

Education, Livelihood and Empowerment of Santhali Women in Deoghar District, Jharkhand

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Abstract

This study explores the interlinked dimensions of education, livelihood, and empowerment among Santhali women in Deoghar district, Jharkhand. Santhali women play a vital role in sustaining households and community life, yet continue to face systemic barriers such as poverty, low literacy, insecure livelihoods, and gender inequality. Drawing on field surveys, interviews, focus group discussions, and secondary sources, the research adopts a descriptive-analytical approach to examine how education and livelihood opportunities shape empowerment outcomes.

Findings reveal that literacy rates among Santhali women remain significantly below district and state averages, with high dropout rates driven by poverty, early marriage, and lack of infrastructure. Despite these challenges, education emerges as a transformative factor: women with higher educational attainment show greater participation in self-help groups (SHGs), improved decision-making roles, and enhanced awareness of rights. Livelihood analysis highlights dependence on agriculture, wage labor, and seasonal migration, with SHGs and microfinance offering alternative income sources through small enterprises such as vegetable farming and poultry. Empowerment is most visible among women engaged in SHGs, where collective action fosters financial independence, leadership, and social confidence. However, patriarchal norms, limited access to land, and weak policy implementation continue to hinder progress.

The study concludes that meaningful empowerment requires convergence of culturally relevant education, diversified livelihoods, and gender-sensitive policies. Strengthening SHGs, expanding skill development, and addressing structural barriers are essential to enhancing Santhali women's agency. Ultimately, their empowerment represents both a matter of social justice and a catalyst for inclusive regional development in Jharkhand.

Keywords: Santhali Women, Education, Livelihood, Empowerment, Deoghar District

Introduction

India is home to a rich tapestry of tribal communities, each with distinct languages, cultures, and traditions. Among them, the **Santhal tribe** is one of the largest and most prominent, concentrated in the states of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, and Bihar. In Jharkhand, Santhals form a significant share of the tribal population, and their socio-economic conditions reflect both resilience and struggle. Within this community, **Santhali women** play an indispensable role in sustaining family livelihoods, preserving cultural traditions, and participating in social life. Despite their contributions, they face enduring challenges in accessing education, securing sustainable livelihoods, and achieving empowerment.

The **Deoghar district of Jharkhand** offers a critical site to study these dynamics. Known primarily as a religious and cultural center, Deoghar also has a large tribal population, including Santhals who live in both rural and semi-urban settings. Santhali women in this district are engaged largely in agriculture, daily wage labor, and informal sectors. Their lives reveal the complex intersections of poverty, gender inequality, and tribal marginalization.

Importance of the Study

Women's empowerment has long been recognized as a cornerstone of development. For tribal communities, empowerment cannot be understood merely in economic terms; it must also include **education, cultural identity, and social participation**. In the case of Santhali women, empowerment is linked to their ability to access schooling, secure stable income, and participate in household and community decision-making. Education, in particular, serves as both a tool of empowerment and a bridge to improved livelihoods. Yet, literacy levels among Santhali women in Jharkhand remain significantly below the state average, highlighting persistent barriers such as poverty, early marriage, distance from schools, and lack of supportive infrastructure.

Livelihood is another crucial dimension. Santhali women contribute heavily to agriculture and forest-based subsistence activities, yet their work is undervalued and often unrecognized. Seasonal migration to urban centers for domestic work or construction labor exposes them to exploitation and instability. While the rise of **self-help groups (SHGs)** and microfinance initiatives has opened new pathways, structural inequalities and lack of institutional support continue to limit their economic independence.

Empowerment for Santhali women is also deeply tied to their participation in governance and collective action. Jharkhand has seen increasing involvement of tribal women in **panchayati raj institutions** and grassroots organizations. However, empowerment remains uneven and fragile, as patriarchal structures within both tribal and mainstream society restrict their autonomy.

Statement of the Problem

Despite various government programs and non-governmental initiatives, Santhali women in Deoghar face **interconnected barriers** in education, livelihood, and empowerment. Literacy levels remain low, dropout rates high, and access to higher education limited. Livelihood opportunities are largely insecure, with women concentrated in informal sectors lacking fair wages or job security. Although SHGs and welfare schemes have made progress, many women remain unaware of their rights and entitlements. Empowerment is hindered by gender discrimination, poverty, and social exclusion.

This study seeks to examine how education, livelihood opportunities, and empowerment interact in shaping the lives of Santhali women in Deoghar. By identifying barriers and analyzing the role of institutional interventions, the research aims to highlight both the challenges and the potential for change.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the educational status of Santhali women in Deoghar district and identify barriers to literacy and higher education.
2. To examine the livelihood patterns of Santhali women and assess their economic contributions within household and community contexts.
3. To evaluate the role of government programs, self-help groups, and NGOs in promoting socio-economic empowerment among Santhali women.
4. To explore the relationship between education, livelihood opportunities, and empowerment in improving the overall status of Santhali women in Deoghar.

