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Comparative analysis of Socio-Economic Status of Major Tribal groups of Malda district in West Bengal

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Abstract:
Socio-economic status (SES) of a community is a combined measure of its members' economic, social, and educational standards. It is generally categorized into high, middle, or low levels. It is an established fact that the Scheduled Tribes are the most backward and depressed community in the Indian society. This study presents a comparative assessment of SES of six major tribal communities, namely Santal, Kisan, Oraon, Kharwar, Kora, and Munda, in Malda district of West Bengal. SES is evaluated using multiple indicators, including caste, occupation, education, landholding, social participation, housing condition, farm power, material possession, and family type. The findings indicate that all the tribal communities of the study area have sub-standard socio-economic status. None of the tribal communities of the study area has been able to reach even the moderate class; rather, all are confined between lower middle to lower class status as per the SES scale of Udai Pareek, 2017. The Kisan tribe holds a relatively better position in terms of occupation, landholding, housing condition, and family structure, reflecting greater economic stability. The Munda tribe has the worst SES condition among the tribal communities of Malda district. The results demand the need for targeted, indicator-specific development interventions to address the necessities of all the tribal people, as all the tribal communities are depressed with respect to SES. They urgently need to elevate the educational status by establishing more educational institution in the tribal dominated areas and for the enhancement of economic profile, job opportunities are to be provided to the tribal youth.

Key Words: Disparities, Malda district, marginalization, SES analysis, Tribal community.

Introduction

The Socio-Economic Status (SES) has been defined as a position of an individual or a family occupied with reference to the prevailing average standard of living, cultural possessions, annual income, material possessions, and participation in the community (Daraei & Mohajery, 2013). The SES of a community is typically determined by a combination of factors such as income, education, occupation, family structure, and access to resources (Tiwari et al., 2005). The SES analysis is an essential framework for understanding the living conditions, opportunities, and overall well-being of a population (Meher, 2007). It is a multidimensional approach used to assess the social and economic conditions of a population by examining variables such as income, education, occupation, demographic structure, and access to resources (Gaur, 2013). SES analysis in tribal-dominated areas requires a holistic understanding of demographic indicators such as age composition, sex ratio, and family structure (Sachan, 2018). These indicators provide understanding into population dynamics and dependency patterns.

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In the context of Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities, SES analysis becomes even more significant, as these groups have historically experienced marginalization, economic deprivation, and social exclusion (Singh et al., 2015). SES analysis holds particular importance because these groups have historically remained detached from the mainstream development processes (Xaxa, 2016).

Malda district, located in the northern part of West Bengal and has numerous tribal communities. The district is historically and culturally significant in West Bengal, characterized by a diverse population structure (Das, 2017). Despite its rich historical and agricultural background, certain sections of the population, particularly the ST communities, continue to lag behind in terms of socio-economic development. Understanding their SES is crucial not only for academic inquiry but also for policy formulation and targeted development planning. The present study focuses on the tribal communities, According to the Census of India, Scheduled Tribes (STs) constitute a notable segment of the district's population, accounting for approximately 7.87% of the total population (Chakraborty, 2019). Tribal people of the district mostly reside in rural areas and are concentrated in specific blocks such as Bamongola, Habibpur, and Gazole, which are often identified as tribal-dominated regions (Taufique & Hoque, 2017). These regions exhibit distinctive socio-economic characteristics shaped by limited infrastructure and historical deprivation. The tribal population of Malda is not homogeneous; rather, it comprises various ethnic groups with unique cultural identities, languages, and traditional practices (Risley, 1915). Among the major tribal communities found in the district are the Santals, Oraons, Mundas, Kharwars, Mahalis, and Kora, along with smaller groups such as Mal Pahariya and others. The Santal tribe forms the largest proportion among the STs of West Bengal and has a significant presence in Malda (51%) (Dey, 2015). Similarly, communities like the Oraon tribe and Munda tribe contribute to the socio-cultural diversity of the region. Each of these groups possesses its own socio-economic structure, but they share common challenges related to poverty, lack of education, and limited livelihood opportunities (Chakrabarty et al., 2018). In many tribal communities, a relatively balanced sex ratio is observed, which reflects a more egalitarian gender structure compared to non-tribal populations (Manna & Sarkar, 2016). However, despite this demographic advantage, gender disparities in education, employment, and decision-making persist in them (Mitra & Singh, 2007). The significance of SES analysis lies in its ability to identify disparities and inform policy interventions (Farah, 2018). In the context of Malda district, such analysis highlights the persistent backwardness of tribal communities despite various government initiatives. Development programs related to education, employment, health, and social security have not fully achieved their objectives due to issues such as poor implementation, lack of awareness, and socio-cultural barriers (Ahmed & Hussain, 2013). The scope of this study is not confined to the analysis of socio-economic conditions of six major tribal communities in Malda district; it represents the overall backwardness of the STs throughout the state, even the whole country.

