

Sabar People in Jhargram of West Bengal: Socio-Cultural and Digital Aspects of Tribal Livelihood

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Abstract: The Sabar community is one of the most marginalized and oppressed tribal groups in West Bengal. Historically stigmatized as a “Criminal Tribe” during British colonial rule, the Sabars continue to face social exclusion, economic deprivation, and cultural marginalization in contemporary society. Geographically, they are largely isolated, residing in difficult terrains close to forested areas, particularly in districts such as Jhargram. This physical isolation has reinforced their backward socio-economic condition and limited their access to education, healthcare, and other developmental opportunities. However, the modern digital boom has been leaving its mark on these people as well, through mediums such as social media.

The Sabars are recognized as one of the poorest communities among the Scheduled Tribes. Within the community, issues such as malnutrition, high maternal mortality, low literacy rates, and a growing disconnect from formal education are distressingly common and often normalized as part of everyday life. Despite residing across several Indian states, including West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Madhya Pradesh, the Sabars remain far removed from the benefits of modern development.

The Sabar people maintain a close and dependent relationship with nature, especially the forest, which plays a vital role in their livelihood, cultural practices, and daily survival. At the same time, they are presently influenced by their access to the digital medias in different ways, that do not always correspond to their traditional lifestyle. This study aims to provide a preliminary understanding of the socio-cultural and socio-economic status of the Sabar community in Jhargram district, including their access to internet-based activities and the extent of digital literacy, examine the significance of forest resources in their way of life, and identify the key challenges that hinder their overall progress and integration into mainstream society.

Keywords: Sabar Tribe, Economic status, social status

1. INTRODUCTION:

Education and environmental sustainability are widely recognized as essential cornerstones of national development. Education plays a fundamental role in human resource development and in sustaining livelihoods, particularly for marginalized communities. However, this vision of inclusive development cannot be fully realized as long as certain social groups remain neglected and excluded. Equitable and affordable access to education, sensitive to social and cultural contexts, must be ensured for all, especially for disadvantaged socio-economic groups. The Indian Constitution recognizes education as a fundamental right, yet in practice, many tribal communities continue to remain outside the formal education system.

Among such marginalized groups are the Sabar community, identified as one of the Primitive Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) of India. The Sabars are Adivasis belonging to the Munda ethnic group and primarily reside in Odisha and West Bengal. In West Bengal, they are mainly concentrated in the forested regions of Paschim Medinipur, Bankura, Purulia and Jhargram districts. During the colonial period, the Sabars were stigmatized as a “Criminal Tribe” under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, a label that has had long-lasting social and psychological consequences.

Despite constitutional safeguards, the Sabar community continues to face severe barriers to education, including economic hardship, geographic isolation, linguistic challenges, and a lack of culturally relevant educational practices. These factors have resulted in weak engagement with formal schooling, high dropout rates, and a growing disconnect



between education and the lived realities of the community. Education is often perceived as an elitist and alien concept, offering limited immediate benefits for livelihood security. The absence of a direct linkage between education and sustainable employment opportunities has further deepened the socio-economic marginalization of the Sabar people in West Bengal.

For centuries, indigenous communities and forests have evolved in a symbiotic relationship. For forest-dependent tribes such as the Sabars, forests provide food, fuel, fodder, medicine, and income through timber and non-timber forest products (NTFPs). Products such as medicinal and aromatic plants, leaves, flowers, seeds, gums, resins, bamboo, honey, and wild fruits play a crucial role in reducing poverty and sustaining livelihoods among forest-dependent populations. Numerous studies have highlighted the importance of NTFPs in meeting the economic, social, and religious needs of tribal communities in rural India.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine the educational challenges, livelihood patterns, and forest dependency of the Sabar community in Jhargram district. By situating education within the broader framework of environmental sustainability and livelihood security, the paper aims to highlight the structural constraints faced by the Sabars and explore pathways toward inclusive and sustainable development.