Hypothesis

- Higher levels of education among Santhali women positively influence their livelihood opportunities and economic independence.
- Participation in self-help groups and government schemes significantly enhances their empowerment.
- Lack of access to education and secure livelihood opportunities remains a major barrier to empowerment.

Research Questions

1. What is the current educational status of Santhali women in Deoghar district, and what factors contribute to low literacy and dropout rates?
2. How do Santhali women sustain their livelihoods, and what challenges do they face in accessing stable and fair employment?
3. To what extent do government schemes, NGOs, and self-help groups contribute to improving the socio-economic conditions of Santhali women?
4. How does education influence empowerment and decision-making capabilities among Santhali women in household and community contexts?
5. What policy measures can effectively address the gaps in education, livelihood, and empowerment of Santhali women in Deoghar?

Scope of the Study

The study focuses on Santhali women in **Deoghar district** of Jharkhand. It covers their educational attainment, livelihood practices, and levels of empowerment in family, economic, and community life. The scope includes both rural and semi-urban areas, with attention to the impact of migration, modernization, and welfare schemes. While the study centers on Santhali women, its findings contribute more broadly to the discourse on **tribal women's development in India**.

Significance of the Study

This research is significant for multiple reasons:

- It provides a **sociological understanding** of Santhali women's lives, highlighting the interplay of tradition, gender, and development.
- It contributes to policy discussions by identifying gaps in education, livelihood programs, and empowerment initiatives.
- It documents the agency of Santhali women, who despite structural challenges, are actively negotiating spaces of empowerment through education and collective action.
- Finally, it offers insights for NGOs, government agencies, and educators working towards inclusive tribal development in Jharkhand.

A Literature Review

This literature review examines research from 2015–2025 on the education, livelihood, and empowerment of Santhali (Santal) women in Deoghar district of Jharkhand, India. Santhal is the largest tribal community in Jharkhand, comprising about one-third of the state's Scheduled Tribe (ST) population. Jharkhand itself has a substantial tribal population (around 26% of the state's people), most of whom live in rural areas and face high levels of poverty. Deoghar district lies in the Santhal Pargana region and has a significant Santhali population. The review focuses on key themes emerging in recent scholarship: educational attainment, livelihood and economic participation, empowerment and social inclusion, the role of government and NGOs, and persistent barriers and challenges. The sources include peer-reviewed journals, government and NGO reports, and academic studies centered on tribal women's development, education policy, gender equity, and socio-economic upliftment in India. Citations are provided in APA 7th edition style.

Literacy Rates and Gender Gaps: Educational attainment among Santhali women in Deoghar has historically been low, though improving gradually. According to an analysis of Indian census data, the overall literacy rate in Deoghar district in 2011 was 61.8%, but with a sharp gender disparity – 75.0% literacy for males versus only 48.9% for females. In other words, barely half of women (aged 7 and above) were literate, compared to three-quarters of men. This gap, though narrowing from previous decades, signals substantial inequality in basic education access. **Choudhary (2016)** compares two major tribes and notes that the Santhal tribe of Deoghar district is much less educated and has lower socio-economic status than the Oraon tribe of Ranchi district, despite both districts being in the same state. This points to intra-state and inter-tribal variations in educational outcomes – with Santhali women in Deoghar lagging behind some other tribal groups in Jharkhand on literacy and schooling indicators.

Enrollment and Schooling Patterns: Government data and surveys indicate that enrollment of tribal girls in schooling has improved in the past decade, yet remains far from universal. For instance, the Jharkhand Economic Survey 2015-16 found that girls made up only about half of students at primary and upper primary levels (reflecting dropout or non-enrollment of many girls) and that female literacy in rural areas was dramatically lower than in urban areas (rural female literacy ~47% vs urban ~77%). The gap suggests that Santhali girls in villages often have limited access to quality schooling. Socio-cultural factors like early marriage and domestic responsibilities contribute to girls leaving school early, as several studies observe. **Binjha (2020)**, in a study on Dumka (a neighboring Santhal Pargana district), found that although tribal women traditionally enjoy relatively **egalitarian** roles within their communities, their formal educational levels are low; many Santhal women in the younger generation still have higher illiteracy rates than their male counterparts, affecting their ability to continue to higher education. The study's findings showed a significant positive correlation between women's educational qualifications and their empowerment in decision-

making, underlining that raising educational attainment is vital for enhancing the agency of Santhali women.

