

Cultural Practices and Community Vitality in Purulia District of West Bengal: A Study of Tribal People

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Abstract: According to the census of 2011, 40 different types of tribal community reside in West Bengal and they comprise of 5.79% of the total population of West Bengal. With 18.45% of its population being, Purulia occupies 3rd position in terms of share of tribal population in West Bengal. The 5 major tribal communities in Purulia are Santhal (60%), Bhumij (18%), Sabar (7%), Munda (6%), Bihor (1%). Indigenous people have strong ethnic identity and rich cultural tradition depicted by its vast collections of songs, music, dance, theatre, folk traditions, performing arts, rites and rituals, paintings and writings. Tribal culture generates assets such as skills, products, expression and insights that contribute to their social and economic well-being. These skills once part of their tradition have now become a means not only for their livelihood, but also for their active contribution to the furthering of India's economic growth. The present paper examines the perceptions of tribal people towards their cultural practices and community vitality in Purulia district.

Keywords: Cultural practices, Community vitality, Tribal people, Purulia district.

A. INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'Culture' cannot be easily expressed, and almost impossible to be quantified. Acknowledgement and promotion of cultural diversity widens the range of choices for everyone and is fundamental for inclusive development, not only in terms of economic growth, but also as a means for achieving a more satisfactory moral, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual existence. However, with changing times development of cultural resilience which is the culture's capacity to maintain and develop cultural identity, knowledge and practices, as well as its ability to overcome difficulties and threats it faces from other outside norms and ideals has become challenging. India is home to 10.2 crore tribal people (Census, 2011) and they are the most backward and deprived section of the Indian society. These indigenous people have a rich cultural tradition depicted by its vast collections of songs, music, dance, theatre, folk traditions, performing arts, rites and rituals, paintings and writings that are known, as the 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' (ICH) of humanity.

The socio-cultural correlatives of tribals like customs and beliefs, food habits/taboo, supplies during lean season, art and craft, law, etc., exhibit the structure and explains how their society functions in its cultural context (Dockery, 2009, 2020). For the development to

be all-round, all-inclusive and all-pervasive economic, it should be at par with socio-cultural development. Data on socio-cultural issues are crucial for formulating development schemes and policies for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Communities, Women, Children and others for their upliftment and for development of a good civil society. However, extant literature fails to present a clear consensus regarding best method of measuring cultural identity among indigenous people (Salmon *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, present objectives of our study is "To examine the perceptions of tribal people towards their cultural practices and community vitality in Purulia district".

B. STUDY AREA

The study focuses on the tribal population of Purulia district in West Bengal. According to the census 2011, 40 types of ST i.e. near about 18.45 percent people in this district belongs to the schedule tribe category and it is the second highest tribal populated district in the state after Jalpaiguri. Tribal societies in Purulia have unique characteristics of their own. They basically live in forested mountainous areas and plateau areas of the district. They have distinct culture, tradition, religion, festivals, language and strong ethnic identity. Most of the tribals of Purulia district being of Proto Australoid group, speak in Santhali, Gond, and Kheria language. 5 major tribal communities in Purulia are Santhal (60%), Bhumij

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(18%), Sabar (7%), Munda (6%), Bihor (1%). To serve the objectives, we have surveyed 600 sample tribal households to collect the information from four blocks, namely Arsha, Bagmundi, Bandwan and Balarampur Block (150 each).

C. RESULTS

C1-Cultural Practices

This study presents various aspects of tribal culture in the study area through the perceptions of respondents towards basic cultural elements such as language; overall traditional knowledge; status of traditional skill sets; and; participation in various cultural ceremonies (table 1).

Table 1: Summary of Findings - Cultural Practice

Indicator	Percentage
First language learned indigenous and ability to speak that first language	100
Overall traditional knowledge strong	57
Households with all 5 basic traditional production skills	68
Ceremonially active	91

Sources: Authors Calculation form Primary Survey

a) Overall traditional Knowledge

It was observed that 100 percent of the respondents had first learned their indigenous language and are able to speak that language. Overall traditional knowledge defined as respondent's understanding of

traditional stories, songs, dances, and games, was measured by asking respondents to rate their understanding of each on a five-point scale. It was found that 57 percent respondents had strong, while 30 percent has weak traditional knowledge (figure 1).