The study examines both inter-tribal and intra-tribal disparities to understand relative levels of development and deprivation. Existing studies on tribal communities in Malda district have largely emphasized on general socio-economic backwardness, with limited focus on comparative and intra-tribal analysis. Most research treats tribal populations as a homogeneous group, overlooking variations among major communities such as the Santal tribe, Oraon tribe, and others. Moreover, there is a lack of detailed SES-based assessments incorporating multiple indicators to capture disparities in well-being. This study addresses these gaps by providing a comparative and intra-tribal perspective, offering a more lucid understanding of inequalities and development patterns within the tribal population.

Objectives

The primary objective is to evaluate the overall socio-economic conditions of six major tribes using selected demographic and economic indicators. A second objective is to conduct a comparative assessment of key social dimensions such as educational attainment, occupational structure, and housing conditions,

to identify variations in development patterns across the groups. Beyond inter-group comparison, the third objective is to analyse intra-tribal disparities by examining SES differentials within each community. It highlights inequalities in access to resources and opportunities at a more micro level. This helps in understanding the uneven distribution of well-being within the same tribal group. Finally, the study seeks to identify the principal socio-economic challenges faced by these communities, including issues related to poverty, education, employment, and living standards. Based on these findings, it aims to propose context-specific and policy-relevant recommendations to improve their overall quality of life and promote inclusive development in the district.

Study area

Malda district has a glorious history and culture in the past (Saadat & Gupta, 2017). Geographical location of the district confined between 25°32'08"N to 24°40'20" N latitude to 87°45'50"to 88°28'10". The district is located in the northern part of West Bengal and is separated from Jharkhand state and Murshidabad district by the river Ganga in the west (Mitra, 2015). In the north, the districts of North Dinajpur and South Dinajpur are situated, and in the east, there lies the international boundary of Bangladesh (Sumon, 2018). The district has a geographical area of 3733 square kilometres. It has a population of 3988845, among which the tribal population is 313984. The decadal growth rate of the district is 21.2%, and the density of population is 1069 persons/Km2. The average literacy of the district is 61.7 %, of which male literacy is 66.2% and female literacy is 57.0%. The sex ratio of the district is 944. There are 15 community development blocks in the district, having two Municipalities, namely Old Malda and English Bazar, and a total of twenty-seven Census Towns, 15 Panchayat Samities, 146 Gram Panchayats, and 1,771 villages (Rahaman, 2020).