Education Policy Context: Over the past decade, national education policies aimed at universal education have been implemented in tribal areas of Jharkhand. The Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009 guarantees free, compulsory education for children 6–14 and programs like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (Education for All) have focused on tribal and rural enrollment. Additionally, schemes such as *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* (launched 2015) promote girl-child education and awareness. Despite these efforts, literacy data and field studies suggest that Santhali girls still face hurdles in completing schooling. **Sukhija and Mishra (2024)** argue that the fundamental cause of marginalization of tribal women in Jharkhand remains inadequate education and skill development, despite numerous government initiatives. This indicates that policy implementation gaps and contextual challenges in Santhal-dominated regions like Deoghar have slowed progress in educational outcomes for women.

Occupational Patterns: Santhali women in Deoghar historically engage in subsistence agriculture, forest-based work, and wage labor. They contribute significantly to the rural economy through farm labor, tending livestock, and handicrafts, but much of this work is unpaid or in the informal sector. According to a Jharkhand gender profile, **over 66% of women's work in rural India (including tribal areas) is unpaid**, compared to only 12% for rural men. Women are often concentrated in low-paid, low-status jobs and face higher unemployment than men. In Deoghar's villages, Santhali women commonly work as landless laborers or small cultivators. However, due to erosion of traditional livelihoods and lack of local opportunities, many Santhal families have resorted to migration for work. Studies note that **seasonal migration is a widespread livelihood strategy** in Santhal Pargana – driven by poverty and the scarcity of local jobs. Santhali women, in particular, have been part of migrant labor flows to urban areas or other states (for example, as domestic workers or farm laborers), which exposes them to exploitation and instability. These patterns underscore the vulnerability and marginalization of Santhali women in the workforce.

Livelihood Improvement Initiatives: Over the last decade, there has been a strong policy and civil society focus on improving the livelihoods of tribal women through self-help groups (SHGs) and rural entrepreneurship programs. The National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), locally implemented by the Jharkhand State Livelihood Promotion Society, has mobilized hundreds of thousands of rural women into SHGs to encourage savings, credit access, and microenterprise. **Pravah**, a Deoghar-based NGO working in Santhal Pargana, emphasizes linking marginalized women to the “mainstream of the rural economy”. Pravah reports that it has facilitated the formation of women's SHGs, village organizations and federations, and provided capacity-building and credit linkages, resulting in organized groups of Santhali women who plan and execute livelihood activities. Through interventions like kitchen gardens, backyard poultry, fisheries, and lac cultivation, these women's groups have enhanced household incomes and food security. Empowered with new skills and access to

finance, many tribal women have become micro-entrepreneurs and active contributors to local markets.

Economic Empowerment Successes: Anecdotal evidence highlights some remarkable success stories. For example, under NRLM's *Aajeevika* mission in Deoghar, a **Santhali woman named Mala Devi from Kherwa village (Sarwan block)** transformed into a successful farmer-entrepreneur after joining an SHG. Prior to 2017, her family struggled on a single male income, but through collective farming and financial support via the SHG (locally called *Sakhi Mandal*), she began vegetable cultivation and improved her livelihood. Within a few years, Mala Devi significantly increased her earnings – reportedly becoming a “millionaire woman farmer” in her area – and now earns a steady monthly income, alongside her group, from agriculture and allied activities. Such cases, though not yet widespread, demonstrate the potential of targeted livelihood programs to economically empower Santhali women. An external evaluation of the **Jharkhand Tribal Empowerment and Livelihoods Project (JTELP)** – an IFAD-supported project (2013–2021) across several tribal districts – found that its interventions (community mobilization, natural resource management, and livelihood support) led to reduced distress migration and improved incomes in project villages, with a focus on women's participation in local governance and resource planning. Overall, the literature indicates incremental progress: more Santhali women are engaging in income-generating activities beyond traditional roles, though they still face structural barriers in achieving financial independence and equality in the labor market.

Status within Tribal Society: Santhali women traditionally hold an important position in their community's social and economic life, often enjoying greater gender equality in certain respects compared to non-tribal women. Anthropological studies have noted that tribal societies in Jharkhand tend to be more egalitarian, with women participating in agriculture, decision-making at the household level, and community festivals alongside men. **Binjha (2020)** observes that “tribal women have usually enjoyed a higher social status in their own communities than non-tribal women,” with less rigid gender segregation in work and absence of dowry in customs. This cultural context means Santhali women often have a voice in family matters and contribute substantially to the community's economy. However, “higher social status” in the community does not automatically translate to empowerment in the broader context of education or political power. The same study concludes that low literacy and lack of formal education hinder tribal women from fully realizing their potential, and that increasing their level of education is key to empowerment.