2. Objectives of the Study

The study has been undertaken with the following objectives:

1. To study the socio-cultural status including the aspect of digital awareness of the Sabar community in the Jhargram district.
2. To understand the socio-economic condition of Sabar people in the study area.

Research Questions

In order to achieve the above-mentioned objectives, the following research questions have been formulated:

- **Q1:** What is the socio-cultural status of the Sabar people in the study area?
- **Q2:** What is the socio-economic condition of Sabar people in the study area?
- **Q3:** How are the Sabar people adapting to the current digital trends and using internet for their livelihood?

3. Methodology of the study:

- Descriptive survey method will be adopted for conducting this study.

Study Area:

The present study was conducted in Jhargram district of West Bengal, an area characterized by forested terrain and a significant presence of tribal communities. Four villages were purposively selected from two Gram Panchayats of the district for an in-depth understanding of the Sabar community. A total of 40 households were surveyed, with 10 families selected from each village. The total population covered under the study was 172 individuals, comprising 92 males and 80 females.

Educational status of the Sabar community.

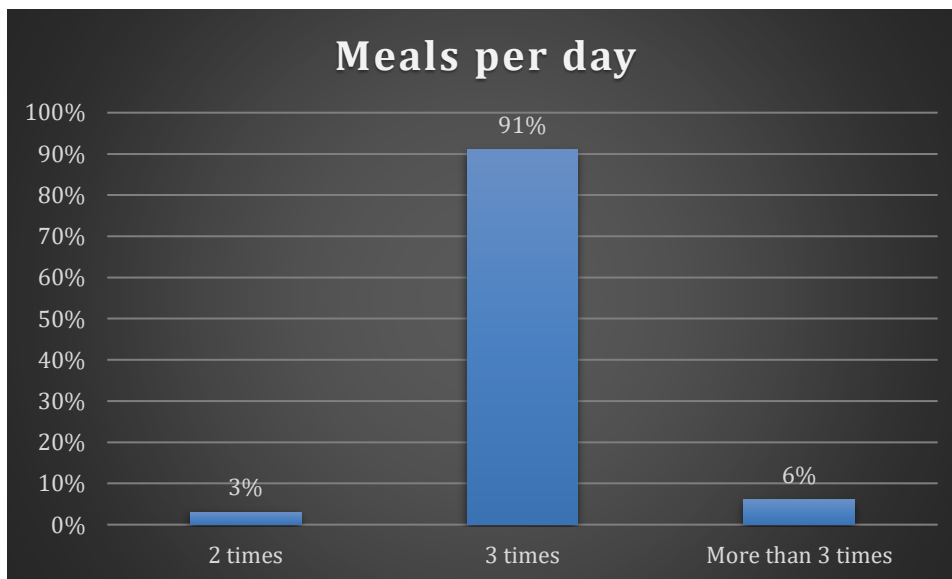
The findings reveal that the educational status of the Sabar community in the study area is extremely poor, with a very high percentage of illiteracy. School dropout rates are significant, although it is observed that girls show comparatively more interest in education than boys. Education considered a key driver of social mobility and human development, remains largely inaccessible to the Sabars, as reflected in their low literacy levels and limited engagement with formal schooling.

4. Food Consumption, Housing Conditions, and Economic Life of the Sabar Community in Jhargram District.

The present study provides insight into the living conditions and economic life of the Sabar community in Jhargram district, focusing on their food consumption patterns, housing conditions, income levels, and sources of livelihood. These aspects together reflect the overall quality of life and socio-economic status of the community. Housing conditions reflect their low socio-economic status, as most families live in kutchra or semi-pucca houses. Roofs are generally made of straw, mud tiles, tin, or asbestos, while walls are constructed with mud or bricks joined with mud rather than cement.