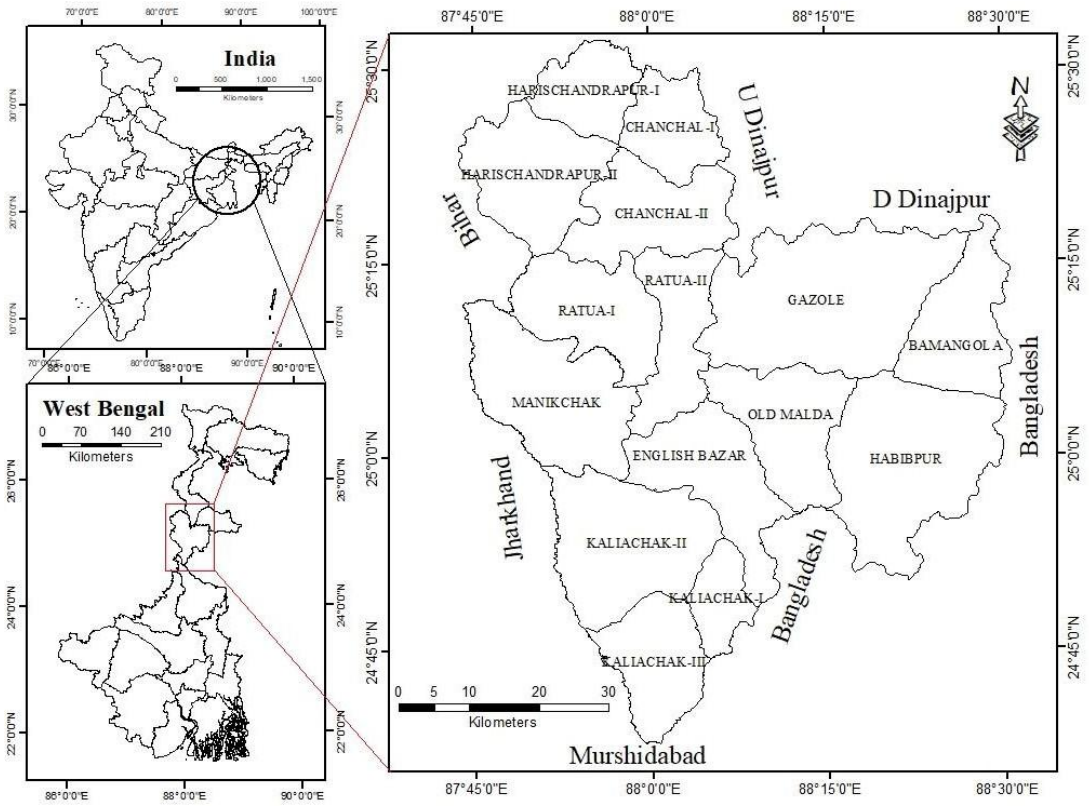

Fig. Location map of the study area

Physiographically, the district is divided into three distinct regions, namely Tal, Diyara, and Barind (Rahaman, 2020). The main rivers of the study area are the Ganga, Mahananda, Fulahar, Kalindri,

Tangoan, Punarbhaba, Pagla, and Bhagirathi. The climatic type of the district to some extent is extreme in nature. The maximum summer temperature reaches up to 42-43°C, and the winter lowest temperature goes down to 5-6°C. The average rainfall of the district is about 1400mm (Mandal et al., 2022).

Data and Method

The study is largely based on primary data that has been collected from a door-to-door survey of the tribal households. A structured questionnaire has been prepared for the field survey. Necessary secondary data was taken from the Census of India (2011) published by the Census commissioner, India and the District Statistical Handbook, 2015, published by the Bureau of Applied Economics, Government of West Bengal. The study follows two methodological steps. The first one is the selection of the sample. Here, the purposive random sampling method has been opted to frame the necessary sample unit. Four tribal dominated blocks, namely Habibpur, Bamongola, Gazole, and Manikchak, are considered for the collection of necessary primary data, and then purposively, the villages are selected to reach the Santal, Kisan, Oraon, Kharwar, Kora, and the Munda households. Table 1 represents the sample unit of the study, where 240 households are studied taking 40 household from each of the tribe to maintain the uniform representation of the said tribes.

Table 1 Sample Unit

Tribe	Blocks	Villages	No. of household
Santal	Habibpur, Gazole	Rahutara, Rajarampur	40
Kisan	Manikchak	Uttar Chandipur	40
Oraon	Bamongola, Habibpur	Beherpur, Jagjibanpur	40
Kharwar	Gazole,	Ghaksol, Deotala	40
Kora	Gazole	Katna, Khord Deotala	40
Munda	Bamongola	Khatil, Beltalabari	40

Source: Framed by author

The second step of the methodology follows the representation of the data, and in this section, the Socio-Economic Status (SES) scale of Udai Pareek (2017 has been adopted to assess the intra- tribe disparity in socio-economic life. Table 2 represents various parameters of SES analysis as given by Udai Pareek in 2017, where eight parameters are selected, and their scores are provided. Finally, a class category of SES is also provided to understand the socioeconomic status of people.

