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Socio-Cultural Transformation and Livelihood Shifts among Dongria Kondha: A Study in Rayagada District

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Abstract
The Dongria Kondha are an indigenous tribal community residing in the Niyamgiri Hills of southern Odisha, primarily across the districts of Rayagada, Kalahandi, and Koraput. With a population of around 10,000 spread over approximately 120 remote hill villages, they have traditionally lived in close harmony with nature, practicing shifting cultivation, horticulture, forest gathering, and hunting. Their language, Kuvi or Kui, and their patrilineal, clan-based social structure reflect a deep cultural heritage, closely tied to local deities and rituals, especially the worship of Niyam Raja, the guardian spirit of their sacred hills. Over the years, however, the Dongria have faced increasing exposure to outside influences. Development programs in education, health, and infrastructure, along with the spread of markets and state policies on conservation and mining, have significantly impacted their way of life. Many families are now gradually integrating into the broader economy, experiencing both opportunities and challenges. This study explores how these transformations have affected their cultural traditions, livelihoods, gender roles, and interactions with government initiatives, offering insights into how a deeply rooted tribal identity navigates the pressures of modernity.

Keywords: Dongria Kondha, Cultural Change, Livelihood, Gender Roles, Tribal Policy

Study Area and Methodology

Rayagada District, with a population nearing one million, is a predominantly hilly and forested area located along the border with Andhra Pradesh. This region is known for its significant tribal populations, including the Dongria Kondha, who mainly reside in the Bissamcuttack and Muniguda blocks within the Gunupur subdivision and parts of the Rayagada subdivision. The Dongria villages are scattered along the southwestern slopes of the Niyamgiri Hills, often situated in remote locations lacking proper road infrastructure. The community practices subsistence farming using the traditional podu system, where small cultivated plots are interspersed with forest groves, reflecting a close relationship with the natural environment.[1]

This paper draws on a broad review of existing research and reports to understand the socio-cultural and economic transformations experienced by the Dongria Kondha over time. By synthesizing ethnographic studies, government and NGO publications, and documented case analyses, the study traces key trends in how the community's traditional way of life has been influenced by external factors. Demographic and socio-economic data provide a backdrop for understanding these changes, while qualitative observations

from recent field studies offer insight into the lived experiences of the Dongria people. Although no new fieldwork was conducted for this analysis, the comprehensive approach enables a nuanced understanding of the forces shaping the ongoing transition of this vulnerable tribal community[2].

Background: The Dongria Kondha of Rayagada

The Dongria Kondha are officially classified as a Primitive Tribal Group in Odisha, highlighting their vulnerable status and the need for special protection. Their homeland, the Niyamgiri Hills, holds deep spiritual significance, with "Niyam" referring to the sun god and "Raj" meaning king.[3] Each village honors this sacred connection by maintaining shrines dedicated to their deities. Agriculture forms the backbone of Dongria life, centered on the practice of podu, or shifting cultivation, on the hilly slopes. [4]Families rotate crops like upland rice and millets alongside diverse fruit orchards that include mango, jackfruit, banana, pineapple, citrus fruits, and tubers. Their expertise in horticulture, especially the careful management of terraced orchards, reflects centuries of adaptation to the challenging landscape. Men typically clear small plots each year, while women tend to kitchen gardens and collect a variety of forest products such as tamarind, mahua flowers, honey, medicinal plants, and bamboo shoots.[4]

Social and cultural life among the Dongria revolves around complex rituals closely tied to the agricultural cycle. Important festivals include Meriah, involving buffalo sacrifices, Ghanta Parba, a post-harvest ceremony, Illu-Arpa, which features household worship through animal offerings, and Pungkuli, a rain invocation ritual held early in the year. Marriage customs are traditionally arranged, with monogamy being the norm and polygyny occurring occasionally; strict rules around clan exogamy exist, although cousin marriage is sometimes practiced. Gender roles within the community remain clearly defined: men are primarily responsible for hunting, farming, and decision-making in village councils, while women focus on weaving, childcare, food preparation, and gathering forest resources.[3] The women's attire is distinctive and culturally significant, featuring red and white striped shawls, large brass nose rings, winged earrings, and floral headpieces. The specialized skill of weaving the red Kapadaganda shawl is passed down exclusively among women. Through these rich cultural practices, the Dongria Kondha have maintained a strong sense of identity and a profound respect for nature, viewing the forests not merely as resources but as sacred embodiments of their deity, Niyam Raja.[5]

