



Research Paper

## Transformation in Economic life among the Kharia Tribe of Purulia, West Bengal, India

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**Abstract:** This study aims to understand the economic condition of the Kharia tribe in Purulia, West Bengal, India, one of the most marginalized communities in the region. Despite their rich traditional knowledge, most families live below the poverty line. The research is based on both primary data collected through field surveys, interviews with Kharia community members and secondary data from government reports and academic studies. The findings highlight the complex interplay between social, cultural, and economic factors that shape the economic condition of the Kharia tribe. The study reveals that the community's economic condition is closely tied to their traditional occupations, including agriculture and forest-based livelihoods which are increasingly at risk due to environmental degradation, market fluctuations, and government policies. The study advocates for a holistic, community-led development approach that considers their social, cultural and economic context, including education, vocational training, and support for traditional livelihoods.

**Keywords:** Kharia Tribe, Economic life, Present condition, Occupation, Previous condition, Purulia, West Bengal, Traditional occupations.

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### I. Introduction

India is home to 10.2 crore tribal people who are also known as Adivasi and the constitution of India has designated "tribes" as Scheduled Tribes (Article 366). These Adivasi people basically inhabit forest and hilly areas. Tribals are considered to be the most backward and deprived section of the Indian society. Socioeconomic development of these tribal people has been neglected from British period to the present age of globalization. These aboriginals have a unique life style of their own, are untouched by the modernity. In the era of development and globalization they still face the problems of illiteracy, vicious poverty, ill health, poor livelihood and low income which force them to live in primitive conditions. Evidences indicate development deficits and backwardness of tribals in Purulia district. The state of West Bengal is also indifferent in the socio-economic conditions of tribals. The 12% tribals households in West Bengal use tap-water for drinking while it is 21% for all population (Census of India, 2011). The percentage of households using electricity for lighting among tribals is 32%. Latrine facility within premises among tribals is 24% while it is 59% for overall population. In West Bengal, the tribals are backward in education. The literacy rate among tribals is 58% while the literacy rate in West Bengal is 76%. The Purulia district is having the second highest tribal population after the Jalpaiguri district in West Bengal. In Purulia district tribal literacy rate in 2011, total 53.86%, male 67.84% and female 39.77%. The percentage of graduates in tribals is 1%. The richest households among tribals are 4% as compared to overall 20% in West Bengal. The present study tries to reveal socio-economic status of Kharia tribe in this district. The socio-economic status of the tribe is under threat due to the process of different transformation. Industrialization, globalization, liberalization, modernization, politicization, etc. have created economic and social changes that directly affected them. The paper highlights the Transformation in economic conditions of the Kharia tribe of Purulia district.

The Kharias have derived their name from kharkharia, palanquin or litter according to Russell and Hiralal as found in Singh (1994). According to Singh, they are distributed in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and

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West Bengal. According to the 1981 census, their population in Bihar is 141,771, in Orissa it is 144,178, and in Madhya Pradesh it is 6892. The Kharias of Bihar are found in the hilly tracts of Chotanagpur. They speak in Kharia language which is an Austro-Asiatic language. They have oral tradition. They use Devanagari script for writing. According to Tete (1990), the Kharias are basically agriculturists and their implements of cultivation are very similar to those of their agriculturist neighbours.

The Kharia tribe is an indigenous community in Purulia, West Bengal. The tribe has gone through significant economic transformations over the years. Historically, they were under economic backward section. The community was also impacted by colonial-era policies, which labeled them as a "Criminal Tribe" and further marginalized them. The social stigma of criminality deteriorates their place in the village society. The Kharia Sabars compel to live in the outskirts of the main villages with economic insufficiency and poor standard of living. However, in recent years, there has been some progress in improving their socio-economic status.

Studies have shown that the Kharia tribe has made some progress in adopting modern amenities, such as LPG fuel for cooking in very few families, which indicates a slight improvement in their economic condition. However, despite these efforts, the community still faces significant economic challenges.

