Education Status of the Santal Community in Northern Bangladesh: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Bangladesh is a land of cultural diversity, with several small ethnic groups living across the country, each with its own tradition and identity. The purpose of this study is to explore the educational status of the Santal community, one of the largest ethnic groups residing mainly in the northern part of Bangladesh. This study adopted a qualitative approach, using a case study as methodology. Data were collected through interviews, group discussions, and document analysis. The findings reveal that the educational status of the Santal community is characterized by poor enrollment, continuity and literacy rate. Despite receiving primary education, their attainment rate declines in the secondary, higher secondary, and university levels. In this regard, various socioeconomic factors contribute to the low educational attainment rate. The Santal children are unable to continue their studies mainly due to poverty. Furthermore, language barriers, future employment uncertainty, child marriage, gender discrimination, industrialization and cultural impediments are primarily responsible for low educational attainment. They are already fighting to make ends meet, so adding the expense of school to their list of concerns is excessive. Despite this, the majority of the young people, especially those who are currently pursuing education, acknowledge the value of education and aspire to improve their situation by reaching a high social position through educational attainment. It illustrates that the current generation is aware of the importance of education and is eager to continue their studies. As a case study, the results of this research demonstrate how ethnic groups struggle to have access to education in Bangladesh and what steps should be taken to enhance education status, so contributing to the existing literature on education and policy. The findings may also be useful for policymakers concerned in improving the educational status of ethnic groups, notably the Santal community.

Keywords: Access to education, dropout, poverty, social change, Santal community

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Introduction

Bangladesh is a land of cultural diversity with several ethnic groups spread across the land. According to the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, the country has 50 ethnic minority communities (IPDS, 2022). The Santal community is one of the largest and historic ethnic groups in Bangladesh. They mostly reside in Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Bogra and Rangpur districts in north-western Bangladesh (Pinku, 2020). The most recent census data indicates that there are 129,049 Santal people living in the country (BBS, 2022). Some comparative studies suggest that the majority of the Santal are historically poor, landless and uneducated (Hossain & Uddin, 2021).

The socioeconomic and cultural traditions of the Santals are ancient; they are not like the mainstream Bengali people of the country (Haider, 2022). They usually coexist with nature, specifically forests, jungles and fauna, with which they have symbiotic relationships. Traditionally, the Santals are hunters and gatherers who rely on a communal pool of resources and an agriculture-based economy to make their living (Sarker, Khan & Musarrat, 2017). Historically, they have been mostly engaged in farming activities, with over 95% of the Santals engaged in agriculture (Haider, 2022). In terms of religion, Santals' traditional belief system is polytheistic, based on *bonga* (means spirits) worship and festivals. While some have converted to Christianity, others have continued to practice ancient faiths with Hindu aspects incorporated (Brandt, 2011).

In terms of educational qualification, the Santals in Bangladesh have limited participation and low literacy rates (Samad, 2006). Pinku (2020) reveals that educational status among the Santals is not improving well, with 10% of the population illiterate and 54% unable to reach the HSC level. Specifically, Santal students are not keeping up with mainstream students academically (Hoque, 2023). According to Cavallaro and Rahman (2009), limited resources have resulted in significant disadvantages among the Santals in terms of education, employment and land ownership compared to the mainstream population and some other ethnic minority groups. Moreover, they feel ignored because Bangla is the primary language of instruction in schools. While there are several programs and the national education policy that assure the use of ethnic community language at the elementary level of schooling, they have not yet been put into practice (Shamsuddoha & Jahan, 2016).

From a socioeconomic perspective, due to a lack of cognizable access to education and suitable skills, there is a lack of income generating activities among the Santals (Samad, 2006). They look for work in town, but their lack of education and suitable skills have made it more challenging (Shamsuddoha & Jahan, 2016). Despite their capability, they are often ignored due to their lack of education and hence, requiring greater cooperation and special attention to ensure their inclusion in the mainstream society (Hoque, 2023). Because of their low educational attainment and career progress, they can not participate in policy making and politics much (Shamsuddoha & Jahan, 2016).

The Santal generations are currently enthusiastic about education and improving socio-economic conditions however, they have been facing challenges such as language barriers, lack of native teachers, lack of guidance and family earning engagement (Sharif, 2014). Although they used to believe in different superstitions, those superstitious beliefs have been reduced by the impact of modernization and education (Shamsuddoha & Jahan, 2016). In addition, the Santal society is changing rapidly as a result of income opportunities, education, market expansion, and social and economic development (Shamsuddoha & Jahan, 2016). However, the equity and quality are the key concerns in the realm of education for them.

There is a significant debate regarding the equity of education, despite the fact that human rights legislation prioritizes to ensure the access and quality of education regardless of ethnicity. The objective of equity education is to ensure equality in learning outcomes, access and retention. In other words, all children must get the opportunity to develop basic cognitive skills and an appropriate learning environment. The UNESCO also emphasizes that quality and equity are inextricably linked. There are different factors such as poverty, remote location and gender inequality that persist as the strongest inverse relation between school attendance and learning performance (UNESCO, 2004).

The importance of quality education is also emphasized by the SDGs and Bangladesh education policy. The core, game-changing promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is 'quality education and leaving no one behind'. The SGDs emphasize on universal access to quality and inclusive education which uphold the idea that quality education is one of the most effective and reliable engines of sustainable development (UNDP, 2023). UNESCO focused on two essential components of a quality education: (a) cognitive development and (b) the importance of education in fostering the values and attitudes of a conscientious society, as well as nurturing artistic and emotional advancement. The Convention on the Rights of the Child delineated the objectives for education in Section 29(1): The child's personality, talents and cognitive and physical capacities should develop to their maximum potential. There should be an increase in the promotion of human rights and basic freedoms, as well as adherence to the ideals outlined in the UN Charter. The child's parents, cultural identity, language, values and the national values of the country where the child resides should all be respected and nurtured.