Cultural Change among the Dongria Kondha

Dongria culture is changing but still holds strong in many ways. Younger people are adopting modern clothes, using new products, and following trends from TV and social media. Traditional clothing like the red-bordered shawl and loincloth is now mostly worn during special ceremonies. [4]Every day life has shifted towards factory-made clothes and plastic footwear. Many fear that the importance of traditional rituals and customs is slowly being lost as globalization influences the community.[6]

At the same time, efforts to keep Dongria traditions alive continue. Community leaders and local groups promote traditional crafts such as weaving the red-and-white Kapadaganda shawl, which carries important cultural symbols.[5], [6] Knowledge about medicinal plants and forest foods is still taught to children, helping them stay connected to their heritage. Important festivals and rituals like buffalo sacrifices and harvest ceremonies are still widely practiced. Traditional houses with shrines remain central to village life. So, while some parts of daily life are changing, the main cultural values, rituals, and language continue to be important and adapt to new circumstances.

Language is a key part of Dongria identity. Most older people speak Kuvi, their native dialect, but literacy rates are low, especially among women. Younger people are exposed to other regional languages like Odia, Hindi, and Telugu mainly through the media and school. This creates a challenge because it can weaken their connection to their native language and culture, while also limiting access to jobs that require reading and writing. Schools try to teach both Kuvi and regional languages, but many children find it hard to adjust to formal education.[2]

Religious beliefs show some mixing with outside influences. The Dongria still strongly worship their main deity, Niyam Raja, and honor their ancestors, but some have also encountered Hindu gods and Christian teachings nearby. Despite these influences, the community remains firm in protecting their traditional faith.[1] This was seen when the Dongria villages united to oppose a mining project on their sacred hills. Their decision led to the cancellation of the mining approval, showing how they use their traditional institutions to defend their culture and land against outside threats.[7]

Table-1 : Cultural Change among the Dongria Kondha Tribe

Cultural Domain	Traditional Practices	Observed Changes	Influencing Factors
Livelihood	Shifting cultivation (Podu), forest gathering	Gradual shift to settled agriculture, wage labor, horticulture (pineapple, turmeric)	Government schemes (MGNREGA, horticulture programs), deforestation, and market integration
Social Structure	Clan-based kinship, strong community bonds, traditional village councils (Kutumba)	Erosion of traditional authority; increased state intervention and role of Panchayats	State policies, modern legal structures, and education
Marriage Customs	Endogamy within tribe, traditional bride capture and community-arranged marriages	Rise in individual choice marriages; reduced practice of traditional rituals	Exposure to mainstream norms, education, legal awareness
Religious Beliefs	Animism, nature worship (Niyamraja as supreme deity), sacred groves	Increasing influence of Hinduism and Christianity; dilution of sacred grove taboos	Missionary activities, cultural assimilation, and development-induced displacement
Language & Oral Traditions	Kui language, rich folklore, and oral storytelling	Decline in usage among youth; preference for Odia in schools	Formal education, mass media, and government language policies
Dress & Adornment	Traditional attire (beads, nose rings, turmeric application)	Modern clothing is adopted by youth; traditional dress is reserved for festivals	Market access, school norms, cultural assimilation

Cultural Domain	Traditional Practices	Observed Changes	Influencing Factors
Housing & Settlement	Scattered hill settlements, eco-friendly materials	Transition to plains or roadside settlements; concrete houses in some areas	Government housing schemes (Indira Awaas Yojana), access to services
Dietary Habits	Forest tubers, millet, fruits, local brews	Shift toward market foods (rice, packaged goods)	PDS system, market economy, agricultural changes
Education & Literacy	Informal knowledge transmission	Increased school enrolment, especially among boys	Government schooling programs, NGO interventions

Economic Impacts and Livelihood Changes

The Dongria Kondha have historically existed as near-subsistence farmers, primarily depending on shifting cultivation, known locally as podu, to cultivate food crops such as millet, maize, and rice. In addition, they engage in horticulture, growing fruits like mango, jackfruit, and bananas, as well as spices like turmeric and ginger in their forest gardens.[8], [9] Women play a crucial role by collecting and selling non-timber forest products (NTFPs) such as tamarind, mahua flowers, honey, and bamboo crafts, contributing to some cash income in local markets. This mix of farming and forest gathering has enabled the Dongria to sustain a diverse and relatively stable food supply for generations.[10]

Pineapples are thriving in the fields, ready for harvest.