Housing conditions of the Sabar people further reveal their economic vulnerability. Most households live in kutchra or semi-pucca houses, with very few residing in fully pucca structures. The materials used for house construction are largely locally available and inexpensive. Roofs are made of tin sheets, mud tiles, asbestos, straw, or occasionally cement, depending on affordability and access to government housing schemes. Walls are commonly constructed of mud or bricks joined with mud, while a smaller number of houses have brick walls with cement. Cooking practices also reflect traditional and resource-dependent lifestyles, as most households use firewood or dry leaves mixed with wood as fuel, only a limited number of families use kerosene for cooking and earthen pots are commonly used for cooking and storing water. These housing and cooking conditions highlight the absence of modern amenities and pose health risks, particularly for women and children due to indoor air pollution.

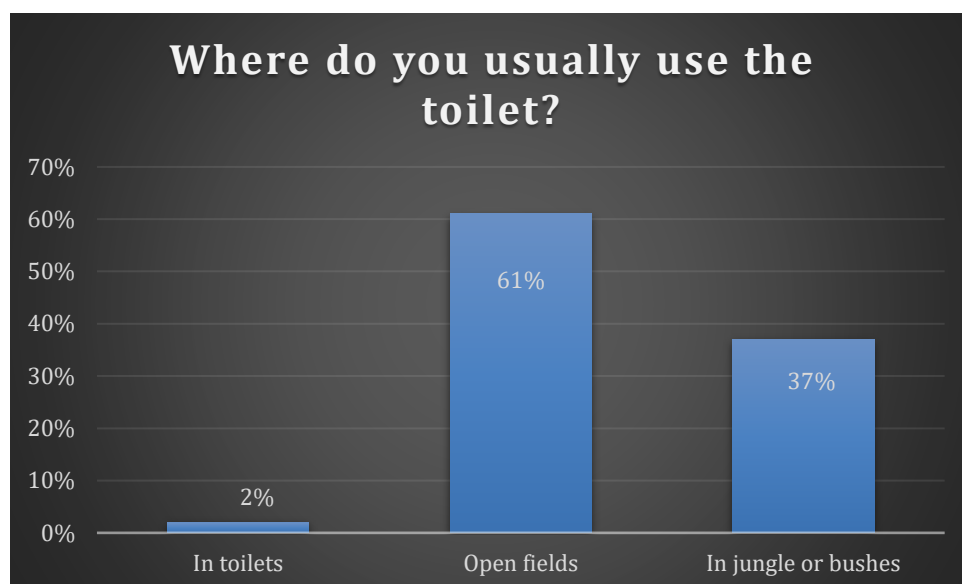
In terms of food intake, the majority of Sabar people consume meals three times a day, while a smaller section consumes meals twice or more than three times daily. With regard to food consumption, the Sabar population appears to have a relatively regular meal pattern. The study reveals that 91 percent of Sabar people in Jhargram district consume meals three times a day. A small section of the population, accounting for 3 percent, consumes meals only twice a day, indicating occasional food insecurity among the poorest households. Another 6 percent of respondents reported consuming more than three meals per day, which may be attributed to households with relatively better economic conditions or greater access to forest-based food resources. Although the frequency of meals suggests a basic level of food availability, it does not necessarily reflect nutritional adequacy, as the quality and diversity of food remain limited and heavily dependent on seasonal forest produce.



