

Unveiling the Vicissitudes of the Munda Community Living in the Sundarbans:
Exploring Linguistic, Educational, and Cultural Dynamics

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article history: Date of Submission: 22-04-2024 Date of Acceptance: 18-12-2024 Date of Publication: 30-10-2025 Keywords: Indigenous Community, Munda, Sundarbans, Language, Education, Culture	The indigenous Munda community living in the Sundarbans of Bangladesh for generations is now at severe risk of losing their language and culture due to excessive integration with the Bengali-speaking people. Moreover, this landless community, which has survived through oppression and was deprived of basic rights, lagged in getting a proper education. Though a certain number of government and NGO initiatives have been taken and some projects are still in force to lift this disaster-stricken community. They are largely centred on climate change risk reduction and livelihood context. Very little has been done to ensure the preservation of their language and culture and, more importantly, to provide education. This article aims to present a brief historical outline of their language, education, and culture, and to explore how changes in these aspects are reflected in the real-life experiences of the Mundas living near the Sundarbans. Besides, it looks at how the ‘longing’ for cultural homogeneity provokes the dominant community to exploit the Mundas, who, with no other way, are unlikely to be driven to keep on collaborating.

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Introduction

The Indigenous communities, who usually reside on the outskirts of settled areas, have very limited access to roads, schools, and hospitals and remain largely detached from mainstream livelihood and subsistence systems. These communities are characterized by extreme poverty, poor education, miserable living conditions, and inadequate physical assets (World Bank, 2010). The UN declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples explicitly laid out the equality of the indigenous people. The rights of these people in protecting their histories, languages, and cultures are clearly stated in articles 13, 14, and 15 of the declaration. Their rights also extended to teaching and learning in their native languages, particularly for children, in accordance with their culturally appropriate approaches (United Nations, 2007). As a signatory to this declaration, Bangladesh is far behind in safeguarding the rights of indigenous peoples. The Munda community comes in 19th among the 50th ethnic minority groups (indigenous communities) officially recognized by Bangladesh Gazettes. The Mundas were employed in clearing jungles and making settlements in the Sundarbans since their arrival from Ranchi, India. This community, the early settlers of the Sundarbans, has lost its ancestral lands and is now confined to a limited geographic area. The research team met several groups of landless Mundas who are rehabilitated in the *Char* areas by the government and several non-government organizations. Some of them are migrating to other areas of the country because they couldn't cope with the extremely congested homesteads of their forefathers. Moreover, living in disaster-prone areas like the Sundarbans and climate change make it almost unmanageable to cope with the changing situation. As a result, the Mundas are witnessing the disintegration of their societal and cultural structures. They, like other marginal 'ethnic minority' groups, are at risk of being forgotten as a result of strong integration with the dominant community. This study thereby investigates the challenges these peoples have in preserving their language and cultural settings as well as getting a proper education.

Materials and Methods

Data collection for this research was conducted between October and December 2023 in the villages of Datinakhali, Burigoalini, Srifalkati, Gabura, and Kalinchi, located in the Sundarbans region of Shyamnagar Upazila, Satkhira District, Bangladesh. Thirty respondents in age groups ranging from twenty to eighty were interviewed through a random sampling method. The interactions during the semi-structured questionnaire survey were audio-recorded after obtaining informed consent from the participants. The interviews were conducted respecting the culture, customs, and beliefs of the Mundas, and no damage was done to the environment. This research used pseudonyms for all participating respondents. The research team methodically transcribed the recording clips, organising all the responses in written form with great care and thoroughness. Therefore, the research team developed a comprehensive and well-organised database and effectively used this qualitative

data, consulting with secondary sources. A brief outline of the socio-demographic data of the respondents is as follows:

Table 1: Socio-demographic Data of the Respondents

Variables	Categories	Number
Sex	Male	18
	Female	12
Age	≤18 years	00
	19-49 years	21
	50 and above	9
Religion	Hindu	17
	Adi/ Prakriti	10
	No Idea	03
Educational Qualification	Literate	14
	Illiterate	16
Occupation	Service Holder	02
	Farmer	09
	Day Laborer	09
	Housewife	03
	Student	03
	Others	04