Fresh pineapples are sorted at a rural home for market sale.

Figure 1: Pineapples thriving in lush fields, ready for harvest, alongside freshly picked pineapples being sorted at a rural home for market sale by the Dongria Kandha of Rayagada district, Odisha.

However, this traditional lifestyle now faces significant challenges. The land available for farming is restricted and crop yields can be unpredictable, particularly due to soil erosion on the hills and erratic weather patterns such as droughts or irregular rainfall. Concurrently, government restrictions on forest access and the effects of mining activities have diminished the availability of forest products that families rely on. Many traditional forest products are being supplanted by plantation crops or store-bought

alternatives, leading to decreased income from forest gathering.[4] Regulations meant to safeguard forests sometimes inadvertently criminalize villagers for collecting minor products, which further diminishes their earnings.[11]

Mining and development projects in the area have introduced both opportunities and disruptions. Some tribal youths have found temporary work in construction related to mining, but overall, mining has disrupted the Dongria's way of life. Large-scale operations and deforestation have compelled many families to depend more on purchased food, leading to food shortages, especially during the lean season before harvest. These difficulties have also prompted some villagers to migrate to nearby towns in search of low-paying jobs, often under challenging conditions.[12]

Despite these hurdles, the Dongria have begun embracing some modern agricultural practices and infrastructure with government assistance. Many villages now have access to tube wells, piped water from hill springs, and solar lighting. [11]Tractors and power tillers have taken the place of manual labor in many fields, aiding in the cultivation of corn and rice. Programs aimed at enhancing livelihoods have promoted kitchen gardening, poultry farming, bamboo craft skills, and small-scale animal rearing. Women's self-help groups encourage activities like weaving, beekeeping, and composting, which provide additional income. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, some Dongria weavers started marketing traditional organic shawls and garments outside their villages, helping to mitigate losses from farming.[13]

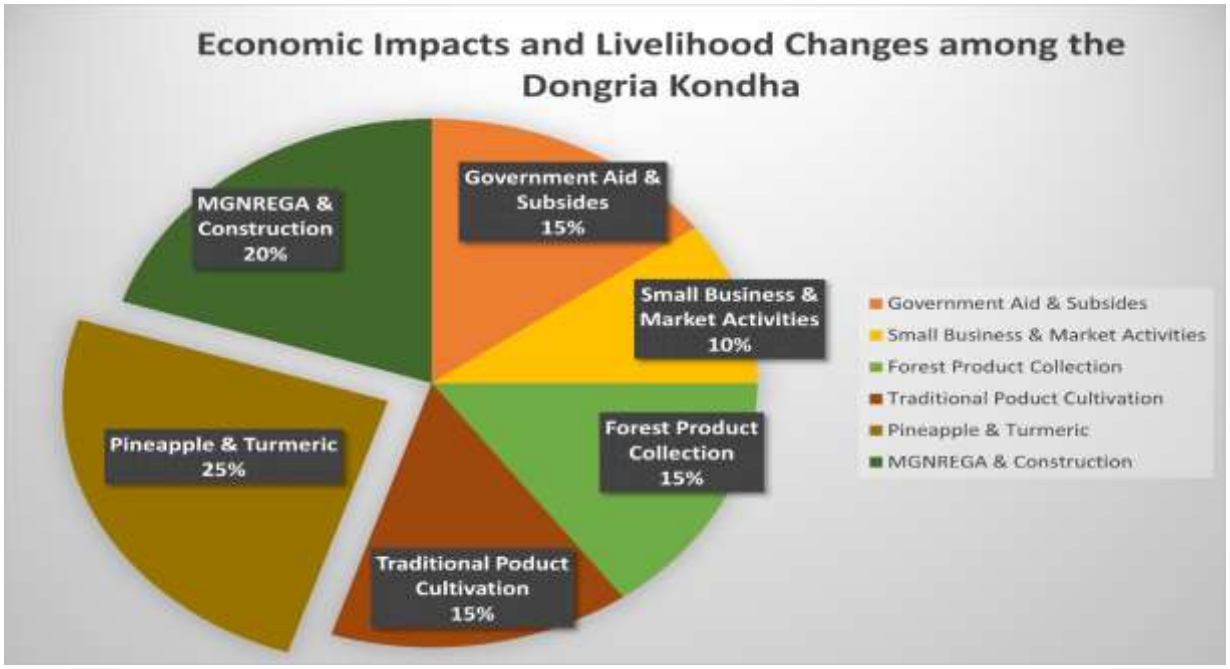

Figure 2: Graphical representation of Economic Impacts and Livelihood Changes of Dongria Kondha Tribe of Rayagada District of Odisha.