In addition to Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the constitutional provisions pertaining to education in Bangladesh are placed in Article 17. Education is a fundamental right under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Constitution of Bangladesh, both of which firmly establish it as a cornerstone of state policy (Rahman, 2017). It is a fundamental obligation to refrain from all forms of discrimination, such as those based on religion, caste, ethnicity, and birth, as explicitly stated in Article 28 of the constitution of Bangladesh. Moreover, in regard to children belonging to ethnic minority groups, Articles 15 and 16 unequivocally decree the value of equal educational opportunities for every individual.

Furthermore, the recognition of inclusive primary education as a fundamental right for every child, regardless of ethnic, cultural, or religious background, is affirmed by the 'Education for All (EFA)' initiative. In this backdrop, this study explored the following research questions: (a) What is the current educational situation of the Santal community? (b) How do they view the importance of education, taking the socioeconomic conditions of the community into consideration? (c) What factors are causing the Santal students' dropouts from educational institutions?

Literature Review

The educational marginalization of ethnic minority people is influenced by factors such as poverty, hunger, insecurity, identity crisis, language endangerment, land encroachment and threats to their livelihood. As a result, there is a significant increase in dropout rates and a decline in the participation of indigenous peoples in secondary and higher education. This situation is also observed within the Santal community of Bangladesh (Soren, 2022). In this regard, because of poverty, economic crisis, policy ignorance, a lack of social consciousness, and discrimination, Santal children are frequently excluded from elementary education, limiting their potential for skilled work (Mujeri, 2010).

There have been some academic studies on the educational and skill development of Santal children and youth (Sharif, 2014), the socio-historical contexts and education system (Shamsuddoha & Jahan, 2016), the impact of low income on literacy rates (Cavallaro & Rahman, 2009), the influence of education on Santal culture (Pinku, 2020), the adaptation of the Bangla language for education (Eftakhar, 2019), the educational lag experienced by Santal children (Hoque, 2023), and the adaptive strategies for receiving education (Soren, 2022). There are different factors affecting Santal children's educational and skill development. More specifically, socio-historical context, education system and economic status influence their educational access and achievements (Eftakhar, 2019; Sharif, 2014).

Sharif (2014) focused on the education and skill development of Santal children and youth in Bangladesh, stressing the high number of dropouts from primary and junior secondary school. The community is mainly based on agriculture and experiences difficulties in finding suitable vocational options and income-generating alternatives. Besides, social isolation exacerbates dropouts and a lack of skill development opportunities. The study proposes bridging child education from mother tongue to bilingual or multilingual education in elementary schools, as well as developing TVET programs for Santal adolescents. Besides, the government and non-government organizations should take the required actions and provide financial support for inclusive education. This may help to overcome social exclusion and ensure that Santal children and youth receive an equitable education and skill development.

Language is one of the key elements of Santal children and youth's educational success. Shamsuddoha and Jahan (2016) explored the socio-historical background of the Santal community in Bangladesh, highlighting indigenous people's educational systems and institutions. They advocate for mother-tongue-based bilingual education to promote educational access and learning outcomes. Pinku (2020) argues that the Santal culture is changing as a result of various factors, including education. Over the years, the community has adapted to traditional practices by using three languages and is now moving towards higher education focusing on modern technology. This shift in language and culture has allowed the community to move forward in their education (Eftakhar, 2019).

Conventionally, socioeconomic status influences educational access and achievement. Cavallaro and Rahman (2009) explored that indigenous communities have low economic standing and educational attainment due to the lack of their recognition in the country's Constitution and the state's reluctance to acknowledge the needs of ethnic minorities. The Santals are deprived of land rights, employment opportunities and education as a result of state negligence. Although there is an increasing need for modern education, the education policy of the country priorities the significance of the mainstream language in elementary school, but the inclusion of minority languages in the education sector has not yet been implemented (Cavallaro & Rahman, 2009). Hoque (2023) mentioned that the cognitive achievement level of the Santal students has not reached the desirable level. Specifically, the academic achievement of Santal children lags behind that of mainstream students. Thus, it is important to identify and reduce the major determinants influencing the academic progress of Santal children in primary school in order to ensure exclusivity and the development of an equity-based society and future generations.

In addition, due to poverty, ignorance and lack of awareness, ethnic communities including the Santal community risk exclusion from primary education. This exclusion may result in lower levels of graduate and human capital, literacy rates and career prospects. Santal families influenced by this socio-cultural condition are practicing new adaptive strategies like teaching the Bangla language, concealing their cultural identity and emphasizing their religious identity. Although they are taking advantage of educational opportunities provided by Christian churches, non-governmental organizations and government institutions, this strategy risks reducing their cultural distinctiveness in the future (Soren, 2022).

Debnath (2010) argued that the state, churches and NGOs use colonial models of education and development to fragment the indigenous community. These models disregard the spiritual dimensions, disrupt local economies and inflict damage upon family, society and environment. These actions are carried out under the guise of normalizing and controlling the indigenous population. The interconnection between the three ideologies also serves to reinforce one another in the creation of a discriminatory education policy. This policy includes the endorsement by the state which undermines the cultural values and beliefs of indigenous people. Additionally, the education policy sponsored by religious institutions, particularly the church, promotes a

civilizing mission. Lastly, the influence of Western education contributes to the degradation of local knowledge and culture (Berry, 1990 as cited in Debnath, 2010).