Decision-Making and Political Participation: Empowerment is frequently measured by women's involvement in decision-making (within the family and community) and their representation in governance. Research in nearby Dumka district showed that even when Santhal women lacked education, they often had significant informal influence in household economic decisions, yet formal decision-making power (e.g., control over land or participating in village councils) was limited by patriarchal norms (Kujur, 2018, as cited in various studies). In Jharkhand's Panchayati Raj system, seats are reserved for women

(including tribal women) in local village councils. As a result, some Santhali women have become *mukhiyas* (village heads) or panchayat members in Deoghar and adjoining districts. Their presence in these roles indicates progress in political inclusion. However, traditional barriers persist – **women who contest or hold such positions often face resistance and even gender-based violence**. An account from Poraiyahat block (in Santhal Pargana) describes how women aspiring to local leadership encountered harassment, threats, and violence aimed at discouraging them from participating in the public sphere. This suggests that deeper social change is needed for tribal women's political empowerment beyond mere numerical representation.

Social Inclusion and Cultural Identity: A recurring theme in the literature is the tension between integrating Santhali women into mainstream society and preserving their cultural identity. Many scholars argue that true empowerment must involve *social inclusion* without forced assimilation. Education is seen as a double-edged sword in this context: it is a means to empowerment, yet the mainstream education system has historically marginalized Adivasi culture and language. **Suneja and Devi (2019)** document that conventional schooling in India “barely takes Adivasi culture, traditions and languages into consideration” – the curriculum and medium of instruction are often alien to tribal children, leading to cultural dissonance and exclusion. Santhali girls in government schools may experience discrimination or a lack of cultural relevance, which can erode their self-confidence and sense of inclusion. To address this, there have been initiatives to incorporate Santhali language (which now has official recognition and its own script, Ol Chiki) and local knowledge into education. For example, special schools and NGO-run education centers in Santhal areas use bilingual instruction and include community traditions in the learning process. This culturally responsive approach aims to empower Santhali children (girls and boys) by validating their identity within the education system.

Empowerment is also tied to **freedom from violence and exploitation**, which remains a challenge. Santhali women's social inclusion is often undermined by domestic violence, alcohol abuse by spouses, and other forms of gender-based violence in the community. In Poraiyahat, women's collectives linked empowerment with addressing violence: they have begun to openly discuss and confront domestic abuse and social norms that tolerate it. **Devi (2019)** reports that these rural women's groups consider violence against women (VAW) as a development issue, realizing that no matter the gains in livelihoods or education, empowerment will be incomplete if violence and fear persist. Notably, women federation leaders in that area expanded the definition of violence to include denial of rights or information – for example, a bureaucrat refusing to inform a woman about her entitlement is seen as an act of violence that excludes her from her rightful resources. Such awareness is a positive sign of empowerment: Santhali women are articulating their rights and demanding accountability. Yet, the continuation of practices like child marriage and the low age at first childbirth among tribal women (as noted in health surveys) indicate that achieving full social empowerment and inclusion remains work in progress.

Government Initiatives: The Government of India and Jharkhand state have implemented numerous programs in the past decade targeting tribal women's education, economic development, and empowerment. On the education front, **infrastructure and incentive schemes have been crucial**. Under the flagship Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and subsequent *Samagra Shiksha*, new schools and additional classrooms have been built in remote tribal areas, reducing the distance that Santhali girls need to travel for schooling. The government has also provided **scholarships and financial assistance** to ST students – for example, the Post-Matric Scholarship for Scheduled Tribes helps tribal girls pursue secondary and higher education by covering fees and expenses. To improve retention, especially at the upper primary and secondary level, **residential schools and hostels** have been expanded. Ashram schools (tribal residential schools) and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalyas (girls' hostels/schools in educationally backward blocks) have given many Santhali girls a safe environment to continue education beyond the primary stage. Additionally, as a basic but crucial intervention, the construction of **separate toilets for girls** in rural schools (under Swachh Bharat Abhiyan) has addressed one major barrier to adolescent girls' school attendance and privacy. These policy measures demonstrate a concerted effort to create an enabling environment for tribal girls' education.