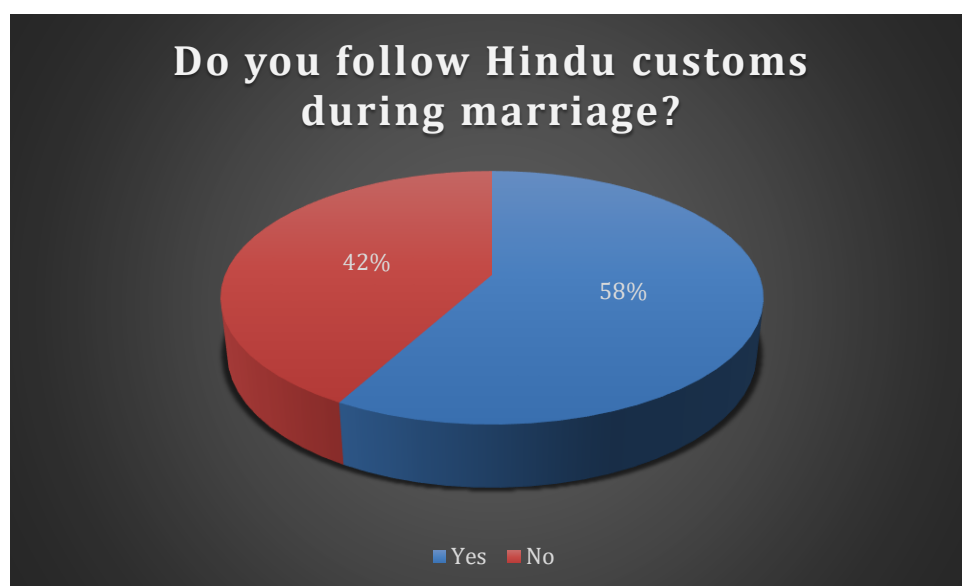
Healthcare practices indicate a gradual shift toward allopathic medicine, which is used by the majority of the population. However, traditional beliefs persist, and some community members still rely on local healers such as Gunin or Ojha.

Sanitation facilities are severely lacking, as toilets are largely absent. Approximately 2 % of them use toilets, 61 % of the population practices open defecation in fields, while the remaining 37 % use nearby forests or bushes.

This highlights the absence of basic sanitation infrastructure and raises serious concerns regarding health, hygiene, and dignity.



The study also highlights the cultural practices of the Sabar community. With regard to marriage customs, 58 % of respondents reported following Hindu rituals, while 42 % stated that they do not strictly adhere to Hindu customs. This reflects a degree of cultural assimilation alongside the retention of distinct indigenous practices.

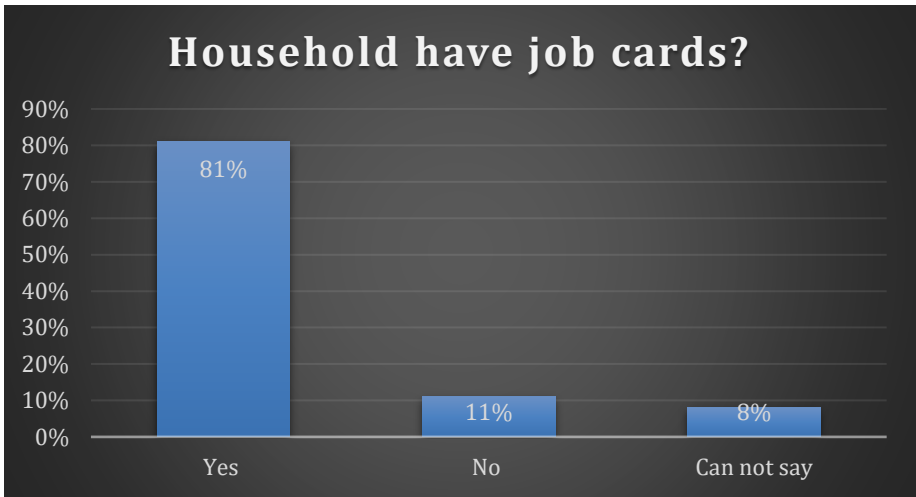


Livelihoods are diverse and heavily dependent on forest and natural resources. Major sources of income include timber and non-timber forest product collection, Babui rope making, Sal leaf plate making, hunting and fishing, agriculture, non-agricultural daily wage labor, and the collection of forest foods such as red ant eggs (Korkut), Sal fruits, edible roots and plants, honey, and Mahua flowers for liquor preparation (though this activity is legally restricted). Additionally, the community produces household items such as mats for their own use.

