation, lifestyle, and social relations. Although these changes demonstrate resilience and adaptability, they also pose risks to the preservation of traditional identities, practices, and community cohesion. Furthermore, the unequal impact of migration across gender and social groups reveals underlying vulnerabilities, particularly in terms of exploitation, insecurity, and disruption of family structures. The persistence of distress-driven migration underscores the inadequacy of local development efforts and the need for more inclusive and effective policy interventions.



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