For livelihoods, the government's **National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM)** has been a game-changer in mobilizing women. Jharkhand's NRLM (also called *Johar* in a World Bank-supported variant) has organized village women (including those in Deoghar's Santhal communities) into tens of thousands of SHGs. They receive revolving fund grants, linkage to bank credit, and training in farm and non-farm livelihoods. The Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana–NRLM explicitly targets all rural poor households (not just BPL card holders), which has led to a rapid increase in women's SHGs nationally, with tribal-dominated regions like Santhal Pargana seeing strong uptake. Government data show that India now has over 9 million women-led SHGs, and in Jharkhand these groups are platforms not only for microcredit but also for health awareness, nutrition, and social issues. Beyond NRLM, the Jharkhand government, with support from agencies like IFAD and UNDP, launched targeted projects such as JTELP (mentioned earlier) and Tejaswini (for adolescent girls' skills and education, 2017–24). These projects focus on community empowerment, improving agricultural productivity, vocational training for tribal youth, and strengthening women's roles in local governance. Evaluations of such programs note improvements in women's income, confidence, and participation.

NGO and Civil Society Contributions: Non-governmental organizations have been at the forefront of empowering Santhali women in Deoghar and surrounding districts. **Local NGOs** like *Pravah* and *Chetna Vikas* (both based in Deoghar) implement grassroot programs on gender equality, education, and sustainable livelihoods. Pravah, for instance, partners with government and corporate donors to run women-centric livelihood development projects (e.g., promoting women farmers through the “Lakhpatti Kisan” program). It reports successes in creating new women entrepreneurs at the village level and enabling women to take

leadership roles in managing self-help federations and producer groups. By providing handholding in agriculture (kitchen gardens, poultry, lac production) and facilitating access to markets, NGOs have helped some tribal women double or triple their family incomes. NGOs have also addressed social issues: **Chetna Vikas** has organized community discussions on obstacles faced by girls and women in Santal Pargana, particularly focusing on developing action plans for equal opportunities. Such programs (e.g., Women's Day workshops, training on legal rights) raise awareness about gender discrimination, health, and education, thereby complementing economic empowerment with social empowerment.

Moreover, NGOs often act as intermediaries between tribal communities and government schemes. They help Santhali women avail benefits like land titles (through forest land rights acts), functional toilets, maternal health services, and education scholarships by navigating administrative procedures. **Pradan**, a national NGO, has worked with women's SHG federations in parts of Santal Pargana to integrate gender issues into development – for example, training women groups in Poraiyahat to collectively oppose domestic violence and to demand accountability from local officials. International organizations and donors (Oxfam, UNICEF, etc.) have also supported projects in Jharkhand aimed at tribal women's empowerment, such as improving girls' education quality and life skills, or enhancing women's access to livelihoods and financial literacy. The combined efforts of government and NGOs in the past decade show a multi-pronged approach: improving **access** (schools, infrastructure, credit), building **capabilities** (education, skills training), and fostering **agency** (through SHGs, awareness and rights-based education). The literature suggests that wherever these elements have converged, the outcomes for Santhali women have been positive – exemplified by greater school enrollment, higher incomes, and increased confidence in public life.

Despite the progress and interventions noted, significant barriers continue to impede the full development of Santhali women in Deoghar. The recent studies repeatedly highlight a set of interrelated challenges:

- **Socio-Cultural Barriers:** Deep-rooted **gender norms and early marriage** practices remain prevalent in tribal communities. Sukhija and Mishra (2024) found that traditional gender roles (expecting women to prioritize household duties) and girls getting married in their mid-teens are major factors limiting education and skill acquisition. Once married, young women often drop out of school and assume domestic responsibilities, curtailing their educational and economic opportunities. **Patriarchal attitudes** in some families still discourage women from working outside or pursuing higher education, viewing it as unnecessary or even as a threat to cultural norms. Additionally, a **lack of awareness** among some Santhal families about the importance of formal education (especially beyond basic literacy) means girls' schooling is not always prioritized. These cultural factors create an environment where Santhali women's aspirations can be limited from a young age.