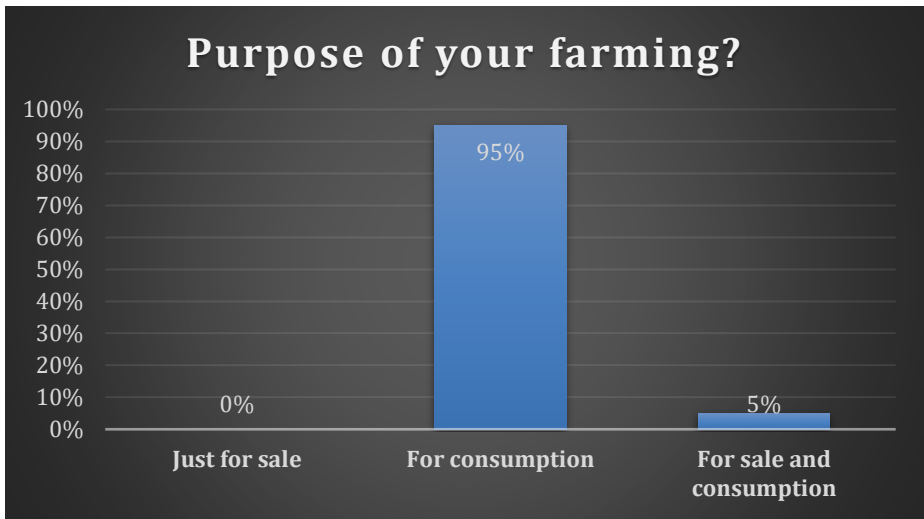
Despite their close relationship with nature, the Sabar people face multiple challenges in daily life, including chronic financial insecurity, communication barriers, low literacy levels, remote forest-based habitation, and limited experience in advanced agricultural practices. However, various government welfare schemes play a significant role

in supporting their livelihoods and improving access to basic necessities. While these interventions have provided some relief, substantial gaps remain in education, sanitation, livelihood security, and overall socio-economic development.

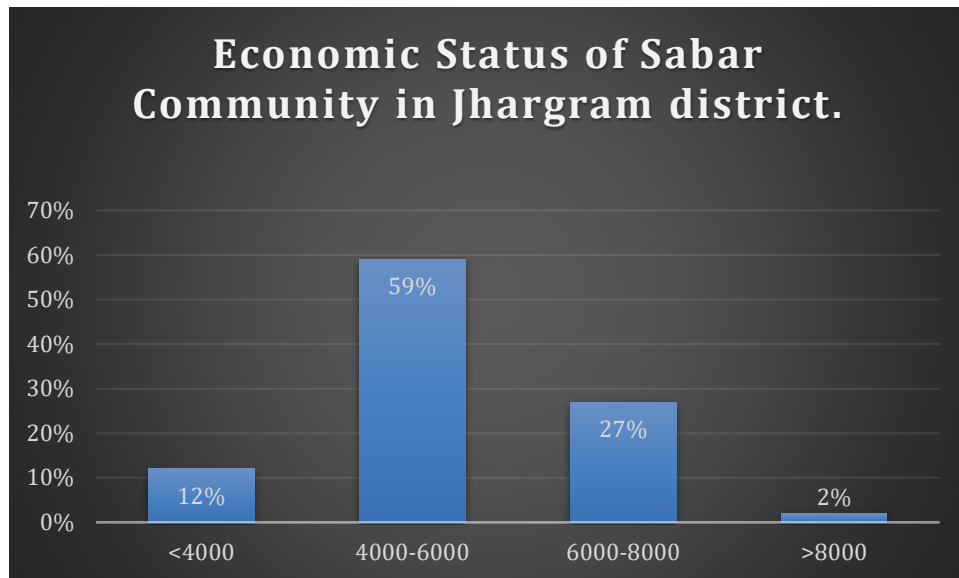
In terms of employment security, a large proportion of households (81 %) possess job cards under government employment schemes, indicating some level of institutional support. However, 11 % of households do not have job cards, and 8 % are uncertain about their status, suggesting gaps in awareness and access to welfare programs.



Agriculture among the Sabar households is largely subsistence-oriented. Cultivation is mainly carried out for household consumption, though a small portion of produce is occasionally sold. An overwhelming 95 % of respondents engage in farming solely for household consumption, while only 5 % practice farming for both consumption and sale. None of the respondents reported farming exclusively for market sale, underscoring their limited integration into the commercial agricultural economy.