Theoretical Basis & Framework

A better understanding of the vicissitudes in the broader sphere of the language, education, and culture of the Mundas requires analysing the entire phenomenon in connection with a few theories on cultural processes and identity formation. This research incorporates the theories of cultural hegemony and the politics of recognition. Cultural hegemony, a theory coined by Antonio Gramsci, denotes that a culturally diverse society can be ruled or dominated by one of its social classes. According to the theory, the ideas of the ruling class become the norm; they are viewed as universal ideologies perceived to benefit everyone while benefiting only the ruling class (Gramsci, 1971). The politics of recognition by Charles Taylor points out the importance of recognizing and respecting individuals or smaller communities for their identities, values, and cultural distinctiveness (Taylor, 1992). The model of ‘great traditions’ and ‘little traditions’ by Robert Redfield has also been framed in this study to examine the dynamic interaction between the great and the little traditions. The great tradition refers to the cultural practices, beliefs, and institutions of the elites or urban class often associated with formal institutions, Sanskrit scriptures, and intellectual traditions. The term little tradition refers to the local, primarily the oral traditions of the masses in rural settings, or the village culture of smaller communities. The urban elites maintained the earlier through scholars, priests, and

rulers and the latter is predominantly practiced by the common people, villagers, or tribal groups (Redfield, 1956). Moreover, the cultural resistance theory has been used to investigate how this indigenous community actively or passively withstands the dominant cultures that attempt to integrate the inherent cultural values and norms of the Mundas. The analytical framework of cultural resistance indicates to the mechanisms by which certain individuals or group of individuals withstand the dominant cultural narratives, ideologies, and practices through artistic expression, media, and community action (Gramsci, 1971; Scott, 1985). This concept emphasizes the strength of cultural values and norms as instruments for social balance, enabling marginalized groups and communities to assert their identities in opposition to oppressive structures.

Literature Review

The surviving languages of the Indigenous communities in a global context are tottering and waiting in a queue to disappear (Walsh, 2005). Safeguarding these languages is essential to preserving their long-standing symbols of distinctive identities. This requires language revitalization planning, which includes language planning, collective functions of language, and bilingual education (Cárdenas et al., 2017). The concept of ‘bilingual education’ for the indigenous people does not infer a contrastive type of education compared to mainstream practices; it is something to address the specific requirements of a group of people who are dismayed by the colonization process (King & Scilman, 2004). To the Mundas, education means fighting back against the dominant community, acting confidently, erasing the stereotypical perceptions associated with the Mundas, and graduating from impoverishment; they desire to overcome the prevailing state of cultural politics (Sharmeen et al., 2020).

Nearly all states, whether they are ‘ethnocratic’ or ‘egalitarian’, have failed to comply with the appropriate cultural practices of the indigenous peoples and ignored themselves in formulating curricula and organising teaching-learning strategies (May & Aikman, 2003). In a situation like this, their linguistic, educational, and cultural rights have been historically and ‘purposefully’ ignored. Statistics and surveys bear this out, demonstrating unequivocally that indigenous communities constitute the global populace, having the least access to fundamental rights (Lastro-Bravo, 2021). Several studies postulate that addressing functional obstacles such as availability, affordability, and accessibility could expedite their inclusion in formal education (Mizetti et al., 2020). It is found that the extreme poverty of the Mundas couldn’t hinder their increasing enrollment at the primary level. Over the years, as the educated Mundas have failed to secure any lucrative positions, frustration has grinded, and subsequently, the young Mundas have lost interest in pursuing education (Sharmeen, 2020). It appears that the existing educational framework has proven ineffective in lowering their vulnerability (Sarker & Davey, 2009; Sharmeen et al., 2020). Munda

identity is also strongly linked to a lack of access to education. They aren't permitted to share seats with their Bengali-speaking peers because they are thought to be untouchable, perverted and, in some ways, less than humans (Shafie & Mahmood, 2012). The indigenous people living within this territory have once again been marginalized with the emergence of Bangladesh, which strongly promotes Bengali nationalism. The project of integration or unification through the exclusion of diverse ethnic and cultural traits has ultimately left the Mundas out of access to mainstream society (Shafie & Mahmood, 2012).

