

**“ECOLOGICAL DEGRADATION AND THE TRIBAL LIVELIHOOD IN PURULIA  
– A BACKWARD DISTRICT OF WEST BENGAL”**

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# ECOLOGICAL DEGRADATION AND THE TRIBAL LIVELIHOOD IN PURULIA – A BACKWARD DISTRICT OF WEST BENGAL

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*This paper tends to examine first the different tribal communities of Purulia district in terms of their physical environment, society, economy, culture, polity, and then an attempt has been made to peep into and scan the connection between tribal livelihood and ecological degradation soon after the introduction of modernization and interaction with non-tribal communities which produced devastating results not only on the tribal societies but above all the ecosystem of the region under consideration. In fine, the paper explains some policy prescriptions regarding the conservation of natural resources and well-being of tribal communities of Purulia district.*

## I

A tribal economy should always be characterized by the collection of their social, institutional, technological and finally economic arrangements through which the community seeks to enhance their material and social well-being. There is always an interaction between the environment in which the community lives and their practices that led to sustain their livelihood. Natural environment, surrounding the people, provides several goods, services and amenities to them, but using the environmental resources for one purpose always reduces its ability to supply them with other services. This limited natural resource base surroundings, the tribal societies being scarce and many conflicting demands placed on it from other sectors and other areas of society reduces their availability to the tribal communities and affects their livelihood. Sometimes, the outside agencies use the tribals of the locality to destroy the resources especially forest resources by encouraging overexploitation of timber, grazing lands and crop lands. Sometimes, the people in the communities are aware of the dangers of this sort of habitat destructions but they badly can influence and arrest the exploitations. They have little knowledge and little power to influence the direction of change taking place due to broader changes in society. They could not influence the national laws, national policies, social and economic changes. They are always the sufferers from the result of the actions by the outsiders. Here the paper seeks to describe that, the depletion of environmental resource base takes place in Purulia district as well as in all the other cases, only by the joint operation of development in human societies and the interactions between tribal habitat and the outside, relatively well advanced world. The problem is very complex, though the paper deals with this complexity with available information, which suggests that the depletion is far less uniform. There are cases where evidence of improvement is also apparent. Progress in societal, economical, cultural, political, and above all educational structures within tribes of Purulia especially within Santals community leads to devolution of power to them, encouraging taking decisions on economic and ecological matters by themselves, which will ultimately, improve the resource base of the entire district.

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## II

Among the rainfed lowland rice areas, Purulia district part of the Chhotanagpur Plateau in India constitutes an area of particularly low agricultural productivity and a high incidence and severity of poverty. Moreover, the incidence of poverty among rural households in the Chhotanagpur Plateau is estimated to be among the highest in Asia. The district of Purulia has been taken as the study area is the westernmost district of West Bengal, girdled by the Tropic of Cancer, and its latitudinal and longitudinal extents are from 22°42'35'' to 23°42'00'' North and from 85°49'25'' to 86°54'37'' East respectively. Purulia has its boundaries on the east with Paschim Medinipur and Bankura districts of West Bengal; on the north with Bardhaman district of West Bengal; on the north- west, west and south- west with Jharkhand state. The total geographical area of the district is 6259 sq. kms (Census 2001), out of which the Urban and rural areas are consisting 79.37 sq. kms (1.27 per cent) (Municipalities & Non-Municipalities) and 6179.63 sq. kms (98.73 per cent) respectively. The landscape of Purulia is quite unique having distinctive soil, terrain, drainage, forest and whole gamut of physical environmental set up which is within the ambit of Rarh Tract of West Bengal. Most rural households practice subsistence farming under adverse and risky environmental conditions. The natural resource base can be characterized as poorly suited to agriculture due to climatic, water resource, and soil conditions. Due to several decades of non-sustainable land use practices and highly erosive monsoon rains, deforestation and accelerated soil erosion are proceeding rapidly in many parts of the plateau. The families, particularly the tribal families, that live and work in the district, often depend upon non-agricultural income generating activities to sustain the household—especially during the post-Monsoon season. The majority of these non-farming activities involve low productive and low paying work. Trends with respect to the state of natural resources combined with the paucity of options for high-return non-agricultural employment make the prognosis for the future of the area, and of the families that live there, worrying. According to the 2001 census the district contains population of 25,36,516 of whom 12,98,078 are male and 12,38,438 are females out of which 19.35 per cent is Scheduled Caste and 19.22 per cent is Scheduled Tribes. The literacy rates of male and female are 74.18 per cent and 37.15 per cent of the total population respectively. Purulia district is having second highest percentage of tribal population (18.3 per cent) after Jalpaiguri (18.9 per cent) than that of its adjacent districts like Bankura (10.4 per cent), Birhum (6.4 per cent), Bardhaman (6.4 per cent), Purba and Paschim Medinipur (8.3 per cent) of West Bengal which automatically enviable for geographers to work on tribes in all respect. At present the district comprises 20 CD Blocks, 170 Gram Panchayat, 2683 Mouzas and 2468 inhabited villages.