The economic status of the Sabar community in Jhargram district remains fragile and largely subsistence-based. Monthly income levels show that 59 % of households earn between ₹4,000 and ₹6,000, while 27 % earn between ₹6,000 and ₹8,000 per month. About 12% of households earn less than ₹4,000, indicating extreme poverty and economic insecurity. Only 2 % of the population earns more than ₹8,000 per month, reflecting a very narrow segment with relatively stable income sources. These income patterns suggest that most Sabar households struggle to meet basic needs and remain vulnerable to seasonal unemployment and economic shocks.



The economic life of the Sabar community is diverse but heavily dependent on natural resources and manual labor. Some families engage in owner cultivation on patta land, though landholdings are generally small and yield is low. Those without land primarily work as agricultural day laborers or non-agricultural laborers, including construction work. Traditional subsistence activities such as hunting, gathering, and fishing continue to play an important role in their livelihood. The community hunts small wild animals and birds, gathers edible plants, fruits, timber, honey, red ant eggs (*Korkut*), and medicinal herbs, and practices fishing in rivers, ponds, and streams using indigenous techniques. These activities not only supplement household income but also ensure food security, underscoring the community's close dependence on the forest and natural environment.

Overall, the findings indicate that the Sabar community in Jhargram district continues to experience severe educational deprivation, inadequate sanitation, and limited livelihood opportunities, reinforcing their socio-economic marginalization and underscoring the need for targeted, culturally sensitive development interventions, manages to sustain basic survival through diverse livelihood strategies, their living conditions and economic status remain precarious, necessitating targeted development interventions and livelihood support.

5. The Presence of the Internet and Digital services in the life of the Sabar people

Even though the surveys show that the Sabar people demonstrate a somewhat lack of inclination towards formal education due to the lack of awareness about the importance of education, and various socio-economic factors contributing to the meagre opportunities for education that are faced by most of the community, the present digital boom and a pervading presence of internet and its facilities can be noticed among them as well. Many peoples in the community below the age of 30 own or have access to android smart phones, as well as a rudimentary knowledge of using some basic internet functions for the purpose of entertainment and livelihood. They are usually bought from saving up their income for months or by saving up the monetary allowance or stipend provided by the government. However, it should be noted that none among them are equipped with the knowledge of using computers in the form of desktops or laptops due to not having the economic means of owning one. The lack of formal education ensures that very few among them can learn the use of computers from classes in schools, or even from government-funded computer training centres. Therefore, computer literacy among the youth is low, but not completely non-existent, as those who study in schools geographically distant from the community or get aid from various NGOs acquire some knowledge of computer.

The android mobile devices with internet access are often used by the Sabar people in Jhargram for watching videos in entertainment and social networking sites like YouTube and Facebook. Apart from watching videos (mostly short-form videos rather than lengthy ones), or listening to music, these applications are also used by the people for

the purpose of their livelihood. Different organisations use handicraft items and artworks by the Sabar people to promote the work of the community and to connect with remote buyers, thereby, helping them financially as well. Some artisans have their individual Facebook or WhatsApp channels to connect with buyers and other interested people. Some members of the community (mostly from the younger demographic) have self-trained in the process of content making through video-editing and reels-making, with which they create content related to lifestyle and entertainment. Older members of the community are also occasionally included in the content as subjects or participants.

Apart from the people of the community and people directly associated with the community, visitors from outside such as tourists and influencers also become instrumental in promoting the culture and the handcrafted materials of the community. For example, artisans in the village named Khoabgaon (Lalbazar) decorate their village with new artworks every year on the occasion of Kalipuja (the annual worship of the Hindu goddess Kali in the season of autumn) with indigenous, traditional motifs and colours. Those artworks are posted online by visitors to the village. Over the years, such posts have gained online traction and have become a kind of tourist-attraction, where people travel to the village to look at the renewed artworks every year. The tourist visits bring a certain extent of economic flow to the village. The members of the community connected to the tradition of dance also promote their artistry by posting performances online.