Table 2 Udai Pareek Revised SES scale, 2017

Component	Score	Component	Score
Caste		**Social participation**	
Scheduled caste/Tribe	1	None	0
Lower caste	2	Member of one organization	1
Artisan Caste	3	Member of more than one organization	2
Agricultural caste	4	Office holder of such an organization	3
Prestigious caste	5	Wide public leader	4
Dominant caste	6	**House**	
Occupation		No house Hut	0
None	0	Kachcha house	1
Labour	1	Mixed housed	2
Caste occupation	2	Pucca house	3
Business	3	Mansion	4
Independent profession	4	**Farm power**	

Cultivation	5	No draught animal	1
Service	6	1-2 draught animal	2
Education		3-4 draught animal	4
Illiterate	0	5-6 draught animal	6
Can read only	1	**Material possession**	
Read and write	2	Bullock cart	0
Primary	3	Cycle	1
Middle	4	Radio	2
High School	5	Chair	3
Graduate	6	Mobile phone	4
And above	7	Television	5
Land		Refrigerator	6
No land	0	**Family type**	
Less than 1 acre	1	Single	1
1-5 acre	2	Joint	2
5-10 acre	3	Extended	3
10-15 acre	4	Siye up to 5	2
15-20 acre	5	Any other distinctive feature	2
20 and above	6		

Grade	Category	Scores on Scale
A	Upper class	Above 43
B	Upper middle class	33-42
C	Middle class	24-32
D	Lower middle class	13-23
E	Lower class	Below 13

Source: Singh et al., 2017

Socio economic profile of the Tribes of the study area

The socio-economic profile of three blocks of Malda district, based on a sample of 240 households, presents a clear picture of a predominantly underdeveloped and economically vulnerable population. The mean age of household heads is 45.25 years, indicating a mature working population. The sex ratio of 1011 females per 1000 males and a child sex ratio of 997 suggest a relatively balanced gender composition, which is a positive demographic indicator.

Table 3 Socio Economic profile of the tribes

Sl. No	Socio-Economic features		Numerical & percentage figure
1	Size of the sample		240
2	Mean age of the household Head (years)		45.25
3	Literacy Rate		59.17%
4	Sex Ratio		1011
5	Child Sex Ratio		997
6	Mean household Size		4.6
7	Dependency Ratio		1:1.4
8	Educational Profile	Illiterate	40.83%
		Can read only	9.58%
		Read and write	7.5%
		Primary	19.58%

		Middle	14.17%
		High School	6.67%
		Graduate	1.67%
		Above Graduation	0.00%
9	Occupation	None	8.33%
		Labour	48.75%
		Caste occupation	4.58%
		Business	0.83%
		Independent Profession	0.00
		Cultivation	37.08%
		Service	0.41%
10	Mean amount of farmland		0.92 (acre)
11	Monthly Precipitate income		Rs. 2260/-
12	Poverty line status	APL	0.41%
		BPL	99.59%
13	Religious structure	Hindu	70.36%
		Christian	8.69%
		Own traditional religion (Sarna)	20.95%

Source: Household survey, 2022

The literacy rate stands at 59.17%, reflecting a lower level of educational attainment, though still below desirable levels. A closer look at the educational profile reveals that 40.83% of the population is illiterate, while only a small fraction (1.67%) has achieved higher education, and none have an education above graduation. Most individuals are concentrated in lower levels of schooling, such as primary (19.58%) and middle school (14.17%). This indicates limited access to or continuation in formal education, which may restrict employment opportunities and overall socio-economic mobility. In terms of household characteristics, the average family size is 4.6 members, with a dependency ratio of 1:1.4, suggesting that for every dependent person, there are approximately 1.4 working-age individuals. However, the data also reflects socio-economic stress, as a large portion of the household structure is likely burdened by limited income sources. The mean size of farmland is only 0.92 acres, indicating marginal landholdings, which are often insufficient for sustainable agricultural production. Occupational distribution further highlights economic vulnerability. A significant proportion of the population (48.75%) is engaged in labour work, followed by cultivation (37.08%). Very few individuals are involved in business (0.83%) or service sectors (0.41%), and none are engaged in independent professions. This heavy dependence on manual labour and subsistence agriculture suggests a lack of diversification in livelihood opportunities. Additionally, 8.33% of the population has no occupation at all, pointing to unemployment or underemployment issues. The mean monthly per capita income of the member of the household is only Rs. 2260, which is extremely low and indicative of widespread poverty. This is further confirmed by the poverty line status, where an overwhelming 99.59% of households fall below the poverty line (BPL), and only 0.41% are above it (APL). Such figures highlight the acute economic deprivation prevailing in the region. Religiously, the population is predominantly Hindu (70.36%), followed by those practicing the traditional Sarna religion (20.95%) and Christians (8.69%). This diversity reflects the presence of tribal communities with distinct cultural identities. Overall, the socio-economic condition of these blocks in Malda district is characterized by low literacy, limited land resources, heavy reliance on labour-intensive occupations, and pervasive poverty.