## III

Tribes of Purulia are mostly a rural phenomenon, almost 95 per cent of tribal communities habited in villages. In case of India, the percentage is 93 per cent and in West Bengal the value is 94.86 per cent. Tribal societies of Purulia are having distinct characteristics, where most of them are of Proto-Australoids groups with dark skin colour, sunken nose and lower forehead. As far as linguistic affiliation is concerned the languages spoken by the tribes in Purulia district are mostly from Austro-Asiatic family where people belonging to Munda branch speak Santhali, Gondi, and Kheria. In terms of demographic characteristics, it is evident from census report, 1991 and 2001, that the percentage of tribal population in Purulia

district has been decreasing in a significant way, where in 1991, the percentage of tribal population was 19.23 percent, dropped off 18.27 percent in 2001. On the other hand, since from 1971 to 1991, Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP) report on tribal population also explain the same down fall, where tribal population in the ITDP areas in those three years were 181099, 247145 and 299363 respectively, clearly indicate decreasing in growth rate in tribal population. The main causes of this remarkable reduction are migration, Sanskritization, conversion into Christianity or other minority classes for better social status, low standard of living, limited occupational opportunities and above all failure of governmental schemes (Table: I).

**Table I:** - Tribal Population of Purulia District, 1971, 1981, 1991 and 2001

Census Year	Total Population	Total Tribal Population	Percentage of Tribal Population
1971	16, 02,875	3, 13,793	19.57
1981	18, 53,801	3, 48,372	18.79
1991	22, 24,577	4, 27,766	19.23
2001	25, 36,516	4, 63,452	18.27

**Source:-** Census of India, 1971, 1981, 1991 & 2001, Government of India.

From spatial point of view the district exhibit very uniqueness as to the tribal habitat and ecology. In some of the CD Blocks the share of tribal population is very high like Bandwan (51.07 percent), Manbazar II (48.96 percent), Santuri(32.26 percent) etc. though the concentration of tribal communities are found all over the district particularly in the northern and western fringes of the district (Table : II).

**Table II:** - Block & Town wise Distribution of Tribal Population of Purulia District, 2001

C.D.Blocks & Towns	% of Tribal Population
Bundwan	51.07
Manbazar II	48.96
Santuri	32.26
Balarampur	31.69
Hura	26.73
Bagmundi	24.19
Kashipur	23.92
Puncha	23.68
Manbazar I	22.99
Neturia	22.96
Arsha	22.02
Barabazar	18.38
Jhalda II	12.86
Jhalda I	10.42
Raghunathpur I	10.05
Jaipur	9.9

Purulia I	7.72
Raghunathpur II	6.23
Para	4.58
Purulia II	4.31
Purulia (T)	1.84
Jhalda (T)	1.07
Raghunathpur (T)	0.45
<b>PURULIA</b>	<b>18.27</b>

**Source:** - Census of India, 2001, Government of India.

Some of the major tribes of Purulia district are Santals, Bhumij, Kheria, Shabar, and others and among which Santals consist the highest population concentration in the district. According to the report of West Bengal Scheduled Castes and Tribes Facts and Information, Special Series No. 32, 1989, Santals, among all the tribal communities of Purulia district, comprises 62.66 per cent, where others like Bhumij, Shabar, Kheria have 16.57 per cent, 1.43 per cent and 0.61 per cent respectively. In Purulia district, Santals, an aboriginal tribe, have been mainly living in the Bagmundi, Bandwan, Balarampur, Arsha C.D. Blocks. Having lived in the thickly forested hills and the plateau surfaces, the Santals have enjoyed a certain degree of isolation. It is evident that, this group of tribal communities and their habitat has been penetrated by non-tribal communities but not on a large scale. As compared to the Bhumij, Kheria and others, the Santals have a larger territorial extent but from whole Indian context, Santals have a smaller territorial extent than Gonds, Bhils, concentrated only in the Rajmahal hills and Chhotanagpur plateau region of India. At the 1991 Census Santals were limited only 60 districts in the three states of India like Bihar, West Bengal and Orissa. The spatial pattern of concentration shows that about one-half of the total Santal population is found in then Bihar and about two-fifths in West Bengal. They are heavily concentrated in the district named after them viz., 'Santal Pargana'- the value of the index of concentration being 25.89 per cent. The index values are also quite high for Birbhum (12.45 per cent), Medinipur (8.33 per cent), Purulia (5.25 per cent) districts of West Bengal.