To truly transform their economic life, the Kharia tribe needs access to sustainable livelihood opportunities, education, and healthcare. Efforts to promote their cultural heritage and traditional skills could also help generate income and improve their economic well-being. Overall, while there have been some positive developments, the Kharia tribe still requires targeted support to overcome their economic challenges and achieve a better quality of life.

## **II. Objectives**

The present study aims to focus on the transformation in economic life among the Kharia people of Purulia district, West Bengal. The main objective of this study is to understand the socio-economic development from the past to now of the tribal communities of the Purulia district.

### **Area and People**

Purulia district is an extended eastern part of the Chotanagpur plateau. The geographical extension of this area is extending from 22°42'35" North to 23°42'00" North latitudes and from 85°49'25" East to 86°54'37" East longitudes. This area is selected especially due to its aboriginal roots. According to the 2011 Census, the district has about 18.45% tribal population of the total population.

Kharia people of Purulia district live in undulated hilly terrains, fringe and out skirt of forest. They are found in scattered and dispersed habitation are generally live in separate hamlets and villages. They are distributed in the different block of Purulia district. Mainly they reside at Barabazar, Balarampur, Manbazar-I & II, Bandowan and Pancha blocks. The Hill Kharia, hunting and gathering tribe, belong to the proto-australoid racial stock and mainly inhabit in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal in India. In Purulia, Hill Kharia is found in 11 out of 23 blocks of the district. They are also found in different districts like Paschim Medinipur, Bankura, Jhargram contiguous with Purulia in West Bengal, in Mayurbhanj district of Odisha and in East Singhbhum of Jharkhand.

In this study four Community Development Blocks namely Manbazar-II, Balarampur, Barabazar and Bandowan of Purulia district in West Bengal, India are taken into consideration for the study.

## **III. Literature Review**

Ghosh et al. (2017) studied the Kharia tribes of Purulia, West Bengal, mainly focusing on their stigmatization of criminality. The researchers focused on how the tribes are exploited from a young age: They do not get to enter the temple, their children are mistreated in school, and the villagers keep them aside from all social interactions.

Chaki studied the Kharia tribe of Purulia, West Bengal, in 2018. This study was all about the socio-cultural aspect of the tribe, i.e., Kharia nomenclature, historical background, eating habits, like how they use a definite act to catch snakes and rats, and their main occupation, which was hunting and collecting fruits, vegetables, fire firewood, and selling them to the market as they do not possess any land for agriculture. This study also focuses on cultural festivals and traditions, etc.

Mukherjee, 2020 conducted a study on the three major tribes of Purulia, that are Santhal, Kharia, and Birhor about their socio-ecological characteristics and the transition and transformation of these communities by the Transformed Social Perception Index (TSPI). Fieldwork was executed among 600 households in 20 villages using the purposive sample method. This study highlights that because of the stigma of criminality, Kharia live on the outskirts of multi-ethnic villages. Because of this isolation, they are far from cultural assimilation. The TSPI score was the lowest for the Kharia tribes in the Purulia district.

S. C. Roy and R. C. Roy (1937), Mukherjee (1998), Saha (2010) made a detailed study about the society of the Kharia Sabar tribal community. Alike the Santhal, the Kharia Sabar tribe also has different

societal sub groups. According to S. C. Roy and R. C. Roy (1917), the Kharia tribe has three main classes based on their nature and surrounding ecology, such as Dudh Kharia, Dhelki Kharia, and Hill Kharia.

Dr. Sanjay Bara on 2022 studies about the Kharia tribe of Jharkhand. This study was mainly focused on the origins and social life of the Kharia tribes (from the early period to the present). It describes the struggles of Kharia tribes from the Mughal period through the British era to the present situation. How the Upparpat (Nagpur) Kharia Mahadakalo (Mahasabha) was formed for the tribe's development was also discussed.