Discussion

The figure 1 shows a comparative assessment of the Socio-Economic Status (SES) of six major tribal communities - Santal, Kisan, Orawn, Kharwar, Kora, and Munda of Malda district.

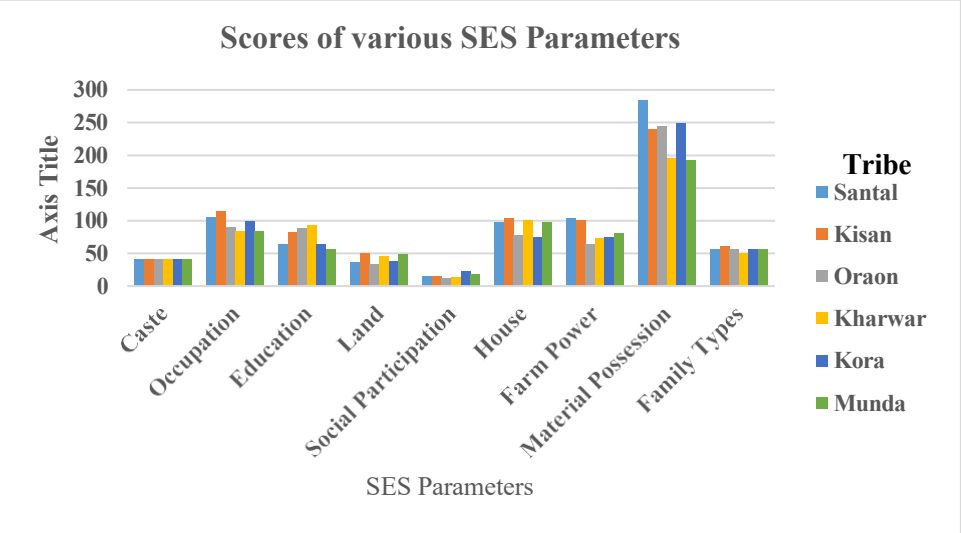

Fig 1 Intra tribe SES Parameters

The SES has been measured through multiple indicators such as caste, occupation, education, landholding, social participation, housing condition, farm power, material possession, and family type. The scores assigned to each variable reflect the relative position of each tribe, while the total and average scores help in understanding their overall socio-economic standing. At the outset, the caste variable shows an equal score (40) across all six tribes. This uniformity suggests that caste, as a structural factor, has been treated equally in the SES framework and does not contribute to differentiation among these tribal groups. Therefore, disparities in SES arise mainly from other socio-economic indicators. In terms of occupation, the Kisan tribe records the highest score (114), indicating relatively better engagement in stable or higher-return economic activities. The Santal (105) and Kora (99) also show moderate occupational status, while Orawn (90), Kharwar (84), and Munda (84) lag behind, suggesting limited access to diversified or remunerative employment opportunities. The education indicator reveals a different pattern. The Kharwar tribe scores the highest (93), followed by Orawn (88) and Kisan (82), indicating better literacy and educational attainment among these groups. In contrast, Santal (63), Kora (64), and especially Munda (56) display lower educational scores, which may hinder their socio-economic mobility and access to opportunities. Regarding landholding, which is a crucial economic asset in rural areas, the Kisan (50) and Munda (48) tribes have relatively higher scores, suggesting better access to land resources. Kharwar (45) also maintains a moderate position, while Orawn (34) and Santal (37) show comparatively limited land ownership, reflecting potential economic vulnerability. The social participation scores are generally low across all tribes, indicating limited involvement in community organizations or decision-making bodies. However, the Kora tribe stands out with a higher score (22), suggesting relatively stronger engagement in social networks. Other tribes, such as Santal and Kisan (15 each) and Orawn (12), show weaker participation. In terms of housing conditions, Kisan (103), Kharwar (100), and both Santal and Munda (98 each) demonstrate relatively better living conditions. On the other hand, Orawn (78) and Kora (75) lag behind, indicating poorer housing infrastructure among these groups. The farm power indicator, which reflects access to agricultural tools and machinery, shows Santal (104) and Kisan (101) in leading positions, suggesting better agricultural capacity. In contrast, Orawn (64) and Kharwar (73) have lower scores, indicating limited access to farm resources. One of the most significant differentiating factors is material possession. The Santal tribe records the highest score (284), indicating greater ownership of household assets and consumer goods. Kora (249), Orawn (244), and Kisan (240) also demonstrate

moderate levels of material wealth. However, Kharwar (195) and Munda (192) show comparatively lower scores, reflecting poorer material conditions. The family type variable shows relatively minor variation across tribes, with Kisan (61) having the highest score, followed by Munda (57) and Santal, Orawn, and Kora (56 each). Kharwar (50) records the lowest, suggesting slight differences in family structure that may influence socio-economic dynamics.