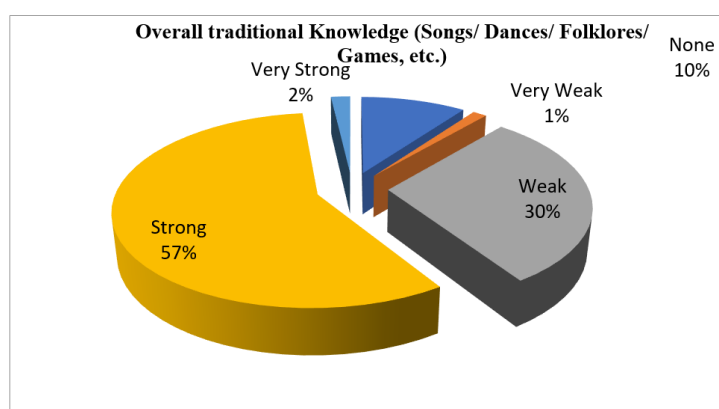


Figure 1: Overall traditional Knowledge

Sources: Authors Calculation form Primary Survey

b) Households with all 5 basic traditional production skills

A composite indicator was formed to assess the households in terms of possessing the five most basic skills. The basic skills indicator is comprised of skills for

housing (house building, basket weaving), feeding (crop cultivation, hunting/fishing), and healing (medicine producing). Nearly 68 percent respondents reported that they or someone in their household possessed all five basic traditional production skills (figure- 2).

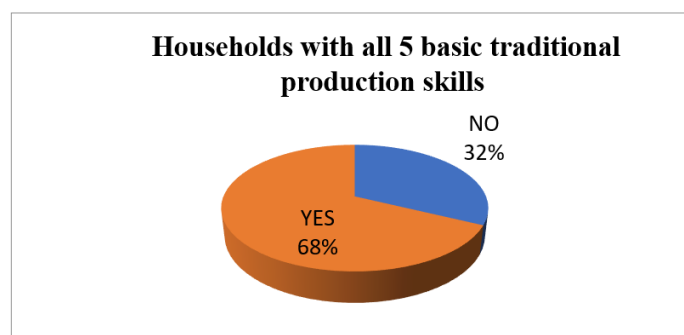


Figure 2: Households with all 5 basic traditional production skills

Sources: Authors Calculation form Primary Survey

c) Weekly engagement in traditional arts and culture

Weekly engagement in various traditional arts and cultural activities like practising their tribal songs and dances, performing plays, painting etc. was estimated to determine importance levels among them

regarding preservation of their culture. It was found that 32 percent of the respondents were engaged in practising their traditional art for 1-2 hours weekly, 26 percent occasionally while 9 percent said there was no specific time limit for them (figure 3).

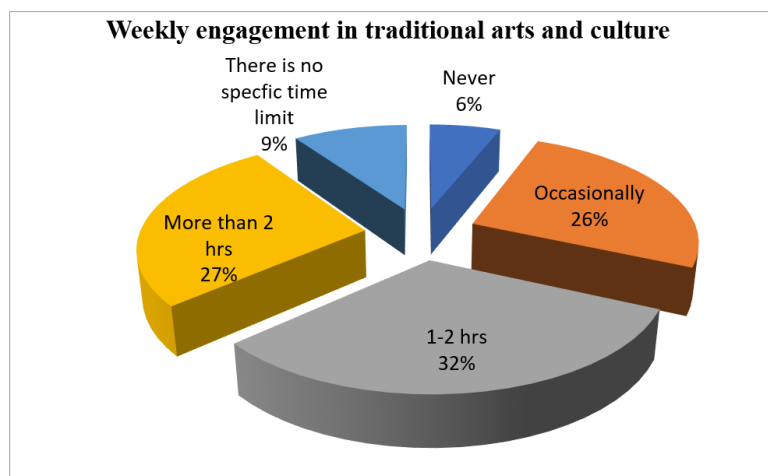


Figure 3: Weekly engagement in traditional arts and culture

Sources: Authors Calculation form Primary Survey

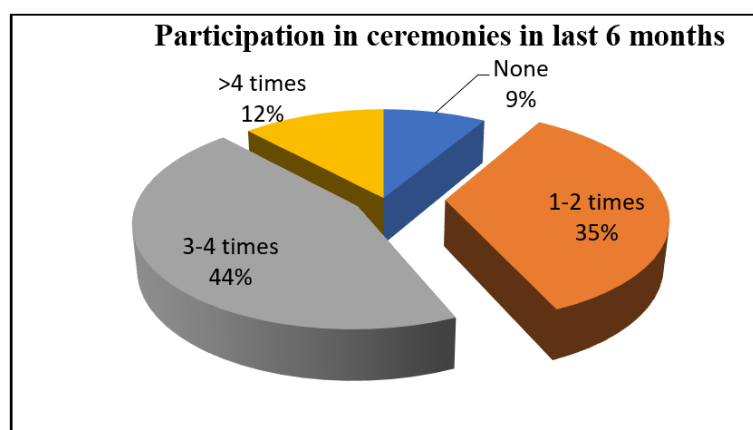
d) Participation in ceremonies in last 6 months