Mondal et al. (2022) conducted a study among the Santhal, Birhor, and Kheri tribes of Purulia, West Bengal, about the interrelationship between environment and sustainable development. The main objectives of this study were to study the status of tribal communities of Purulia, how they depend on the environment, and how they react to sustainable development. This study shows that the tribal peoples of Purulia depend very much upon the forests; their primary economic system is agro-forest-based. However, this is now being substituted by livestock and skilled labor, and a sedentary lifestyle is slowly being adopted.

Karak et al. (2024) conducted a study aiming to study the literacy rate among the tribal population of Purulia and the status of tribes concerning cultural mobilization. This study highlighted that despite several state and central government schemes, many tribal populations did not benefit due to a lack of awareness and knowledge.

#### IV. Material and Methods

The study is based on primary source of data as well as secondary source of data. The data regarding basic amenities, education and workforce, household, health and wealth are collected from the villagers by interview method. The details about the geographical location, area and people are collected from different secondary sources.

Twelve different Kharia-dominated villages were selected from Barabazar, Balarampur, Manbazar-II, and Bandwan blocks of Purulia district, West Bengal. Then a total of 260 Kharias' households will be selected from the selected villages in terms of habitation, representation from different economic classes, educational status, and health status. A pilot survey was made after getting the panchayat-level data. Physical and human resource mapping was also made using GPS.

#### V. Discussion

Kharia tribe is an indigenous tribal community who are mainly distributed in the states of Odisha, Jharkhand, West Bengal. Kharia people mostly inclined towards forest areas for living. Their economic life is based on mainly traditional practices. But nowadays there are influences of modernization and external environment also which make variations in their occupations and income.

Current economic condition of the Kharia tribe of 12 villages of four blocks are as follows:

Table-1.1: Economic status wise population division

Block Name and Village Name	Monthly Economic status	Population	Percent (%)
Manbazar II Kumari (Olgara)	1000- 4999	27	26.73
	5000-10000	15	14.85
	Above 10000	0	0
	Unknown	59	58.42
	<b>Total</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>100</b>

**Description:** In Kumari village, there are mostly agricultural laborer in the village. So, according to their occupation their season-wise income status lies. Although there are many people (58.42%) who did not agree to tell their income level. There was no one who earns more than 10000.

**Explanation:** The villagers live from hand to mouth daily. Their income is really low as per today's expenditure. At the same time there are very limited sources of work. Most of them are uneducated also. So, this fact works as a disadvantage to grab any kind of work and run their life seamlessly.

Table-1.2: Economic status wise population division

Block Name and Village Name	Monthly Economic status	Population	Percent
Manbazar II Boro	1000-4999	7	5.74
	5000-10000	40	32.79
	Above 10000	1	0.82
	Unknown	74	60.65
	<b>Total</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>100</b>

**Description:** There are 32.79% people who earn from 5000-10000 rupees. At the same time, there are 60.65% whose salary is unknown. In some cases, there were elder members or earning members absent so rest of the members were not able to tell about household income.

**Explanation:** The villagers live from hand to mouth daily. Their income is really low as per today's expenditure. At the same time there are very limited sources of work. Most of them are uneducated also. So, this fact works as a disadvantage to grab different kinds of work and run their life seamlessly. Here a traditional economic work is also found which is called *Sona Dhoa* (local term). From this work people get money as compared with paddy seeds. Some people in this village are associated with cultural programme and their band name is 'Pahari Ful'.

Table-1.3: Economic status wise population division

Block Name and Village Name	Monthly Economic status	Population	Percent
Balarampur Kalipur	1000-4999	8	15.38
	5000-10000	5	9.62
	Above 10000	1	1.92
	Unknown	38	73.08
	<b>Total</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>100</b>

**Description:** There are 15.38% people who earn from 1000-4999 rupees. At the same time, there are 73.08% whose salary is unknown. There are only 1.92% person who earns above 10000 rupees.

**Explanation:** The villagers goes through extreme poverty. Their income is really low as per today's expenditure. At the same time there are very limited sources of work. Most of them are uneducated also. So, this fact works as a disadvantage to grab different kinds of work and run their life seamlessly.