When all indicators are aggregated, the total scores clearly highlight inter-tribal disparities. The Kisan tribe secures the highest total score (766), closely followed by Santal (762), indicating relatively better overall socio-economic status. Kora (678) occupies a middle position, while Orawn (666) and Kharwar (654) fall behind. The Munda tribe records the lowest total score (633), indicating the most disadvantaged position among the six tribes. The average scores, which standardize the total scores, further confirm this ranking. Kisan (15.63) and Santal (15.55) lead the SES hierarchy, followed by Kora (13.83), Orawn (13.59), and Kharwar (13.35). The Munda tribe, with an average score of 12.92, remains at the bottom, highlighting persistent socio-economic deprivation.

Figure 2 reveals significant intra-tribal disparities in the socio-economic conditions of Malda district. While Kisan and Santal tribes exhibit relatively better SES due to stronger performance in occupation, farm power, and material possession, tribes like Munda, Kharwar, and Orawn face multiple disadvantages, particularly in education, landholding, and material assets.

Table 4 Grade Category Score on Scale

Category	SES Value	Tribes
A Upper Class	Above 43	---------
B Upper Middle Class	33-42	---------
C Middle Class	24-32	---------
D Lower Middle Class	13-23	Santal (13.71), Kiasn (15.63) Oraon (13.59), Kharwar (13.35), Kora (13.83
E Lower Class	Below 13	Munda (12.92)

Source: Calculated by author

Table 4 attempts to classify the socio-economic status of major tribal communities of Malda district into five hierarchical categories based on average scores. A critical examination of this classification reveals important understandings of relative position of the tribes in respect of SES. At the outset, the table establishes a five-tier SES scale ranging from Upper Class (A) to Lower Class (E). However, a striking feature is that no tribe falls within the upper three categories (A, B, and C). This absence is highly significant and indicates that none of the studied tribal communities have achieved a level of socio-economic development that could be categorized as middle or above. This reflects the overall structural marginalization and backwardness of tribal populations in the district. It suggests that socio-economic deprivation is widespread and not confined to a few isolated groups. Most of the tribes, namely Santal (13.71), Kisan (15.63), Oraon (13.59), Kharwar (13.35), and Kora (13.83), are clustered within the Lower Middle Class (D category: 13–23).