Nonetheless, economic vulnerability remains a pressing issue. Most Dongria households possess very little land, often less than two acres, and many lack official land titles. Poverty rates are high, with incomes significantly below the state average. Low literacy rates, particularly among women, restrict access to better-paying employment opportunities. [14]The typical livelihood mix continues to encompass small-scale farming, forest gathering, casual wage labor, and migration. When crops fail or forest resources become scarce, families depend on daily wage work or animal husbandry for survival. The migration of

young men in search of work has become prevalent, though it depletes villages of capable workers while exposing migrants to health risks and exploitation.[15]

Overall, the Dongria's traditional, diversified economy is transitioning towards a more constrained and insecure livelihood, primarily reliant on agriculture and casual labour. Without stronger land rights and improved market access, their economic situation remains precarious. The loss of forest access particularly impacts women, who not only lose a vital source of income but also a significant part of their cultural identity linked to forest knowledge and gathering. [15]This ongoing economic struggle underscores the urgent need for a balance between development and the protection of tribal rights and resources.

Gender Role Transformation

Traditionally, Dongria men and women had different but complementary roles within their community. Men were mainly responsible for hunting, clearing land for shifting cultivation, and leading important ceremonies. Women took care of weaving clothes, collecting water and firewood, tending gardens, gathering forest products, and looking after children and elders. Women had a certain level of independence because their skills in weaving and gathering forest goods brought them both respect and some income. The weaving of special shawls, unique to the Dongria, was done only by women and held both economic and cultural importance, as the designs told stories and preserved traditions.[10]

In recent times, these roles have started to change. More girls are going to school, which has helped increase female literacy, although it is still lower than that of boys. Going to school sometimes means girls marry later and think differently about their roles in the family and society.[11] Women have also come together in self-help groups that save money and run small businesses, giving them more influence over household finances. They continue to earn money by selling forest products like tamarind and mahua flowers, even though restrictions on forest use have made this harder.[16]

Women remain the main keepers of traditional skills like weaving, and while both men and women are adopting some modern clothing and habits, women still carry out important cultural and economic tasks. They often balance old customs with new activities, such as growing new kinds of crops in their gardens or selling products in local markets.[16]

Some old customs, such as restrictions on menstruating women participating in certain rituals or going to particular places, have become less strict. Women now take part more freely in daily life and resource gathering. However, new government rules on forest resource collection threaten to reduce women's access to important sources of income and livelihood.[17] Overall, while women continue to play a vital role in keeping Dongria culture alive and supporting their families, their roles are shifting because of education, economic changes, and new laws.

Government Policy and Interventions

Over the years, both the central and state governments have introduced various schemes aimed at improving the lives of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), including the Dongria Kondh. Since the 1970s, programs have promised better access to roads, schools, health centers, and farming support. However, in practice, the actual benefits have often fallen short. [2]Even today, many Dongria villages in districts like Rayagada and Kalahandi continue to lack basic infrastructure such as proper roads, drinking water, primary education, and health care. Although funds are allocated on paper, ground-level implementation remains slow and uneven.[9]

Two major laws that influence the Dongria's forest-based habitat are the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA) and the Forest Rights Act (FRA). These laws are supposed to give tribal communities control over local resources and land titles. In the case of Niyamgiri, for example, community leaders were able to use these legal rights to protect their sacred hills from mining. In theory, this shows the potential of law to support tribal autonomy. However, the situation remains complex.[1] On one hand, more villages are now being included under land rights schemes; on the other hand, new amendments and policy proposals sometimes seem to take back the very rights these laws were meant to secure. For instance, certain rules on forest use and religious conversion have raised concerns about increased state control and reduced space for tribal practices, particularly affecting women who depend heavily on forest produce.[9]