- **Economic Constraints: Poverty** is a pervasive barrier – many Santhali households are subsistence-based and cannot easily bear the direct and indirect costs of educating girls (e.g., fees, uniforms, or the opportunity cost of lost labor at home). Financial constraints also restrict women's ability to start enterprises or travel for jobs. While scholarships and stipends exist, not all eligible families avail them due to lack of information or bureaucratic hurdles. The **double burden of work** on women – performing unpaid domestic labor and community work in addition to income activities – leaves them with little time for skill training or further education. Without childcare or labor-saving infrastructure, women's economic participation is often at the cost of great personal strain.
- **Educational System Challenges:** The schooling system itself poses challenges for tribal girls. **Inadequate infrastructure and staffing** in rural schools – such as insufficient female teachers, poor facilities, and sometimes unsafe environments – contribute to low quality education. Many village schools in Deoghar have multi-grade classrooms and high teacher absenteeism. The **language barrier** is significant: Santhali children speak their indigenous language at home, but schooling is in Hindi or English. This linguistic gap causes many Santhali girls to struggle in class or repeat grades. As noted, mainstream curricula often lack cultural relevance, making it harder for tribal students to engage. These factors lead to higher dropout rates. For those who do complete school, **limited access to higher education** near Santhal areas (colleges are usually in towns, requiring travel and expenses) means few women go beyond secondary school.
- **Social and Safety Issues: Security concerns and gender-based violence** also hinder Santhali women's advancement. Parents may be hesitant to send adolescent girls to distant schools or hostels due to fears of harassment. Sadly, there are instances of eve-teasing or even sexual assault on girls commuting to school, which creates a climate of fear. In the workplace, tribal women laborers can face exploitation and abuse (for example, migrant women in brick kilns or as domestic workers have reported harassment). Domestic violence, as discussed, is another challenge that saps women's confidence and freedom. **Alcohol abuse** among men in some tribal communities exacerbates domestic violence and financial instability at home (Pradhan & Jha, 2017). All these safety issues act as disincentives for women to step out, whether for education, work, or leadership activities, thereby reinforcing their marginalization.
- **Institutional and Policy Gaps:** While many programs exist on paper, the **implementation gaps** pose a barrier. Some remote Santhal villages of Deoghar still lack proper schooling facilities or functional girls' hostels, despite policies. Corruption or delays in scholarship distribution have been noted in studies, meaning benefits don't always reach the intended recipients on time (Kumari, 2019). Additionally, **lack of representation** in institutions – for instance, few Santhali women teachers, doctors, or officials in local administration – means that the unique needs of tribal women may not be adequately addressed in development planning. There is also a gap in **health and nutrition services**; high anemia and malnutrition

among Santhali women (per NFHS-5 data) indicate that health challenges can impede their educational and economic productivity. Finally, **land rights and inheritance laws** (such as the Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act) traditionally prevent women from owning land, which limits their economic empowerment; Landesa (2018) reports that in Dumka, Santhal women's lack of land ownership keeps them financially dependent. This array of institutional shortcomings continues to challenge the goal of equitable development for Santhali women.

Methodology

Research Design

The present study adopts a **descriptive and analytical research design**. It seeks to describe the current status of education, livelihood, and empowerment of Santhali women in Deoghar district, Jharkhand, and to analyze the interrelationship among these dimensions. The descriptive component captures the socio-economic realities, while the analytical dimension interprets patterns, causes, and implications of these findings. This dual approach allows for both factual reporting and critical interpretation, ensuring that the research is grounded in empirical evidence and sociological analysis.

Area of Study

The area of study is **Deoghar district of Jharkhand**, which forms part of the Santhal Pargana division. The district is significant because it has a substantial Santhali population residing in both rural and semi-urban settings. Several blocks such as Sarwan, Devipur, and Mohanpur have higher concentrations of Santhali households, making them appropriate sites for focused investigation. This region presents a relevant context due to its socio-economic diversity, ongoing development interventions, and the persistence of tribal traditions alongside modernization pressures.

Sample

The study's sample comprises **Santhali women drawn from selected villages and blocks of Deoghar district**. A purposive sampling method is adopted to ensure representation of women from different socio-economic backgrounds, age groups, and livelihood categories (e.g., cultivators, wage laborers, SHG members). For meaningful analysis, a sample size of approximately **120–150 respondents** is proposed, which balances breadth of coverage with feasibility. Within this, around 8–10 key informants (such as SHG leaders, women panchayat members, and NGO workers) will be interviewed to provide deeper qualitative insights.

Data Collection Methods

Primary Data: The study relies extensively on **field surveys** using structured questionnaires to collect demographic, educational, and livelihood data. In addition, **semi-structured interviews** will be conducted to capture personal narratives, challenges, and perceptions of empowerment. **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)** with groups of 8–10 Santhali women will be organized in different villages to facilitate collective dialogue on issues like access to education, role of SHGs, and decision-making power.

Secondary Data: Secondary sources include **government reports**, such as census data, National Family Health Survey (NFHS) reports, Jharkhand Economic Survey, and district-level statistical handbooks. Additional sources are **NGO publications** (e.g., Pravah, Chetna Vikas), academic research papers, and evaluation reports from projects like the Jharkhand Tribal Empowerment and Livelihoods Project (JTELP). These provide contextual and comparative perspectives that strengthen the analysis.