Figure 4: Participation in ceremonies in last 6 months

Sources: Authors Calculation form Primary Survey

To determine levels of ceremonial activity, respondent's participation in various ritual activities like birth, marriage, death and other community-based ceremonies, over a 6 month period was estimated. Figures 4.17 show that 44 percent respondents participated in community ceremonies 3-4 times, 35 percent 1-2 times and 9 percent did not participate in any kind of ceremonies in the last 6 months (figure 4).

C2-Community vitality

Human beings are inherently social and the frequency of contact and the quality of personal

relationships with other members of the society play a vital role in human well-being. Social networks are strong in tribal communities and they material and emotional support in times of need.

In order to understand the contribution of social capital to well-being among tribal people we have examined their interactions and relationships within communities. To gather Information regarding the state of community vitality we have looked into specific dimensions such as volunteering in community development works, social cohesion and trust (table- 2).

Table 2: Summary of Findings - Community Vitality

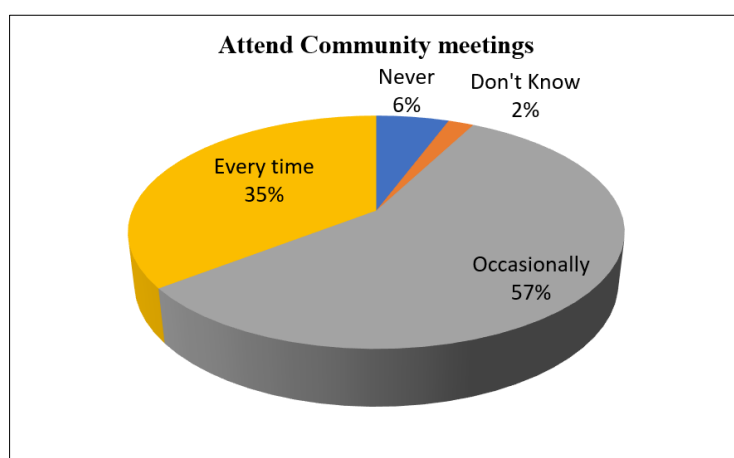
Indicator	Percentage
Regular attendance at community meetings	35
Rate of voluntarism	81
High level of trust in neighbours	30
Very strong family perception	72
Never missed meals for lack of food	89

Sources: Authors Calculation form Primary Survey

a) Attend Community meetings

Community meetings are a vital feature in tribal villages. These meetings bring all members of the community together and serve a number of purposes such as resolution of any conflicts, planning for works related to community development, and planning for various ceremonies/ festivals etc. Community meetings provide a platform for building and strengthening of

social connections and utilization of social capital. Information regarding respondent's frequency of attending community meeting on a monthly basis was collected. It was found that 57 percent respondents participated in community meetings occasionally, 35 percent participated every time and 6 percent never attended community meetings (figure 5).

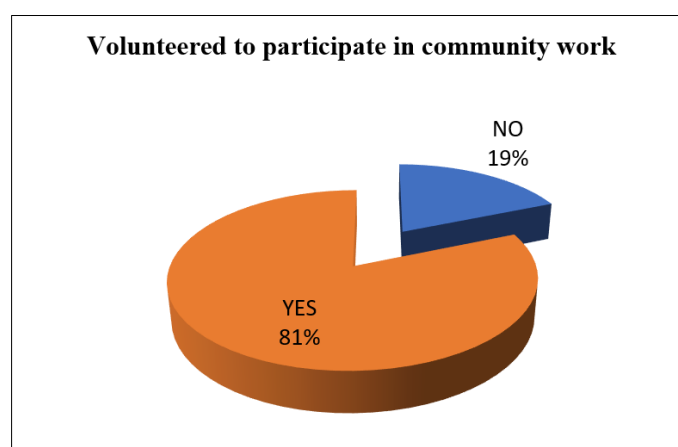
**Figure 5: Attend community meetings**

Sources: Authors Calculation form Primary Survey

b) Volunteered to participate in community work

Voluntarism indicates availability of support within a community in a more objective manner. We find that 81 percent of respondents have volunteered to participate in community work such as cleaning of

ponds, building roads within villages, planting trees, preparations for ceremonies/festivals or other work activities assigned by traditional leaders or family members (figure 6).