Table-1.4: Economic status wise population division

Block Name and Village Name	Monthly Economic status	Population	Percent
Balarampur Shyamnagar	1000-4999	23	20.18
	5000-10000	13	11.40
	Above 10000	3	2.63
	Unknown	75	65.79
	<b>Total</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>100</b>

**Description:** There are 20.18% people who earn from 1000-4999 rupees. At the same time, there are 65.79% whose salary is unknown.

**Explanation:** The villagers live from hand to mouth daily. Their income is really low as per today's expenditure. At the same time there are very limited sources of work. Most of them are uneducated also. So, this fact works as a disadvantage to grab any kind of work and run their life seamlessly.

Table-1.5: Economic status wise distribution

Block Name and Village Name	Monthly Economic status	Population	Percent
Barabazar Sargo (Chirkundi)	1000-4999	2	3.51
	5000-10000	9	15.79
	Above 10000	1	1.75
	Unknown	45	78.95
	<b>Total</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>100</b>

**Description:** There are 15.79% people who earn money in the range of 5000-10000. There are 78.95% whose income status is unknown.

**Explanation:** The villagers live from hand to mouth daily. Their income is really low as per today's expenditure. At the same time there are very limited sources of work. Most of them are uneducated also. So, this fact works as a disadvantage to grab any kind of work and run their life seamlessly.

Table-1.6: Economic status wise population division

Block Name and Village Name	Monthly Economic status	Population	Percent
Barabazar Beldih (Digar Para)	1000-4999	20	21.98
	5000-10000	34	37.36
	Above 10000	1	1.10
	Unknown	36	39.56
	<b>Total</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>100</b>

**Description:** There are 54 villagers whose earning is under 10000. There are 39.56 % people who were not eager to share their income level. In some cases, there were elder members or earning members absent so rest of the members were not able to tell about household income.

**Explanation:** The villagers goes through extreme poverty. Their income is really low as per today's expenditure. At the same time there are very limited sources of work. Most of them are uneducated also. So, this fact works as a disadvantage to grab different kinds of work and run their life seamlessly.

Table-1.7: Economic status wise population division

Block Name and Village Name	Monthly Economic status	Population	Percent
Barabazar Jahanabad, Bardaha	1000-4999	19	16.52
	5000-10000	56	48.70
	Above 10000	10	8.69
	Unknown	30	26.09
	<b>Total</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>100</b>

**Description:** There are 48.70% people who earn between 5000-10000. There are only 8.69% people who earn above 10000rs. monthly.

**Explanation:** The villagers goes through extreme poverty. Their income is really low as per today's expenditure. At the same time there are very limited sources of work. Most of them are uneducated also. So, this fact works as a disadvantage to grab different kinds of work and run their life seamlessly.

Table-1.8: Economic status wise population division

Block Name and Village Name	Monthly Economic status	Population	Percent
Barabazar Hijla	1000-4999	10	6.37
	5000-10000	45	28.66
	Above 10000	15	9.55
	Unknown	87	55.41
	<b>Total</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>100</b>

**Description:** There are 48.70% people who earn between 5000-10000. There are only 8.69% people who earn above 10000rs. monthly. There were 55.41% people whose monthly income is not known to us.

**Explanation:** The villagers goes through extreme poverty. Their income is really low as per today's expenditure. At the same time there are very limited sources of work. Most of them are uneducated also. So, this fact works as a disadvantage to grab different kinds of work and run their life seamlessly.

Table-1.9: Economic status wise population division

Block Name and Village Name	Monthly Economic status	Population	Percent
Bandowan Mangla	1000-4999	7	25
	5000-10000	10	35.71
	Above 10000	3	10.71
	Unknown	8	28.57
	<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>100</b>

**Description:** There are 35.71% people who earn between 5000-10000. There are only 10.71% people who earn above 10000rs. monthly. There were 28.57% people whose monthly income is not known to us.

**Explanation:** The villagers live from hand to mouth daily. Their income is really low as per today's expenditure. At the same time there are very limited sources of work. Most of them are uneducated also. So, this fact works as a disadvantage to grab any kind of work and run their life seamlessly.