Although the above-mentioned literature focuses on different aspects of education, it lacks comprehensive narratives of Santal individuals on their educational status and socio-cultural, economic, political and religious factors that result in dropouts from educational institutions. Moreover, the existing literature mainly pays attention to the reasons for lagging behind Santal students in education instead of focusing on factors that drive students to complete their education. Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the current status of education of the Santal community, the importance of education and its impact on the society, and the factors resulting in dropouts from educational institutions.

Conceptual Framework

Considerable debate surrounds the definition and conceptualization of quality education. This study employs the Framework of the EFA Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2004) to comprehend the status and significance of education among the Santal community in northern Bangladesh. The Report established a comprehensive framework for comprehending, monitoring, and enhancing the quality of education. In this regard, there are two methods: the "school effectiveness" method and the "learner-centred view of education". The school effectiveness method focuses on analyzing education systems at the school level, specifically examining how schools are structured and operated. On the other hand, the learner-centered approach is emphasized by the framework's incorporation of the category of "learners' contributions to the school environment." The framework focuses on four key elements pertaining to quality education: learner characteristics, enabling inputs, outcome and context.

Characteristics of Learners

The process of learning and the rate at which individuals acquire knowledge are significantly shaped by their cognitive abilities and prior experiences. In this regard, crucial deciding factors may include socio-economic status, health condition, residential location, cultural and religious traditions, as well as the extent and kind of preceding educational experiences (UNESCO, 2004).

Context

The relationship between education and society is robust, with both exerting significant effect on one another. Education often mirrors society to a significant extent, since it is shaped by the prevailing values and attitudes of the broader societal context. Equally significant is the consideration of whether education occurs within the framework of a prosperous society or one characterized by pervasive poverty. In a more explicit manner, national education policy also

serves as a significant contextual factor. The enabling circumstances for educational practices are established by several factors such as purposes and standards, curriculum and teacher policies (UNESCO, 2004).

Enabling Inputs

The effectiveness of teaching and learning is expected to be significantly impacted by providing adequate resources to assist the educational process. It is evident that educational institutions without qualified instructors, adequate textbooks and appropriate learning resources would have challenges in delivering effective instruction. The pedagogical process is intricately intertwined with the support system of inputs and different environmental elements (UNESCO, 2004).

Outcomes

The assessment of educational outcomes should be conducted within the framework of its established goals. Academic achievement is the main way to measure these results, but additional approaches should be considered to assess creative and emotional growth, as well as changes in values, attitudes and behaviour (UNESCO, 2004).

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach, specifically using case study as a methodology, since it provides valuable insights and enhances readers' understanding by shedding light on different aspects of a small group. Besides, qualitative case studies enable researchers to focus on gaining insight, making discoveries, and interpreting data rather than only testing hypotheses (Merriam, 1988). Furthermore, such studies focus on how certain groups address particular issues, adopting a comprehensive perspective on the situation. Yin (2018) argued that case study research entails the examination of a specific instance within a current and authentic context or environment. Stake (1995) contends that a case study is a decision about what to investigate, specifically a particular case within a defined system, limited by both time and location. This involves collecting detailed and comprehensive data from various sources, such as observations, interviews, audiovisual material, documents and reports (Yin, 2018). The case study may take several forms, such as being single or collective, taking place in multiple locations or within a single site, and focusing on a specific instance or a problem (either intrinsic or instrumental) (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Consequently, this procedure develops hypothetical suppositions and gathers evidence from many sources, guaranteeing that the data converges in a triangulating pattern (Yin, 2018). Considering the position of the Santal community as an ethnic minority group and the research trend in the field of education, the case study seems to be suitable to understand the status of education in the Santal community.

Study Village

In order to collect primary data, fieldwork has been conducted in a Santal village located in Dinajpur district. The village was chosen because it is one of the largest Santal villages in Bangladesh. The village community consists of a total of 35 households. Ten of these households have been converted to Christianity while others believe in various supernatural forces. The village's total population is 209, which includes both adults and children. Out of 209, 107 individuals are male and 102 individuals are female. The majority of the locals engage in agricultural activities. Besides, some individuals earn their livelihoods via other occupations such as day labour, sharecroppers, van drivers, and so on. Most of the households own a small amount of land for cultivation. It is also found that, about 70 percent of the Santals are engaged in some kind of sharecropping. There is a primary school in the village, and it is currently run by the village community.

Data Collection Methods and Tools

Case study research often involves comprehensive data collection, which encompasses several sources of information including "observations, interviews, documents and audiovisual materials" (Creswell, 2013, p.94). Interviews and documents review were the predominant methods of data collection for this study. The data collection methods and tools that have been used in order to explore the educational status of the Santal community are described below.

Case Study Interviews

Case study interviews were undertaken with a total of 20 members from the Santal community. Yin (2018) suggests that case study interviews may be characterized as guided conversations rather than structured queries. During a case study interview, the series of questions is expected to be flexible rather than strict but nevertheless follow a continuous path of enquiry (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Specifically, such interviews entail a thorough investigation of a current phenomenon, often known as a "case", within its original context. To expedite the interview process and capture the essential insights, explanations, and interpretations related to the research topic, an interview guideline was used that covered the issues such as the attitude of the Santals towards education, experience with the education system, and causes of dropout from the formal educational institution. During the interviews, two specific criteria were ensured, as proposed by Yin (2018): to adhere to the research questions and to accurately document the conversations without any prejudice. The interviewer established a rapport with the respondents during the interviews. Ten out of the 20 participants were current students, while the other 10 had recently dropped out of their studies; all participants were purposefully selected.