At the local level, government-run development programs have produced mixed outcomes. Earlier schemes like OTELP and the current OPELIP have tried to improve farming techniques, promote nutrition, and support tribal youth.[18] In some areas, literacy has improved and community groups have been formed to manage development funds and activities.[4], [12] Yet, the reach of these efforts is still quite limited. Compared to the rest of the state, educational levels among Dongria communities remain very low, and many promises about roads, pensions, or school buildings have not been fully realized.[12]

Other targeted efforts, such as residential schools for tribal children, support for minor forest produce, and basic healthcare outreach, have been launched to close these gaps. Some projects have even trained Dongria women to process forest goods into saleable items like tamarind products or herbal soaps. Despite these efforts, people in many villages still report delays and gaps in services. Official claims about progress often do not match lived experience on the ground.[11]

What is changing, however, is the role of the Dongria themselves. Community-led groups have started to emerge as strong voices. Organizations like village-level committees and tribal collectives have taken a more active role in defending land rights and monitoring development work.[13] Youth groups and cooperatives are also working to find new ways to market forest products without harming the environment.[4] These grassroots efforts show that even when top-down development falls short, community-led action can help shape more meaningful change.

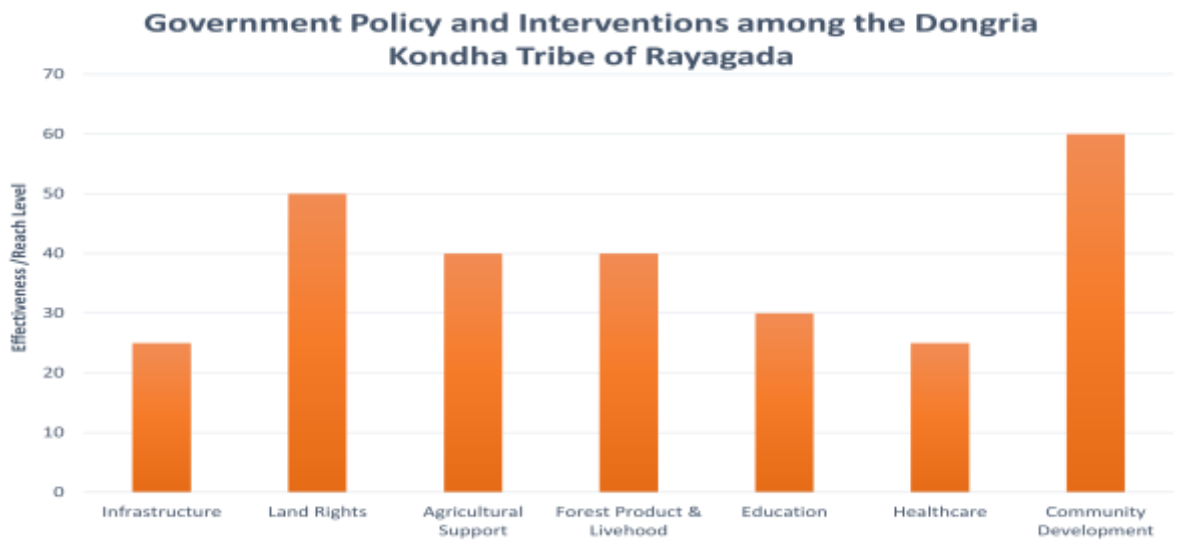

Figure 33: Graphical representation of Government Policy and Interventions among the Dongria Kondha Tribe of Rayagada District of Odisha.

Discussion

The Dongria Kondha community today stands at a crossroads between tradition and modernity. While many external influences have entered their lives, the Dongria have managed to hold on to their core cultural values.[10] Beliefs like reverence for Niyam Raja, close-knit clan systems, and deep knowledge of horticulture continue to bring people together and maintain social balance. Rituals and their language are still practiced, even though they are slowly declining.[13] Recognition from outside, such as the honor given to their weaving or their religious rights, shows that their identity remains strong in the public space.[12]

At the same time, daily life has undergone major changes. Exposure to education and media has created new aspirations, especially among the younger generation. The need for money and access to distant markets has changed how people think about work, food, and community living.[16] Government programs and rules, while offering some support, have also created new pressures. Traditional ways of living are now shaped by both aid and control from outside.