Table-1.10: Economic status wise population division

Block Name and Village Name	Monthly Economic status	Population	Percent
Bandowan Ghatihuli	1000-4999	5	10.42
	5000-10000	14	29.16
	Above 10000	6	12.5
	Unknown	23	47.92
	<b>Total</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>100</b>

**Description:** There are 29.16% people who earn between 5000-10000. There are 10.42% people who earn between 1000-4999rs. monthly. There were 47.92% people whose monthly income is unknown.

**Explanation:** The villagers live from hand to mouth daily. Their income is really low as per today's expenditure. At the same time there are very limited sources of work. Most of them are uneducated also. So, this fact works as a disadvantage to grab any kind of work and run their life seamlessly.

Table-1.11: Economic status wise population division

Block Name and Village Name	Monthly Economic status	Population	Percent
Bandowan Mirgichami	1000-4999	10	18.52
	5000-10000	30	55.56
	Above 10000	4	7.40
	Unknown	10	18.52
	<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>100</b>

**Description:** There are 55.56% people who earn between 5000-10000. There are only 7.40% people who earn above 10000rs. monthly. There were 18.52% people whose monthly income is unknown.

**Explanation:** The villagers live from hand to mouth daily. Their income is really low as per today's expenditure. At the same time there are very limited sources of work. Most of them are uneducated also. So, this fact works as a disadvantage to grab any kind of work and run their life seamlessly.

Table-1.12: Economic status wise population division

Block Name and Village Name	Monthly Economic status	Population	Percent
Bandowan Popo (Ketki)	1000-4999	10	12.20
	5000-10000	12	14.63
	Above 10000	10	12.20
	Unknown	50	60.97
	<b>Total</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>100</b>

**Description:** There are 14.63% people who earn between 5000-10000. There were 60.97% people whose monthly income is unknown.

**Explanation:** The villagers live from hand to mouth daily. Their income is really low as per today's expenditure. At the same time there are very limited sources of work. Most of them are uneducated also. So, this fact works as a disadvantage to grab any kind of work and run their life seamlessly. As a daily labor the villagers need to get out of their house at very early morning for work. This is also a reason of not getting hundred percent data.

According to the informants from different villages of Purulia district, agriculture is their main occupation and almost in every household there is a practice of broom making mainly by the ladies. Kharia people are depended on forest produces as they live near the forest areas. Particularly these Kharia tribes of Purulia were palanquin (local term-Palki) bearers many years ago. Coming to agriculture, the soil type and rainfall frequency is very important for cultivation. Most of the farmers go to Burdwan for paddy cultivation. There are limited fields in Purulia which are able to be cultivated. The villagers collect firewood for their daily household works. They are depended on other forest products such as different fruits, medicinal plants etc. In almost every villages it is observed that they have a practice of animal husbandry or cattle rearing.

Besides agriculture and broom making, there are some occupation options to them. They work as daily wage labourer, mason, Brick field worker. Very few people are there who are drivers, shopkeepers, Decorator, sweeper, water pipe line labour, textile labour. These works are inclusion of modern days and availability of a high range of occupation options. At past Kharia people were almost fully depended on forest produces as then they had no access to education, connection with mainstream works. Some aged people are till now know the trick of using medicinal plants. There is particularly one person who performs *Jolpora* (local term).

Earlier they were hunter gatherers and cultivators. The literacy of Kharia tribe of Purulia is very low. Illiteracy is a huge disadvantage for these Kharia people which limits them from exploring various education-based occupations. Over time, other different occupations lead towards the transformation of their economic life. Kharia people are known for their traditional crafts such as basketry, broom making. They transformed these skills into income generating activities by selling those products to local markets or to tourists. There is Sabar Kalyan Samiti at Rajnoyagarh in Purulia where there is a dedicated portion to display those artisan products for buying and helping the tribal people and make other people know about the talents of Kharia Community. Some individuals moved to other states as Migrational labour so that they can feed their family members. As the Kharia people are open to different type of works and multitasking there is an upliftment in their economic status. They are no longer reliant on a single source of income. It reduces their vulnerability to economic shocks. But, it has to mention that most of them are still below poverty level as observed. Very few are there who are living more or less a better life. Though they are earning little more now, their daily food intake pattern specially for children is not changed. They do not invest in health and hygiene issues. They have access to markets now but the markets are far away from their places. Education can help them to grow and to have access to other occupations also. But most of the pupils are not interested to go to school to have basic education. Very less quantity of people is there who are little educated and move up the social ladder and challenge traditional power structure.