Key Informant Interviews (KII)

A KII was also carried out, whereby individuals with extensive knowledge and understanding of the educational situation of the Santal community were interviewed. Yin (2018) asserts that key informants play a vital role in assessing the success of a case study. These people may provide useful insights on a topic and can facilitate the researcher's connection with additional interviewees who may possess corroborating or contradictory information (Yin, 2018). In this study, interviews were conducted with five key Informants who were senior and experienced members of the community. They were chosen purposively because of their distinctive position in the community, and their knowledge and communication skills in relation to the education situation of the Santal community. These interviews have revealed the historical and contemporary social and political factors that affected the educational status of the community.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

As part of this study, two FGDs were conducted with children and youth ranging in age from 10 to 25 years in order to collect reflective appraisals of the participants on the situation, obstacles and socio-cultural dynamics in relation to education. The participants were chosen by following purposive sampling and engaged in a collaborative exchange of ideas to arrive at a conclusion about a specific topic aligned with the study purpose. As stated by van Eeuwijk and Angehrn (2017), a FGD allows for the involvement of a varied group of individuals who engage in interactive sessions to share information on their attitudes, perspectives, knowledge, experiences and behaviour. Berg (1989) defines the focus group as an interviewing technique particularly suitable for small groups. In this study, each FGD lasted for one hour. The FGDs were conducted using Lederman's (1990) approach, which included several steps: an introduction outlining the goals of the study, guidelines, and boundaries; a set of introductory questions to encourage participation; a series of focused questions designed to elicit all pertinent information regarding the subjects under discussion; and a concluding part for summary and discussion closure. A pre-developed guideline was used in the discussions that included but were not limited to, geographic location, cultural traits, education status, importance of education, impact of education, socioeconomic and political factors for dropout in the Santal community.

Documents Review

Books, articles, research reports, census reports and policy papers regarding the Santal community were reviewed and used to supplement the primary data.

Sampling Procedure

Sampling is a critical aspect of qualitative research since sample decisions may undermine or invalidate the ultimate findings (Berg, 1989). According to Patton (2002), purposive sampling is considered the most appropriate sampling method for case study research as it involves

selecting cases that provide enough information for in-depth analysis that are fundamental to the study objectives. This study opts for cases that exhibit diverse viewpoints in relation to the educational status of the Santal community. The study village was selected for convenient sampling in the first step of the sampling procedure. Later, the research participants for interviews and discussions were selected using purposive sampling. The total number of samples was 47.

Table-1: Sample distribution					
Methods	**Data code**	**Number of participants**	**Gender status**	**Education level**	**Total**
Case Study Interviews	CSI	20	Male 12, Female 08	Primary to University level	20
Key Informant Interviews	KII	5	Male 03, Female 02	Primary to HSC level	05
Focus Group Discussion	FGD	02 (22 participants)	Male 12, Female 10	Primary to University level	22
Total					47

Data Analysis and Presentation

After completing the fieldwork, the data was transcribed and then underwent coding. In this case, a mixture of Alpha-numerical characters was used to encode the data. For instance, KII-3 denotes a key informant interview carried out with participant number 3. Table-1 provides data on the application of the same coding pattern on other participants such as CSI for Case Study Interview and FGD for Focus Group Discussion. Afterwards, the perspectives and knowledge shared by the participants were analyzed using a thematic approach. This approach is often employed in case study research as it has been documented in the literature (Yin, 2024). Specifically, this research has used the approach of thematic analysis, which encompasses six stages: familiarizing oneself with the data, creating initial codes, finding overarching themes, scrutinizing and refining the themes, giving labels to the topics, and compiling the report. Stake (1995) presented four forms for interpreting data in case study research: category aggregation, direct interpretation, pattern identification, and naturalistic generalizations. This study grouped the collected data into ten categories through coding and condensed them into four themes. Then, generalizations regarding themes were formulated, and a comparison was made with relevant literature on the Santal community's educational situation. To ensure the validity of the data, this study performed a triangulation. Data obtained from case study interviews and focus group discussions was compared with information gathered from key informant interviews. The data was obtained in its unaltered state by audio recording, which was then transcribed. The data analysis includes exact quotes to improve the accuracy of the data and provide a thorough comprehension of the real situations of the study population. The study has complied with ethical standards in various aspects, including obtaining informed consent from participants, maintaining confidentiality, privacy and ensuring voluntary participation.

Results and Findings

Based on the themes emerged from group discussions and interviews, following sections have been presented: access to education of the Santal community, views about the importance of education, and the challenges in education. The study utilized UNESCO education framework to understand the education status and its impact in the Santal community considering the learners' achievement in terms of educational access, learning contexts, available educational inputs, teaching-learning environment and process and finally, education output among the Santals.

Access to Education of the Santal Children

All children within the age range of primary school in the study village are enrolled at the nearby primary school. The village has a primary school that is managed by the village community. The school has an approximate enrollment of 25 pupils. A non-governmental organization (NGO) once operated the school; however, it has recently stopped financial backing. In this situation, the community has taken on the responsibility of sustaining the school's operations via self-financing, therefore ensuring that all children of primary school going age have access to school education. According to KII-1,

> The school was first built and operated by an NGO along with financial support. However, the provision of assistance for it has stopped in recent times. The dearth of educational opportunities for the students was mostly attributed to the distance location of the government primary school and their apparent reluctance to participate in government school. As a result, the school was reopened by the provision of financial assistance from the community.