**Figure 6: Volunteered to participate in community work**

Sources: Authors Calculation form Primary Survey

c) Level of trust in neighbours

To determine the levels of trust within community members, respondents were asked to reveal their trust level on a four point scale. It was observed that

majority of the respondent (60 percent) expressed medium level of trust on their neighbours. 30 percent respondents reported high level while 9 percent reported low level of trust on their neighbours (figure 7).

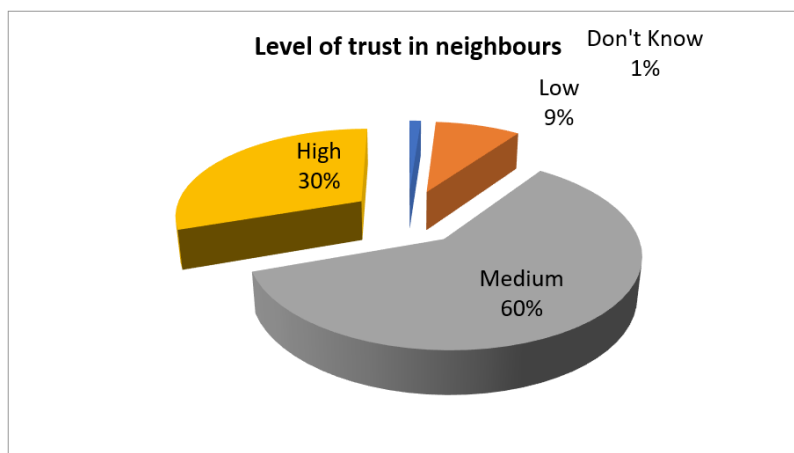


Figure 7: Level of trust in neighbours

Sources: Authors Calculation form Primary Survey

d) Missed meals for lack of food in a month

To gauge the strength of social connection and bond between the community members, information was collected regarding whether respondent has missed

meals for lack of food in a month. It was found that 40 percent respondents never missed meals, 27 percent missed occasionally or once or twice and only one percent missed meals twice in a month (figure 8).

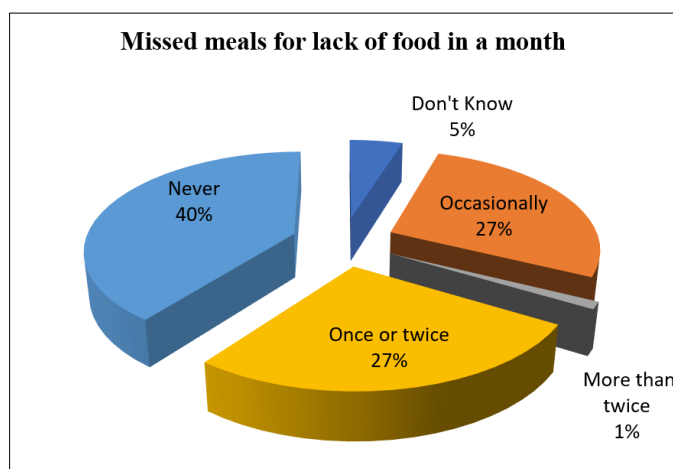


Figure 8: Missed meals for lack of food in a month

Sources: Authors Calculation form Primary Survey

D. CONCLUSION

In this paper we have tried to assess the strength and significance of various aspects of culture in the study area through the perceptions of respondents towards basic cultural elements such as language; overall traditional knowledge; status of traditional skill sets; and; participation in various cultural ceremonies. It was found that only 57 percent of respondents had strong and 30 percent had weak traditional knowledge, nearly 68 percent of respondents confirm that they or someone in their household possessed all five basic traditional production skills. Merely 32 percent of the respondents were engaged in practising their traditional art for 1-2 hours weekly and only 44 percent of respondents

participated in community ceremonies 3-4 times and 9 percent did not participate in any kind of ceremonies in the last 6 months. The state of community vitality was observed by looking into specific dimensions such as volunteering in community development works, social cohesion, and trust level with their neighbours. It was found that 57 percent of respondents participated in community meetings occasionally, 81 percent of respondents volunteered to participate in community work such as cleaning ponds, building roads within villages, planting trees, preparations for ceremonies/festivals, or other work activities assigned by traditional leaders or family members and the majority of the respondent (60 percent) expressed medium level of

trust on their neighbours and it was found that 89 percent respondents never missed their meals throughout the years.

Data availability

The data utilized in this study were gathered through a survey of 600 households. These data are not publicly accessible as they were produced as part of an ICSSR-funded research initiative.

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Conflict of interest

We hereby declare that there is no conflict of interest whatsoever related to this manuscript.

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