Kharias used to live by their hunting and collection of fruits and vegetables from the forest. But since the Forest Preservation Act of 1952, their livelihood is in danger. Gathering a little amount of food has become a matter of luck. They do not possess any lands for farming—they are landless. Hence, they have no other livelihood apart from working as hired labourers in the farms of the nearby HinduSantal, Mahato or other Hindu farmers. In leisure time, they collect fruits, flowers, honey from the forest and sell it in the local markets. Young men wait for the chances to go out hunting.

Post-independence, the hampering of forest collections has diverted the Sabars towards taking up agricultural works as their profession. In the 1971 census 10.61% of the Sabars were seen to be farmers and 79.61 % agricultural labourers. However, the latter job is not permanent: available for only two to three months per year. Most of the time they have to starve. Famine is at its height for them: in this situation, expending money in clothes, medicines just cannot be imagined, so they had to resort to superstitious rituals and dangerous experimental hack medicines. For three decades after independence, this has been the situation of Sabars: many big words have been spoken while keeping them under poverty line.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Purulia is one of the most backward tribal districts in the country. Tribals of this district have distinct age-old social system, cultural tradition, customs, values, life style and languages. But in terms of economic condition of these people, they can be considered to be the poorest of the poor in the country. Tribals of this district use the forest as a means of their sustenance. Unequal access to resources, employment and income along with its trend of steady magnification results into multiple social and economic depreciations. Purulia district is one of the most backward districts in West Bengal in perspective of all the dimensions of human development accompanied with the income inequality at a considerable magnitude. The present study aims to focus on the socioeconomic status and problems faced by this community to sustain their livelihood and attempts to assess the economic condition and its transformation from previous years.

To sum up, the transformation in economic life among the Kharia tribe of Purulia has been a complex process. Despite facing historical marginalization and socio-economic challenges, the community has shown resilience and adaptability. While some progress has been made in improving their economic condition, much work remains to be done. To truly achieve economic empowerment, the Kharia tribe requires sustained support in areas such as: Sustainable livelihood opportunities, Education and skill development, Healthcare and social services, Cultural preservation and promotion by addressing these critical areas, we can help the Kharia tribe break the cycle of poverty and achieve a better quality of life. It is essential to recognize the community's unique cultural identity and traditional knowledge systems, and to involve them in decision-making processes that affect their lives. Ultimately, the transformation in economic life among the Kharia tribe requires a comprehensive and inclusive approach that prioritizes their needs, aspirations, and well-being.

The economic condition of the Kharia tribe in Purulia is a complex and multifaceted issue. This study has highlighted the various challenges faced by the community, including limited access to education, employment opportunities, and healthcare. Despite these challenges, the Kharia tribe has shown resilience and adaptability, with many community members engaging in traditional occupations such as agriculture and forest-based livelihoods. However, the study also reveals that the economic condition of the Kharia tribe is closely tied to their social and cultural context. The community's strong social bonds and traditional practices are essential to their well-being and identity. Any efforts to improve their economic condition must consider these social and cultural factors. To address the economic challenges faced by the Kharia tribe, it is essential to implement policies and programs that promote inclusive and sustainable development. This could include initiatives such as: Providing access to education and vocational training, Supporting traditional occupations and promoting entrepreneurship, Improving healthcare and sanitation facilities, Encouraging community-led development initiatives. By adopting a holistic and community-led approach, it is possible to improve the economic condition of the Kharia tribe in Purulia and promote their overall well-being.

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