The community has currently a total of 15 secondary school pupils, categorized by age. However, a total of nine students only attend school. The remaining children have completed their elementary schooling but are now discontinuing their enrollment in the educational institution. KII-2 said,

> There is a subset of youngsters in the community who do not attend high school due to financial constraints. Besides, there seems to be a lack of desire among them in engaging in academic pursuits. As a result, they prefer to take manual jobs and travel here and there rather than attending school. Even if parents persist to motivate them, they are not willing to attend the school.

The number of students who meet the criteria for enrollment in higher secondary education subsequent to successfully completing their secondary education is 12. However, just two have pursued further education, while the majority has discontinued their studies. It is found that the discontinued students had assumed the role of day labour, engaging in employment to generate income and provide financial support to their respective families. Similarly, while the

expected number of individuals pursuing higher education is five, the current status reveals that only three students are now engaged in higher education. Two of them are female students who are studying at honours level, while the other one is a male student studying towards the completion of a degree program.

Importance of Education in the Community

The Santal community has historically endured neglect and discrimination, resulting in their marginalization in mainstream society. Moreover, the lack of integration with the wider population has caused a significant disparity in their progress across several domains, notably in the realm of education. However, there has seen significant advancements in education in recent years, attributable to both governmental and non-governmental endeavours as well as heightened consciousness. The endeavours at hand are a collective undertaking including children, parents, teachers and other members of the community.

Students who are granted access to education see it not only as a fundamental entitlement but also as a significant determinant of their future prospects. According to CSI-5,

> We identify ourselves as members of the *adivashi* community. We have experienced a lack of integration with the mainstream community for a long period of neglect. Education is the one means by which our condition may be altered. I am now pursuing a degree in the field of engineering at a private university. Upon completion of my academic studies, I want to establish myself and change the socioeconomic condition of my family.

Similarly, CSI-1, a secondary school girl, expressed her commitment to attending school consistently while facing familial challenges.

> I go to school on a regular basis, despite my family problems. My ambition is to become a doctor one day. I will work for the people. I aspire to be a doctor. Doctors are held with great regard. I'm now studying science. In the future, I hope to study medical science.

In the contemporary period characterized by advancements in technology and economic development, parents feel a heightened recognition and urge of education in the Santal community. The community people have the belief that their current socioeconomic conditions may be transformed through receiving education. According to KII-4,

> My father had no literacy skills. At this juncture, we can read somehow. However, the world has gone through a significant change. Education is the key element in society. It has a pivotal role in transforming one's social standing and economic circumstances, so this motivates us to priorities the education of our children in order to secure a more promising future.

Senior members also hold the belief that there has been a significant shift in the educational attainment of the community. In the past, there was a limited level of interest for education, however now; it is found that there exists a substantial degree of interest in receiving education. In this regard, KII-5 said,

> The community has shown a growing interest in pursuing formal education. However, it is essential that this numerical value undergoes an increment. Efforts are being made to enhance the enrollment rate among those seeking education within the community. Consequently, despite the initial small number of Santal students a decade ago, there has been a substantial increase in their numbers now.

FGD-1 depicted the historical causes of the lack of education among the Santal community,

> Historical impediments to education within the Santal community mostly included poverty and limited understanding. The current scenario has undergone a transformation. Every student is provided with a stipend, fostering curiosity and facilitating educational prospects. However, it is important to ascertain the underlying causes of the dropout and thereafter implement suitable measures to address this issue.

The discernible influence of education on the Santal community has been more evident in recent times. The rate of literacy is progressively rising as a result of the efforts made by both governmental and non-governmental institutions, as well as the initiatives undertaken by Christian missionaries. The introduction of formal education has resulted in notable transformations within the Santal traditional social structure. Haviland (1990) posits that there are several elements that potentially contribute to the cultural transformation experienced by a community including innovation, diffusion, migration, modernization and globalization. The Santal community holds the belief that education plays a crucial role in fostering competence in the age of globalization. An individuals can alter his/her economic and social circumstances by means of education. The use of technology in the field of education has seen a notable surge in recent years, hence fostering innovation. The Santal community has the means to engage with media and mobile technologies. The individuals are developing an awareness of education, which is facilitating their departure from traditional perceptions. According to a participant of FGD-1,

> Our culture is plagued by several issues, one of which is the prevalence of superstitious behaviours. As a result, we are largely disregarded in the mainstream society. However, the current circumstances have undergone a transformation. We may engage in recreational activities, socialize and get pleasure in the company of our fellow individuals from the Bengali community. These achievements have been made possible as a result of our educational qualification. Education has the potential to address the constraints

and obstacles hindering the progress of our society. Currently, we are making significant progress in the domains of healthcare and education. I anticipate a positive change in our culture in future due to educational attainment.

According to Haviland (1990), cultural change may give rise to distinct outcomes, namely assimilation, adaptation, and extinction. The increasing inclination of the Santals to pursue education mostly stems from their desire to progress by integrating into the wider community while preserving their cultural identity. In this regard, the findings of FGDs revealed that education has had a positive impact on the Santal culture. Such as,

First and foremost, the Santals possess a distinct cultural identity that is susceptible to the influences of mainstream culture, globalization and urbanization. However, schooling emphasizes the need of preserving and fostering one's own cultural heritage. This also encourages the Santal community to uphold their culture, identity, traditions through formal and informal practices in the community.

Secondly, for a long time, the Santal community has been subjected to neglect, injustice, and suffering. Besides, people belonging to this community have encountered various forms of discrimination and deprivation across several domains, including social, economic, and political realms (Ali, 1998). In this regard, education has been playing a crucial role in fostering awareness and understanding among the community members about the establishment and assertion of their rights.