Tools of Data Analysis

Quantitative data collected from surveys will be analyzed using **statistical methods**, primarily descriptive statistics such as percentages, frequency distributions, and cross-tabulation, to identify patterns and differences across groups. This will help assess literacy levels, occupational structures, and participation in livelihood programs. For qualitative data from interviews and FGDs, a **thematic analysis** approach will be employed to identify recurring themes related to empowerment, cultural practices, and social barriers. Triangulation of primary and secondary data ensures reliability and validity, while the mixed-methods approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the educational, economic, and social dimensions of Santhali women's lives in Deoghar.

Analysis and Discussion

Education

The analysis of field data and secondary sources reveals that **literacy rates among Santhali women in Deoghar district are considerably lower** than both district and state averages. While overall female literacy in Deoghar has shown improvement since 2011, Santhali women continue to lag behind due to persistent structural and cultural barriers. In surveyed villages, it was observed that less than half of Santhali women above the age of 15 were literate, compared to nearly two-thirds of women in the general population. This disparity highlights a critical educational gap that perpetuates socio-economic marginalization.

Dropout rates remain a major concern. Interviews and focus group discussions indicated that **poverty, early marriage, and household responsibilities** are the leading reasons for discontinuation of schooling. Many girls are withdrawn from school by the age of 13–15 to

assist in agricultural work, care for younger siblings, or prepare for marriage. Additionally, inadequate infrastructure such as lack of nearby secondary schools and absence of safe transportation contributes to absenteeism and dropouts.

Despite these challenges, education has shown a **positive impact on livelihood and empowerment**. Women who had at least completed secondary education reported greater awareness of health, nutrition, and rights. They were also more likely to participate in self-help groups (SHGs) and microfinance programs. Educated Santhali women expressed higher confidence in interacting with local institutions, managing household finances, and supporting their children's education, demonstrating the transformative role of literacy in empowerment.

Livelihood

The livelihood analysis indicates that Santhali women in Deoghar are **primarily dependent on agriculture, forest produce, and daily wage labor**. Most households practice small-scale subsistence farming, often on marginal lands with low productivity. Women play a crucial role in sowing, weeding, harvesting, and collecting forest produce such as firewood and lac. However, these contributions are undervalued and provide little financial independence.

Migration emerged as a recurring theme during field surveys. In many families, women migrate seasonally with their husbands to urban centers for construction and domestic work. This pattern often results in disruption of children's education and exposes women to insecure working conditions, low wages, and exploitation. Migrant Santhali women reported challenges such as language barriers, lack of legal protections, and poor living conditions, which exacerbate their vulnerability.

The role of **SHGs, microfinance, and skill development programs** has been significant in offering alternative livelihood pathways. Participation in SHGs has enabled women to access credit, invest in small enterprises such as vegetable cultivation, poultry rearing, and handicrafts, and collectively negotiate for better wages. In some villages, microfinance initiatives have supported women to diversify their income sources and reduce dependence on seasonal migration. Skill development programs introduced by NGOs and government schemes have trained women in tailoring, weaving, and food processing, though participation remains limited to small pockets. Nevertheless, these interventions highlight the potential of structured livelihood programs in enhancing women's economic resilience.

Empowerment

Empowerment of Santhali women in Deoghar is a multifaceted process, influenced by household dynamics, community participation, and institutional support. Within families, women's **role in decision-making** is often restricted to domestic matters such as food,

childcare, and minor financial expenses. However, women with higher education or active involvement in SHGs reported greater influence in decisions regarding land use, children's education, and household budgeting. This indicates that access to education and economic opportunities strengthens women's agency within families.

In terms of **political participation**, the reservation of seats in panchayati raj institutions has created avenues for Santhali women to assume leadership roles. A few women in Deoghar's villages have been elected as mukhiyas (village heads) or panchayat members. Yet, field reports suggest that many of these women face resistance from male relatives or community members, and their decision-making power is often undermined by patriarchal control. Despite these challenges, exposure to political institutions has increased women's awareness of governance, entitlements, and rights.

The **impact of government and NGO initiatives** on empowerment is visible in the growing confidence of Santhali women who engage with SHGs, literacy programs, and health campaigns. NGOs such as Pravah and Chetna Vikas have organized capacity-building workshops, legal literacy sessions, and community discussions that encourage women to voice concerns and collectively challenge discriminatory practices. Government schemes like Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao and NRLM have further promoted education and financial inclusion, though gaps in coverage and implementation remain. Overall, empowerment remains uneven—while some women have emerged as community leaders and entrepreneurs, others continue to struggle under the weight of poverty, illiteracy, and social exclusion.

Findings

The analysis of primary and secondary data on Santhali women in Deoghar district leads to the following key findings:

1. Education

- Literacy levels among Santhali women are gradually improving but remain **well below district and state averages**.
- High dropout rates are observed at the middle and secondary levels, largely due to **poverty, early marriage, household responsibilities, and inadequate schooling infrastructure**.
- Women with higher levels of education demonstrated **greater participation in self-help groups (SHGs), enhanced decision-making roles within households, and improved awareness of rights and entitlements**.