Indigenous peoples around the world are subject to vulnerability because they may have sentiments that contradict the global capitalism and the supremacy of growing nation-states (Shafie & Mahmood, 2012). One approach to addressing this is to integrate into the culture of the dominant community, thereby disappearing as a distinctive ethnic community (Partridge, 1996). The Mundas have taken an alternative approach to constructing a defence contrary to the realities of the globalizing world by gathering in insulated areas and taking on approaches to form their own safe pockets (Shafie & Mahmood 2012). However, the agricultural revolution drove Bengalis to look into these 'safe pockets' to grab their land, and thus the disintegration process started (Sharmeen, 2015). Over the 1990s, this situation started to change slightly as a result of developments in irrigation technology, the commercialization of agriculture, and the implementation of government projects to support the development of ethnic minorities in the Northern districts (Sharmeen, 2015). The Mundas are becoming responsive to their growing potential and have started changing their socio-economic status. They began negotiating and raising their voices in every aspect to criticize the prevailing practices and claimed their due rights (Sharmeen, 2013). Besides, NGO activism enabled the Mundas to apprehend that this distressful situation occurred due to the prevailing uneven socio-economic and political situation (Sharmeen, 2013). Would this reflection of the unwavering bravery of the Mundas represent the southern area of the country? Research on the Mundas of Bangladesh has been carried out on varied issues, covering mostly the economic adversities and resilience of the Mundas, predominantly on the northern districts of the country. It would be an utmost generalization if we consider the entire community just through the lens of the Mundas living in the north. The socioeconomic and cultural experiences of this community in the Sundarbans are to a certain extent different from the Mundas living in the north. The objective of the present research is to look exclusively at them, who, unlike the Mundas in other regions of the country, live in a highly marginalized and disaster-prone area and confront a wide range of challenges. This research explores: What features set them apart and led this group of people to develop a sense of identity? What challenges is the Munda community in the Sundarbans region now facing in the broad spheres of language, education, and culture?

Findings and Discussions

Revisiting the Collective Identity of the Mundas in the Sundarbans Area: Language, Education, and Culture

Linguists and anthropologists agreed on the coming of the Mundas from Southeast Asia to the eastern coast of India, at least before the arrival of the Aryans approximately 4000 years ago (Wake, 1890; Schmidt, 1906; Rau & Sidwell, 2019). A group of scientists in a recent study led by Kai Tätte (2019) found that the genetic composition of the Mundas has been shaped by the intermingling of peoples from the Dravidian and Southeast Asian races. These Southeast Asian races include various tribes such as *Mah Meri*, *Temuan*, and *Lao*, while the Dravidian races come from Kerala- the early Dravidians, namely *Paniya* or *Puliyar* (Tätte et al., 2019). According to Wilhelm Schmidt (1906), the Mundari-speaking people have a close linguistic affinity with the *Mon-Khmer* languages of Thailand. This affinity includes the intimacy between pronunciation and spelling and consistency in lexicology, grammar, and vocabulary (Sachchidananda, 1979, p. 62). Thus, their language roots may be traced to Southeast Asia. The Aryan texts portrayed the early inhabitants of India in a highly derogatory manner. Tribes such as the *Anga*, *Vanga*, *Pundra*, *Kalinga*, and *Magadha* were depicted as inferior or uncivilized.³ These Austric-speaking tribes, also known as Australoid or Austro-Asian, were the original inhabitants of India before the arrival of the Aryans. Anthropologists considered them the predecessors of the *Kol*, *Bheel*, *Shabar*, *Santal*, *Bhumees*, *Munda*, *Nisad*, *Banshforh*, *Malpahari*, and other ethnic groups (Ahmed, 2003). This indigenous Dravidian group of people could easily be discernible by their physical traits. They are of average height, with dark skin and curly hair (Haq, 2003, p. 126).

There are divergences of opinions as to whether the language of the Mundas is a dialect, a member of the Austro-Asiatic language family, or a corruption of any of the languages of Indo-European language group. Sir George Grierson (1903) in *Linguistic Survey of India* identified the Munda and Sadri language in the following words:

“.....most of the aborigines speak Munda, but some of them use a corrupt Aryan language, which is locally known as Sadri, or more correctly sadrikol, as in the case of the Sadri korwa sub-dialect of Chhattisgarhi. The word Sadri is used when an aboriginal tribe abandons its language and takes to an Aryan one” (vol. 5, part. 2, 159).

Shourav Sikder (2020) opines that Sadri is a language belonging to the Indo-Aryan, Oriental, and Bihari branches of the European language family. Initially used as a language of business communication, Sadri gradually established itself as the mother tongue of the tribal groups (Sikder, 2020, p. 164). *Oraons*, *Kol*, *Bheel*, *Mundas*, *Bhumees*, *Hos*, *Banshforh*, and *Santal* all contributed to the formation of this language.