Thirdly, education has a significant role in mitigating the biases ingrained within the traditional belief. For instance, although the drinking of *haria* (local homemade wine) is ingrained in the cultural practices, excessive intake of *haria* may have detrimental effects on their physical health and well-being. Both FGD groups strongly believe it and accordingly try to avoid it in their everyday life.

Fourthly, an additional aspect to consider is economic development. Through receiving education, individuals are given the chance to engage in formal institutions to a certain degree, so augmenting their social and economic standing.

Fifth, it is important to consider the concept of human and constitutional rights. Santals who have received formal education have knowledge on their rights as citizens of the country. The educated members are now engaged in a proactive endeavour to advocate for the establishment of their basic rights, as shown by their vociferous and assertive movement.

Least but not last, a notable change has occurred in the family and marital practice. While child marriage was a common practice in the past, its incidence has reduced as a result of increased access to education. As per the statement made by KII-2, alterations in culture possess the potential to provide both positive and negative outcomes. In this perspective, the change in the Santal society as a result of education is seen favourably.

Educational Challenges

In the Santal community, there exists a favourable educational attainment rate at the primary and secondary levels. However, when considering further higher secondary and tertiary education, the attainment rate is much lower and raises concerns when compared to the mainstream population. There exist several factors contributing to this dropout, including poverty, language barrier, future employment uncertainty, corruption, industrialization and cultural impediments which are explained below.

Poverty

Poverty is the primary impediment to educational attainment of Santal children. The majority of individuals in this community primarily engage in manual employment. The sustenance of their livelihoods is contingent upon their daily earnings. A significant number of households exhibit a preference for engaging in daily labour rather than pursuing formal schooling. CSI-11 mentioned that,

> I had the intention to further my studies but was unable to do so due to the financial crisis of my family. My parents wanted me to engage in income generating activities so that I could contribute to my family. We do not have land or property. As a result, I was compelled to discontinue my study and engaged in manual labour as a means of employment.

Parents sometimes believe that it is not always feasible for them to bear the kinds of expenditures associated with schooling. As a consequence, they prioritize other tasks above studying. For example, KII-3 claims, *"schooling expenses especially in high school and college levels are beyond our capacity. As a result, our children are unable to attend school. The government's supports are partial and hence, we can't afford all the additional expenses."*

Future Employment Uncertainty

The Santal community is grappling with a predicament about the assurance of securing employment at the completion of their educational pursuits. As per their assertion, the Santals lack the requisite money as bribe and influential connections necessary to get employment. A participant of FGD-2 described that,

> We wanted to study, but we dropped out. Where may one get job security? Some of us successfully completed SSC, however were unable to get employment. Bribe or power or influence is a prerequisite for getting employment today. We don't have so much money to bribe for a job. So, securing a job is an unrealistic ambition and unattainable goal for us.

Corruption

Corruption in the wider society has been said to be a significant impediment to the educational advancement of the Santal community. The prevalence of corruption within the broader societal context is mirrored among the education seekers of the community. In this regard, a participant of FGD-2 said,

> It is now common to provide bribes in order to get a job. The lack of money to provide bribes may diminish the likelihood of securing a job. How will we manage so much money! We do not have anyone to influence. There exists an uncertainty regarding the future after completing formal education. So, it is better to do some alternative jobs to survive from now onwards. It is best to accomplish this immediately.

Gender Discrimination

Gender discrimination often leads to the dropout of students. As an example, CSI-12 asserts that her ability to engage in studying is restricted by her mother.

> My mother does not allow me to study. She prefers that I remain at home and work for the family. What is the use of studying for females, she wonders? Working at home is better for my mother than studying. She wants me to marry as soon as possible. I attempted to persuade her at first but failed. So, I dropped out of school and now work for family.

Cultural Barriers

Cultural barriers are a significant contributing factor to student dropout. *Haria paan* (drinking local wine) holds significant cultural value among the Santals. However, this carries a negative perception among the wider community. As an example, CSI-13 asserts:

> I used to attend school; however, I often encountered the appellation "Santal" [slang], 'drink haria' from my fellow classmates. I had a prolonged period of laughter, which elicited a sense of melancholy inside me. Later I decided not to continue my education due to the insult. In addition, the Bengali language as a means of teaching was a problem for us at the beginning.

Industrialization

Industrialization has a significant impact on the Santal households. The opportunity of employment in the garment sector has seen a notable upsurge among the community in recent years. Given the prevailing uncertainties surrounding employment prospects and the labour market, a significant number of Santal children prioritize pursuing opportunities in the Readymade Garments Sector. A female garment worker commented on their occupation within the RMG sector:

> There exists a degree of financial and future security. Based on my current income, I am able to sustain an average standard of life. I am now working in the garment industry. Despite my lack of formal education, I can manage to sustain myself financially here (CSI-15).

Language Barrier

Language is a crucial component for teaching and learning at every educational level. Santali youngsters acquire and use the Santali language as their primary means of communication since childhood. However, the educational institutions use Bengali as the primary language of teaching. Consequently, children have challenges in comprehending the instructions and educational content in the classroom throughout the primary stages of their academic journey. This not only hinders their academic progress in comparison to their mainstream peers but also contributes to their decision to discontinue studies. As CSI-16 said,

> We have learned our mother tongue from infancy. All of us are fluent in the Santali language. However, Bengali is the medium of instruction for teaching in all educational institutions in the country. Children often struggle to comprehend the instructions given by teachers in the school, particularly during the primary level of education. The teachers do not know our language. Consequently, our ability to communicate effectively and fully enjoy our educational experience is hindered throughout the early stages of schooling. I suggest the implementation of a policy mandating the presence of at least a teacher from our community in every school, ensuring effective communication with Santal youngsters.