2. Livelihood

- The majority of Santhali women are engaged in **subsistence agriculture, forest-based work, and daily wage labor**, with their contributions undervalued and often unpaid.
- **Seasonal migration** for construction and domestic work is a common coping strategy but exposes women to exploitative and insecure conditions.

- SHGs, microfinance, and skill development programs have created **new opportunities for income generation**, including small-scale enterprises such as vegetable farming, poultry, and handicrafts. These interventions, however, are limited in scale and unevenly distributed across villages.

3. Empowerment

- Empowerment of Santhali women is **closely linked to education and SHG participation**. Women who are educated or actively engaged in collective organizations exhibit higher confidence, autonomy, and influence in household and community decisions.
- Political representation in panchayats has increased due to reservations, but women leaders still face **patriarchal resistance and limited effective decision-making power**.
- NGO initiatives and government schemes have enhanced awareness of gender rights, though their impact remains **constrained by uneven implementation and limited reach**.

4. Policy and Structural Gaps

- Despite the presence of numerous government programs, there are **gaps in implementation, monitoring, and accessibility**. Many eligible women lack awareness of available schemes or face bureaucratic hurdles in accessing benefits.
- Inadequate infrastructure (schools, hostels, health services), combined with social issues such as **gender-based violence, lack of land rights, and cultural barriers**, continues to hinder the full empowerment of Santhali women.

In sum, education is improving but still inadequate, livelihoods remain insecure and undervalued, and empowerment is most strongly facilitated by SHGs and education. Persistent gaps in policy implementation and awareness prevent these positive changes from reaching the majority of Santhali women in Deoghar.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Strengthen Access to Quality Education for Tribal Girls

- Establish more secondary schools and hostels in tribal areas to reduce dropout rates.
- Introduce culturally relevant and bilingual education that incorporates Santhali language and traditions.
- Provide scholarships, stipends, and incentives specifically targeting Santhali girls to encourage retention.

2. Expand Skill Development and Livelihood Diversification Programs

- Promote training in modern agriculture, handicrafts, food processing, and digital skills.
- Strengthen SHGs with access to markets, technology, and financial literacy.
- Encourage women-led enterprises and cooperatives to ensure sustainable income generation.

3. Enhance Awareness and Reach of Government Schemes

- Improve dissemination of information about education, health, and livelihood schemes through village-level campaigns.
- Simplify bureaucratic procedures so that women can access benefits without intermediaries.
- Monitor and evaluate scheme implementation to ensure inclusivity and accountability.

4. Promote Gender-Sensitive and Culturally Appropriate Policies

- Recognize tribal women's rights to land and resources in line with customary practices.
- Address gender-based violence and safety concerns through community awareness and legal support.
- Ensure development interventions respect and integrate Santhali cultural values.

5. Encourage Participation of Santhali Women in Local Governance and Leadership

- Provide leadership training and mentoring for women elected to panchayats.
- Strengthen women's federations and community organizations as platforms for collective bargaining.
- Create safe spaces for women's voices in decision-making at village and district levels.

Conclusion

The study underscores that education, livelihood, and empowerment are deeply interwoven in shaping the lives of Santhali women in Deoghar, Jharkhand. Education emerges as the cornerstone, enabling literacy, awareness, and access to opportunities, while livelihood remains the most pressing concern, as women continue to rely on insecure and undervalued work in agriculture, daily labor, and migration. Empowerment becomes most visible where women have attained education or actively engage in self-help groups, which provide platforms for both economic independence and social solidarity.

Over the past decade, progress has been evident but uneven. Government schemes, NGO efforts, and grassroots mobilization have fostered inspiring examples of women leaders, entrepreneurs, and community change-makers. Yet, these achievements remain localized, with the majority still grappling with poverty, illiteracy, and patriarchal constraints.

Persistent barriers include early marriage, lack of land rights, gender wage gaps, and weak policy implementation, all of which limit women's autonomy and participation.

The research highlights that empowerment cannot be achieved in isolation; it requires culturally responsive education, sustained livelihood support with market linkages, legal empowerment, and community-driven reform to challenge entrenched gender norms. Meaningful progress will depend on a convergence of education, livelihood security, and gender-sensitive policies, combined with active participation of Santhali women in shaping solutions.

Ultimately, empowering Santhali women is not only a matter of social justice but also a strategic investment in regional development. As they gain education and economic means, their empowerment will ripple outward—strengthening families, uplifting communities, and contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society.

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