Hierarchical status is virtually absent from Santal society. Each Santal has equal status in his own society, whether he is rich or poor, strong or weak. Being in small village, everyone knows everyone's identity. Relationship in the family and village is governed by well known customs and traditions.

Bhumijis are one of the autochthonous people of the land, mention in the ancient and medieval Chronicles as Jharkhand, a large part of which was included in the district of Jungle Mahals (the common characteristics being the jungle nature of the terrain) in 1805, to which the larger part of the present day Purulia district belonged. Bhumijis are in very conscious with their religion and this factor is limited with their own natural circumference such as 'Sun' or 'Singh Bonga', local name is their main God. Moreover, their marriage system is also bounded by their norms and customs.

Since 1956 from the year of identification of Kheria as schedule tribes, they are the worst sufferer in terms of economy in the district. More than 70 percent populations in Kheria community are agricultural labourers. In Purulia district Kheria is subdivided into three sub-groups as 'Pahari Kheria', 'Dhelki Kheria' and 'Didh Kheria'. Kheria Panchayat system is being divided into two branches on the basis of their power of judgement into Panchayat,

relatively having lower status and making all sorts of primary judgement and 'Parha Panchayat', is recognized as their supreme court.

#### IV

Presently, tribal indigenous lifestyle, including mode of economy, societal status, culture, polity as well, are intrinsically linked with and transformed according to the overall changes in the ecological base of their present habitats. Though no less impressive is the pattern of their spatial distribution. Moreover, two broad generalizations viz. option of the tribes to live in remote areas which are largely unfavorable to sedentary agriculture and the Tribes being unscrupulously pushed into uninhabited areas by the comparatively cultured peasant groups of the villages by their general habits. In addition, unprecedented increase in population among tribes also generates environmental degradation in such tribal habitats of Purulia district. So, increasing tribal population results into a tremendous stress on the natural environment of the tribes in those areas which again reduces the capacities of local environment to provide adequate support to the tribal people and the others. Thus the problem of physical survival of the tribal people of Purulia district under such circumstances crops up inviting attention of the society by and large.

Moreover, though only 6 per cent tribal people live in towns but for them, the living condition is worse than in the countryside. The problem is basically economic and ecologic. In the towns, they do not earn enough money to buy the essential commodities from the market. Here the movement is essentially distress-driven.

Since independence, tribal ecological and economical conditions have undergone many changes as result of governmental policies. Rapid industrialization through economic planning, constitutional laws which is responsible for the creation of democratic, secular, and egalitarian society, introduction of land reforms and Community Development Projects (CDP) in tribal areas since 1950's, influences of modern science and technology specially on their pristine practices, all have deeply affected the social, institutional, economic, cultural as well as political structure of tribes of Purulia. Application of new agricultural technology in farm production has also transformed the farm economy and the mode of life. The family, class and institutional life of the tribal communities have been undergoing drastic changes as a result of rapid transformation of the agrarian tribal society to a market based profit oriented, commercial agrarian tribal society. The introduction of parliamentary democracy and adult franchise has made tribal villages even more fully integrated with the wider political system. They are now not only the elected members of local bodies like Gram Panchayat but also members of the state legislature and parliament.

Societal as well as economic changes in tribal life due to developmental processes may be examined in two crucial sections first, structural changes in the primary work especially in agriculture, and secondly, the shift of tribes from non-literate to literate status. It is evident that, tribal assimilation into peasant mode of production is a very slow process though its consequences may be detrimental due to the fact that slow rate of change in tribal economy, leading to the transformation of tribal mode of production again led to the destruction of physical environment in the end.

On the other hand, several tribal groups especially during and after British rule sought to improve their social and economic status by embracing Sanskritization, sections of tribal population who tended to get absorbed into Hindu society through cultural interchange and

Christianity. For instance, the Bhumijis began to rely upon neighboring Hindu artisans, for procuring which they had to sell part of their surplus agricultural produce as also lac and shellac objects which were produced in Purulia. Thus their economic communication with Hindu peasant, artisans and traders began to make impact on their culture. On the contrary, where attempts at Sanskritization is failed, resulting in resentment among the tribal peoples.