Early Marriage

Interviews with key informants indicate that early marriage was prevalent in the past; however, there has been a recent decline in this practice owing to increased awareness within the community. Nevertheless, several families continue to engage in early marriage, hence exacerbating the issue of school dropout. As stated by CSI-20:

> My parents wed me between the ages of fourteen and fifteen. Although I was unprepared, I felt compelled to comply. I was in class nine and aspired to further my academic pursuits. However, my parents received a marriage proposal and believed it prudent for me to enter into marriage, given that the prospective bridegroom belonged to a wealthy family. I tried to convince my parents but was unsuccessful. Eventually, I married, but within two years, I had to file for divorce because my husband was drug addicted. This marriage has ruined my life and aspirations!

Discussion

The Santals youngsters possess poor education status in terms of literacy rate, enrollment and continuity. There are many interconnected socio-economic factors behind their poor education status. One of the remarkable reasons is that, living in an extreme poverty condition, they cannot afford to attend school without working, making them reluctant to continue studies. They prefer financial assistance from schools; otherwise, they choose the options of getting paid by labour. The Santals culture is more traditional than Bengali culture; therefore, the Santals youngsters face social stigma in the school, so let them remain unenrolled in the school. Moreover, the unavailability of the school near their village also pushes them to remain unenrolled.

Many of the youngsters, specifically those who are continuing education, realize the significance of education and willing to change their economic condition by attaining a good position in society. They also realize that becoming engineers, doctors, or having at least a solid educational qualification can assure their promising future. These kinds of self-realization and aspiration are quite similar among Bengali youngsters. It indicates many of them understand the significance of education and want to continue their studies. Although there are some historical barriers to educating themselves, the understanding of the significance of education is changing positively. It has been found that their interest in enrolling in educational institutions and continuing to complete a degree is increasing day by day.

Various socio-economic factors contribute to the low attainment rate of education within the Santals. Poverty, unpredictability regarding future employment, gender discrimination, corruption, language barriers, child marriage, and cultural obstacles are the primary causes of the Santals' unfavourable educational standing. One of the major reasons for poverty is that the Santals prefer daily earnings to taking education as an investment for the future. Additionally, as the cost-of-living rises, they are unable to afford the additional financial burden of education expenses. Moreover, the rate of unemployment is very high in Bangladesh. Nobody can be sure of getting a job in this overpopulated country, which also makes them reluctant to receive education from the formal institutions. In the uncertain and competitive job market, corruption, discrimination and social stigma are also considerable factors in their poor attainment. In addition, the growth of the garment industry has reduced interest in education because they can earn a minimum wage from the industry.

Education has a positive impact on the Santal community in many ways. Above all, new technologies like mobile and different media have made them understand the significance of education. Diffusions of culture have also brought them mentally to accept education, and the awareness of education motivates them to leave the traditional cultural mind. As they do internal migration, they learn that education has changed the lives of others in society. Moreover, the Santals are aware of the fact that education can make them skilled manpower to sustain in the era of modernization and globalization. Thus, education plays a pivotal role in making

them integrate into the mainstream society. Vickie Roach, an Aboriginal Graduate of Deakin University, said that education has consistently played a crucial role in the economic, social, and cultural advancement of Indigenous communities. In addition, a quality education has a crucial role in shaping the health, literacy, career opportunities, social standing and productivity of Indigenous children (as cited in Das, 2011: 43). Furthermore, a Santal teacher comments that they are aware of the significance of education now and make efforts to enroll their children in school (as cited in Das, 2011: 55).

Ensuring quality education within the Santals is threatened by different barriers like poverty, cultural barriers, language difficulty, etc. All these barriers have pushed the Santals to an unequal margin of being deprived socio-economically in society and the state. Moreover, they cannot avail of the opportunity of getting education in their mother tongue as the public institutions provides education mainly in Bengali.

Like Hoque's study (2023), it is found that 'Santali' is the main language that Santal children use to talk to each other, and they start learning it from childhood. There is a language hurdle in the classroom because the language used for teaching is not the same as the child's first language. It's likely that most parents don't know how to help their kids get ready for school (Hoque, 2023). Furthermore, inadequate nutrition and poor health during early life might have a significant impact on learning and cognitive development in subsequent years. This research posits that the education system, particularly the schooling provided to Santal children, has been affected by the sociocultural settings and economic circumstances prevalent in the community. The differences among the Santal youngsters undeniably constitute a significant aspect that impacts their academic pursuits.

The government and NGOs in Bangladesh have taken several initiatives and projects to ensure equal access to education for everyone, including the Santal community (Sen, Roy & Lamin, 2007). The aim of these educational efforts is to improve the general literacy rate by offering compulsory primary education to all children, thereby guaranteeing their right to education as citizens. In this case, the Santal people have a positive attitude towards education. They think education is the only option for improving their socio-economic conditions and the community as a whole. The access to education has already had a positive impact on Santal society. In this regard, the Santal children have access and attended primary school; however, the rate of enrollment significantly declines thereafter. The primary factors driving this drop out are deprivation, apprehension over forthcoming circumstances, and a pervasive dearth of information. Besides, the educational status of Santal children is influenced by several socioeconomic factors, such as employment uncertainty, poverty, and the quality of education. Sen, Roy and Lamin (2007) outlined the factors contributing to dropout rates, including insufficient security measures and unfavourable environmental conditions that negatively impact the welfare of the Santal community. Additionally, challenges arise from long-distance travel, illness, economic crisis, familial issues, early marriage, academic underperformance, lack of interest in studying

and linguistic barriers. Sharif (2014) additionally highlighted the persistent obstacles faced by Santal children, including linguistic differences, social isolation, lack of nurturing and motivating home environments, parents' limited understanding and awareness, poverty, demands of family obligations, early marriage, alcohol addiction and limited access to education.