Major Findings

- The Sabar people of Jhargram district largely exhibit a negative attitude toward formal education, which significantly affects school participation and continuation.
- The overall educational standard of the Sabar community is extremely low, with a high proportion of illiteracy among both males and females, reflecting limited access to and engagement with schooling.
- Housing conditions among the Sabars are modest and vary from kutcha to semi-pucca and a few pucca structures. Houses are constructed using locally available materials, with roofs made of tin sheets, mud tiles, asbestos, straw, or cement, and walls built of mud or bricks with mud or cement. Cooking is mainly done using firewood or dry leaves, while kerosene is used by a small number of households.
- Agricultural activities are primarily subsistence-oriented, with cultivation mainly undertaken for household consumption. Only a small section of the community sells a portion of their agricultural produce in local markets.
- Food consumption patterns indicate that the majority of Sabar households maintain a regular meal routine, with about 91% consuming meals three times a day. A small proportion consumes meals twice daily, while a few households report eating more than three times a day.
- Sanitation facilities are severely inadequate, as toilets are largely absent. Most Sabar people practice open defecation in fields, while others use nearby forests or bushes, highlighting serious hygiene and public health concerns.
- In terms of healthcare, the majority of the Sabar population relies on allopathic medicine for treating illnesses. However, traditional beliefs persist, and some individuals continue to consult local healers such as Gunin or Ojha.
- The livelihood pattern of the Sabar community is diverse and heavily dependent on forest-based and manual labor activities. Major sources of income include timber and non-timber forest product collection, Babui rope making, Sal leaf plate making, hunting and fishing, agriculture, non-agricultural day labor, and the collection of forest products such as red ant eggs (*Korkut*), Sal fruits, edible roots and plants, honey, and Mahua flowers for liquor preparation, though the latter is legally restricted.
- Earthen pots are commonly used for cooking and storing water, reflecting traditional practices and limited access to modern utensils.

- The community also engages in the production of household items such as mats, primarily for personal use.
- The Sabar people face multiple challenges in their daily lives, including chronic financial insecurity, language barriers, low literacy levels, remoteness of habitation, limited transportation access, and inadequate experience in improved agricultural practices.
- Government welfare schemes and development programs have played a significant role in supporting the Sabar community, particularly in areas of employment, food security, and housing.
- A notable finding is that Sabar girls show relatively greater interest in education compared to boys, indicating potential for improvement in educational participation if adequate support and incentives are provided.
- Despite a substantial gap in formal training in digital usage, social media has become a vehicle of preserving as well as commodifying certain aspects of their culture with the help of internet.

6. Conclusion

The Sabar community of Jhargram district continues to maintain a close and dependent relationship with the forest, which plays a vital role in their daily lives and livelihoods. Their subsistence largely revolves around the collection and utilization of timber and non-timber forest products (NTFPs), providing essential resources for food, fuel, medicine, and other socio-economic needs. The forest not only supports their material survival but also forms the basis of their cultural and traditional identity.

Over the years, both the state and central governments have introduced a range of developmental initiatives aimed at improving the living standards of the Sabar people. These include scholarships for Scheduled Tribe students, implementation of various welfare schemes (*Prakalpas*), financial assistance for toilet construction, housing under the Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY), establishment of residential schools such as the Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS), and recruitment of tribal teachers in local schools.

The prolific usage of android smart phones and certain internet facilities have helped them engage in global connectivity to some extent and gain visibility for their culture and livelihood. It is instrumental in 'modernising' their lifestyle, but the full impact of digitalisation on the lives of the indigenous people has the scope of being researched in a further thorough manner.

Such interventions have begun to make a positive impact by enhancing educational participation, reducing economic vulnerability, and improving overall socio-economic conditions. However, despite these measures, challenges such as low literacy, limited access to modern amenities, and dependence on forest resources persist. Strengthening and expanding these developmental programs in a culturally sensitive manner is crucial for ensuring sustainable progress and improving the quality of life for the Sabar community in Jhargram district.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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