## V

Most of the tribal villages are backward in Purulia district and according to latest report developed by the Office of the District Magistrate, Purulia there are 994 identified backward villages in the district out of 2468 inhabited villages (Table III). These villages have been identified as backward villages on the basis of two parameters, namely, lack of enough employment for the villagers and extremely low women literacy rates. In this concern, government, has implemented and given the priority for several employment generation schemes in these villages under various schemes like NFFWP, SGRY, RSVY etc. Here, also two fold actions are taking place, firstly, provision of employment through excavation of earth for development of roads and excavation of tanks for immediate benefit. At the same time, with the available funds, special care has taken to increase rain water storage potential in these areas by again excavation of tanks, rising embankment and development of Jore-bunds so as to increase the agricultural activities as a permanent source of employment. Schemes of soil conservation, digging masonry wells, land reclamation have also taken up to tackle the situation. To some extent, this has improved the tribal economical as well as ecological situations.

On the other aspect, in case of educational development, tribals have been responding fairly well. As in case of whole West Bengal, Purulia district is also experiencing at least a fare growth in male literacy; even Purulia is well above the average of the State i.e. 20 per cent. But there is no progress in female literacy as such. Low women literacy rates in Purulia district like other districts of West Bengal except Bankura and Jalpaiguri, where these two districts have experienced increase of more than 4 per cent points in women literacy, steps have been taken to open some SSKS or MSKS with the fund available under SSA and DPEP. Though admittedly, not much of improvement is felt as yet though efforts are still going on with the help of the PRI officials.

To ensure irradiation of backwardness from the tribal societies and these backward villages, government has implemented different developmental schemes like 'Food Security Schemes', 'Mid-Day Meals in Schools', 'Ensure Payment of Labour Wage fixed by Govt.', 'Maintenance of Hostels run by BCW Departments', 'Distribution of Pension to Old Persons', 'Employment Generation Programs in the Backward Villages', 'Drinking Water Schemes', 'Irrigation Schemes' etc.

**Table- III:** - Number of Backward Villages in different Blocks of Purulia district

Sl. No.	Name of the Blocks	No. of Backward Villages
1	Arsha	69
2	Bagmundi	98
3	Balarampur	56
4	Bandwan	78

5	Barabazar	80
6	Hura	18
7	Joypur	61
8	Jhalda-I	53
9	Jhalda-II	102
10	Kashipur	25
11	Manbazar-I	75
12	Manbazar-II	39
13	Neturia	38
14	Para	36
15	Puncha	21
16	Purulia-I	44
17	Purulia-II	24
18	Raghunathpur-I	23
19	Raghunathpur-II	30
20	Santuri	24
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>994</b>

**Source:** - Developmental Section, Office of the District Magistrate & Collector, Purulia, 2005

## VI

Ecological degradation in the region of Purulia district where the tribal people live, enhance their poverty and deprivation. The physical environment that sustains the livelihood of the people of the community compel to reduce their dependence on natural environment, further increase in rural population has pushed the man-land ratio to below sustainable level. The larger demand for food grains is tackled with institutional changes and unproved farming techniques, which could enhance the degradation more towards uncertainty in livelihood, though government and non-government plans keep the hope to sustain tribal ecology and economy through the advancement of overall physical environment of the district. While saying so, there is no gainsaying the fact that the tribes to be drawn into the vortex of development, encounters with development, modernization and globalization have produced devastating results on the tribal society not only in Purulia but all over India. Interaction with outsiders became a cause of disturbance to the otherwise self-contained tribal social world. With the opening up of tribal regions, started in the third decade of the twentieth century, the tribal society, registered few major impacts such as an influx of non-tribal peasantry, transformation of subsistence tribal agriculture into cash cropping, market based economy leading to deplorable result in the environment of the living status of the tribes.

In fine, the major portion of the necessities and conveniences of life the people receive is being obtained in a non-market context. The ecological-economics perspective can offer a better approximation in determining their well being. One of the major steps for improving the life style of tribal communities, keeping apart the role papers on polices on tribal development, either they have to gain equality, unity, justice, supplemented not only by the government but by the modern people of locality as well. That is to say that, the tribal

communities as well as modern societies are to be very much liberal and flexible in exchanging the culture, and ideas and this process will strengthen the solidarity, equity and unity on both sides. In this context, education in the real sense of the term is to be taken as a key role for fostering well being integrity of the totalitarian society, environment, combining both the tribal and non-tribal population of Purulia district.

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