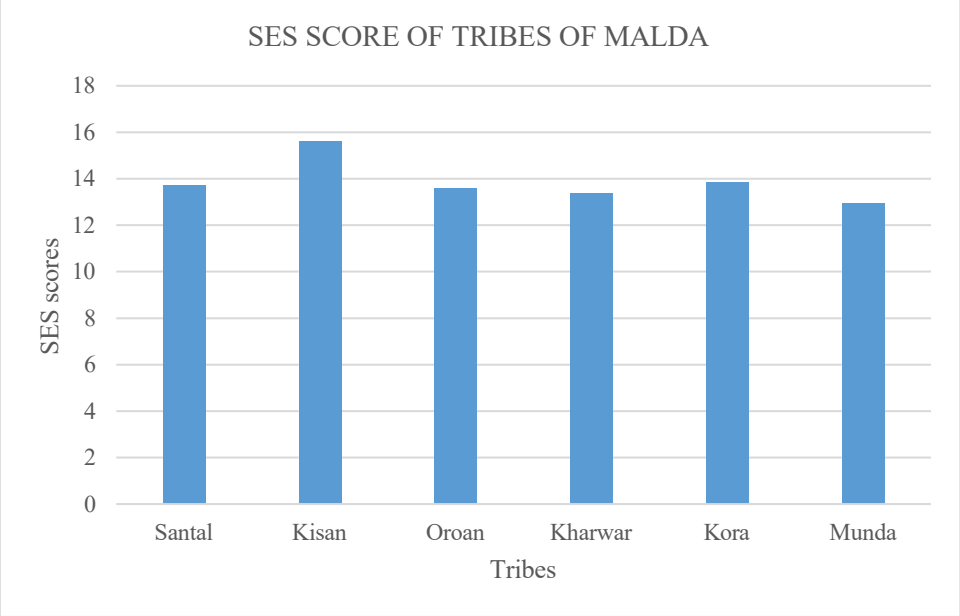

Fig 2 Intra-tribal SES scores

While this categorization may appear to suggest a moderate level of development, a closer look reveals that all these scores are just marginally above the lower threshold (13). This implies that their position in the "lower middle" category is quite fragile and may not reflect substantial socio-economic security. In reality, these tribes are closer to the lower class than to a stable middle-class condition. The narrow range of scores (13.35 to 15.63) also indicates low intra-group variation, suggesting that most tribes share similar levels of deprivation rather than significant differentiation (Fig. 2). Among them, the Kisan tribe (15.63) records the highest average score and appears relatively better off. However, even this score is far below the threshold for the middle class (24), indicating that their relative advantage is limited and does not interpret into real socio-economic advancement. Similarly, the Santal (13.71), Oraon (13.59), Kharwar (13.35), and Kora (13.83) tribes show marginal differences, which are statistically small and may not represent meaningful disparities in actual living conditions. The Munda tribe (12.92) is the only group placed in the Lower Class (E category: below 13). Although numerically it is slightly below the cut-off, this categorization highlights its relatively more vulnerable condition. However, the difference between Munda (12.92) and tribes like Kharwar (13.35) or Oraon (13.59) is minimal. This raises a critical issue regarding the rigidity of classification thresholds, as a small numerical difference results in a categorical shift.

Conclusion and recommendations

The study is related to the most unprivileged community of the country. They need special attention for their overall development. The constitution of India led the way for the same, providing them with reservations in various social and economic corners. The central and state governments in this respect have also made an effort in their own way. But still they are lagging. However, all the tribal groups of Malda district are backward in socioeconomic status. The woeful position of all tribes on the SES table, explores the truth of their poor developmental status. Among the six major tribal groups, no tribe is in a better socio-economic position. By all the SES indicators, they are trailing. In fact, in the ladder of social structure, the tribal peoples are at the lowest position in the study area. Despite certain positive demographic indicators such as a favourable sex ratio, most of the households lie below the poverty line, and low average income reflects deep-rooted poverty. In the SES categorization by Udai Pareek, there are five categories, but none of the tribal groups in Malda district can stand at least in category 'C' or middle class. They are clustering into lower middle (D) and lower class (E). In this situation, to elevate the SES of the tribe of Malda district, both the Central and the State governments should approve the initiative at

different levels. In this context, tribal development in the district requires a comprehensive and multi-dimensional strategy. Priority must be given to improving educational attainment through expanded access to secondary and higher education. In addition to this, the adult literacy programme is to be taken. Simultaneously, livelihood diversification through skill development, promotion of small-scale enterprises, and strengthening of self-help groups (SHGs) can reduce economic vulnerability. Agricultural productivity to be enhanced through modern techniques, irrigation support. Land security is equally essential which should be given the small size of landholdings. Furthermore, effective implementation of poverty alleviation programmes, improved healthcare and nutrition services, and expansion of rural infrastructure are essential for ensuring overall well-being. Importantly, development interventions must remain culturally sensitive and encourage active participation of tribal communities to ensure sustainability and inclusiveness. Therefore, only through an integrated approach that addresses both economic and social dimensions can long-term tribal development be achieved in Malda district.

Limitation and future scope of the study

Only six major tribes out of 39 tribal community are selected for the study, others are left. A larger sample size ought to be taken as the population is vast. In the methodological part, the distinction between the Lower Class and Lower Middle Class in this context may be somewhat artificial and may exaggerate differences that are not substantial in reality. Another concern lies in the construction of the SES scale. The classification ranges (e.g., 13–23 for lower middle class) appear broad, but the actual observed scores occupy only a very narrow segment of this range. As a result, the classification compresses most groups into a single category, limiting its analytical usefulness. The future scope of the study lies in the selection of all tribes in sample and more comprehensive study taking a large sample unit across the other tribal dominated district in the whole state, may eradicate the weakness of the study.

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