Economically, the shift from mixed farming and forest gathering to market-related activities has had mixed results. While new farming techniques and higher-yield crops have reduced some of the physical workload, they have also brought risks. Crop failure, price drops, and the need to borrow money for farming or schooling are now part of village life.[13] The steady loss of forest rights over the years, from colonial times to modern forest policies, has hurt traditional livelihoods. Though forest conservation is often seen as necessary, it sometimes limits the very communities that once cared for the land.[3]

Gender roles have also been changing, though not always in clear or equal ways. Women now have more access to education, self-help groups, and training programs. This has increased their confidence and participation in village matters. However, restrictions on forest gathering have affected their traditional sources of income and respect. Their skills as weavers, healers, and collectors are no longer as valued, especially as cheaper goods and outside schooling gain popularity. Still, many women are active in village meetings, speaking up for roads, schools, and forest rights. Their influence in family decisions remains strong, but their independence is facing new threats.[13]

Government efforts have brought both help and harm. Some villages have better roads, health services, and training thanks to public schemes. Yet many of these programs follow a one-size-fits-all model that doesn't suit hill communities.[19] For instance, giving seeds or livestock without understanding the local environment has caused waste and dependence. The gap between what policies promise and what actually happens is still wide.[2] Despite years of planning and funding, many Dongria families remain poor and underserved. Issues like poor planning, corruption, and weak delivery systems have blocked real change.[19]

This situation shows how important cultural understanding is in tribal development. Traditional practices like shifting cultivation are not just farming methods, they are part of the Dongria's identity and belief system. Pushing new crops or farming models without cultural acceptance may weaken the community's social fabric. Similarly, interfering in rituals or community customs can cause resistance. Real progress for the Dongria Kondha will likely depend on development that respects their traditions while expanding their choices.[1] Strengthening local institutions like village councils and respecting their knowledge systems can help bridge the gap between tradition and change. For policymakers, the challenge is to work with the community's worldview, not against it.

Conclusion

The Dongria Kondha community in Rayagada district is currently going through a period of major transition. Their traditional way of life, passed down through generations, is being reshaped by both internal aspirations for change and outside influences. Culturally, the Dongria have adapted in selective ways. While their festivals, rituals, and social norms continue to hold meaning, changes are visible in their clothing, tools, and food habits, which now reflect modern trends.

Economically, many households are moving beyond shifting cultivation, or podu, often not by choice but due to changing circumstances. Improved irrigation and access to markets have increased the possibility of earning more from farming. However, these gains are not enough to make up for the loss of access to forest land and the uncertainty that comes with dependence on cash-based incomes.

Gender roles are also shifting. Dongria women continue to play important roles in weaving and forest product trade, and these contributions are still respected. Yet, new laws and social changes are also altering their status within the community. While women now have more opportunities, such as education and self-help groups, some of their traditional rights and roles are being limited or replaced.

Government programs have brought both benefits and challenges. On one hand, special schemes for particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs) and infrastructure development have created new opportunities. On the other hand, restrictive forest policies and unequal implementation of welfare schemes have created new kinds of insecurity. The well-known case of Niyamgiri highlights both the strength of community decision-making through local village councils and the continued need for legal protection of tribal rights. Recent calls for action by national human rights bodies also show that many Dongria villages still lack basic facilities, despite years of government intervention.

For researchers and development workers, the experience of the Dongria Kondha shows how cultural identity and economic development are deeply connected. Future policies must be based on local realities. Education should be delivered in the tribal mother tongue, agroforestry practices should be locally controlled, and women's rights to forest resources must be protected. Most importantly, development plans must involve the Dongria themselves at every stage. Their deep knowledge of their land and society must guide change. Only by respecting traditional systems while providing new opportunities can true progress be made that strengthens, rather than weakens, their identity and self-reliance.

Data Availability

The raw/processed data can be made available with a reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Authorship statement

All persons who meet authorship criteria are listed as authors, and all authors certify that they have participated sufficiently in the work to take public responsibility for the content, including participation in the concept, design, analysis, writing, or revision of the manuscript.

Aliva Hansdah - Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing- Original draft preparation, Writing- Reviewing and Editing.

Barsha Biswa - Writing- Original draft preparation, Visualization, Investigation, Writing- Reviewing and Editing.

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used ChatGPT-3 to improve grammatical errors. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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