The Santal people face significant challenges arising from economic instability associated with their property rights. Children experience increasing academic disparities and a significant number of them discontinue their education as a direct consequence of this factor (Das, 2011). Their economic marginalization is an additional factor that contributes to their downfall too. Instead of attending school, children are required to promptly begin their work search in order to sustain themselves financially. Consequently, students are increasingly lagging behind in their academic pursuits. Besides, they face discrimination in educational institutions due to the absence of legal entitlement to receive education in their native language. Oftentimes, the linguistic barrier hinders ethnic children from attaining an education that is equivalent to that of Bengali children (Cavallaro & Rahman, 2009).

It is essential to evaluate the degree to which Santal children have challenges to attend school, considering their minority position in the country. According to Sen, Roy and Lamin (2007), a significant number of parents choose to shift their children from educational institutions as a result of the ongoing economic crisis. Furthermore, in rural areas, a considerable proportion of young individuals have restricted educational opportunities due to the substantial geographical distance that separates their homes from schools (Cavallaro & Rahman, 2009). As a result, the children's school attendance becomes irregular. Parents with limited academic qualifications sometimes struggle to adequately monitor their children's educational advancement (Hoque, 2023). As a result, young people have a deficiency in being prompt with their studies and neglect to engage in completing formal education.

Primarily, schooling serves as a reflection and validation of the unique cultural identity and spiritual beliefs held by the Santal people (Debnath, 2010). Das (2011) asserts that schools play a pivotal part in the development of a community. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the Santal community is now facing various manifestations of covert discrimination inside the educational system. Although a considerable number of Santal parents choose to admit their children in schools, they nonetheless encounter substantial obstacles in acquiring adequate educational opportunities. The significant prevalence of school dropout among youngsters is a cause for serious worriedness, primarily because of its possible consequences on the ability of future generations to effectively tackle the difficulties resulted from poverty and landlessness and attain economic empowerment (Das, 2011). Debnath (2010) argued that the educational system, characterized by its colonial origins, has been ineffective in cultivating a sense of self-respect among the Santal community and in safeguarding their property from encroachment. Consequently, they have been subjected to various forms of oppression such as bonded labour and indebtedness.

The Santal youngsters feel disconnected and alienated in schools that enforce dominant cultural norms by imposing language dominance. They often struggle to discover any correlation between what they are taught in school and what they learn from their real-life experiences (Debnath, 2010). Due to 'bicultural ambivalence' (Cummins, as cited in Debnath, 2010), Santal youngsters face uncertainty and poor self-esteem both individually and as a group. Consequently, many of them end up leaving school. The education and linguistic policies implemented have resulted in the dispersal and individualization of the Santal community, causing the loss and fragmentation of their ethnic identity in rural areas (Debnath, 2010). So, it is crucial, according to Cavallaro and Rahman (2009), that members of the marginal community possess literacy skills in Santali, which is also their mother tongue. Additionally, fluency in both Bangla and English is necessary to take advantage of all the benefits that the formal education system has to offer. For the establishment of effective bilingual and multilingual educational programmes for the Santals, collaboration among linguists, educators, and government agencies responsible for curriculum development, assessment, and evaluation is essential (Cavallaro & Rahman, 2009). It is of the utmost importance to address the distinct educational needs of the Santal community through the establishment of a resilient and enduring bilingual curriculum that emphasizes the Santal language. The strategy ought to priorities cultural significance and resilience, with the aim of expanding educational access for this community. Such initiatives are essential for enhancing the quality of life for the Santals and guaranteeing the survival and revitalization of their native tongue (Cavallaro & Rahman, 2009). There is no doubt that there has been a change in the Santal society due to education. However, in order to improve the education status of the Santal community, it is necessary to enhance their economic prosperity, the teaching-learning process and ensuring that the results of education fit with the needs of the Santal community.

Conclusion

Education is universally acknowledged as an essential entitlement for every person, regardless of their ethnic background, religious beliefs or gender status. Small ethnic communities in Bangladesh have had significant socioeconomic development since gaining independence. Following then, the Santal community has experienced substantial progress in terms of gaining access to formal education and cultural advancement. Without a doubt, this has unequivocally resulted in a beneficial transformation in the community. Nevertheless, the community is deeply concerned about the dropout rate that occurs after primary school, mostly owing to socioeconomic factors. In addition, it is found that a uniform educational approach has been implemented for both small ethnic groups and the mainstream population, leading to difficulties in language acquisition. More precisely, this approach is not suitable for Santal youngsters, since they communicate and acquire knowledge about the world using the Santali language. Not only does this language serve as a means of communication, but it also embodies social attitudes, histories and traditions. The access to primary education for Santal students is acceptable, but

there is a notable worry over their achievement in higher levels of education. In this regard, poverty, education policy and cultural barriers are significant obstacles that need immediate response at the policy level. Simultaneously, it is advisable to use the Santali language as the primary medium of teaching in regions where the Santal people resides, gradually transitioning to the Bangla language as the medium of instruction (Hoque, 2023).

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