3. These pre-aryan ethnic communities have been mentioned in the Aryan Sanskrit scriptures namely *Puranas*, *Aitareya Aranyaka*, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

Some refer to this language as 'Kharia', while others refer to it as *Nagpuri*, *Sadri*, or *Sadri-Kol*, and the interviewees we met with generally take on their language as *Sadri* or *Mundari*. The Munda people speak among themselves in this language and learn it from their family and other members of society. It is verbal and has no alphabet. This language developed around Bihar, Ranchi, Hazaribagh, some parts of Purulia, and even the western part of Medinipur. Even though the Mundas came to this country a long time ago, they continue their efforts to speak in this language (Sharmeen, 2002).

No effective initiatives have been implemented yet, from any end, for the education of the Munda children. They need to learn several languages simultaneously; the mother tongue for internal communication and Bengali and English for educational purpose. This cumbersome learning process put a huge burden on them, and consequently, they couldn't cope with their classmates. Their dimness in achieving lingual efficiency at a very early stage made them unenthusiastic to learn. In the Sundarbans area, SAMS (*Sundarban Adibashi Munda Sangstha*) has taken an initiative to educate the Munda children using their mother tongue through a program called 'CTSP' (Community Tuition Support Program). Under the aegis of this initiative, 14 community tuition schools have opened in the Sundarbans area. These schools have appointed instructors from the Munda community to capacitate the children for the Bangla-medium curriculum. SAMS also prepared some elementary textbooks for these schools on the *Sadri* language in Bengali script (SAMS, n.d). Most of the adult members of the Munda community are illiterate, and their language and economic drawbacks cause this ill-fated community, particularly children, to lag in getting a proper education. The dropout rate is also very high compared to the rate across the whole country.

The growing up of the authors close to the Munda villages has been a bestowal to comprehend the cultural life-ways of the Munda community. Moreover, the ethnographic data obtained from fieldwork and the secondary sources offer a comprehensive understanding of the culture of the Mundas particularly those living in the Sundarbans and the Mundas in general. Father Hoffman, a member of the West Bengal mission, carried out extensive missionary and socio-economic activities among the Mundas in the Chotanagpur plateau region. He writes,

"When, at the beginning of the 19th century, the British stepped into the forested mountains of Chotanagpur, they found native remnants there that are much more different from the Aryan Indians in every respect than the English themselves... Their languages differed not only in roots and sentence structure but also in the whole conception of language itself from the Indo-European... They were alone without writing, without a temple, without any outward sign of religion, and God's customary, simple children of nature who subsisted by hunting and herbs and also operated much undeveloped farming. There are the remains of the original inhabitants of India, who were once driven by the Aryan invaders in the mountains and had defended themselves for thousands of years from the invaders they hated so much" (Translation: Steffen, 2016, p. 55).

Since the arrival of the Mundas in the Sundarbans area, they have also tried to live in ‘safe pockets’ from mainstream society and practice their cultural traits. Singbonga, the supreme deity of the Munda, is a central figure in the Mundari mythical legend. It is Singbonga to whom they seek blessings in ceremonies and hazards (Roy, 1912). He writes about the fate of human beings and appoints other Bongas to look after the creations. There are countless Bongas in the Munda world (Kumar, 2000; Hoffman & Emelen, 2009). The Bongas uttered by the Mundas of the Sundarbans area of are *Ikir Bonga*, *Chandi Bonga*, *Hatu Bongako*, *Jaher Burhi*, *Marangburu*, *Guru Bonga*, *Ora Bonga* etc.

Table 2: Bongas of the Mundas (Sachchidananda 1979, 265-272)

Manita-Bongas (Benevolent Gods)		Malevolent Gods
<i>Hatu Bongako</i> (Village Gods)	<i>Dasauli Bonga</i> , <i>Devibonga</i> , and <i>Jayer-Bongako</i>	<i>Churimbongas</i> (spirits of women who died in pregnancy), <i>Harsulivadbongas</i> (.....committed suicide), <i>Muabongas</i> (.....killed with a weapon), <i>Nagdavabongas</i> (.....died of a snake bite), <i>Kulachandi</i> (.....killed by a tiger), and the <i>Nasanbongas</i> .
<i>Ora-Bongako</i> (House Gods):	<i>Marangbonga</i> (<i>Mahadev</i>) and <i>Gonra Bonga</i>	
Nature Gods:	<i>Burubonga</i> , <i>Marangburu</i> , <i>Hai Buru</i> , <i>Sukun Buru</i> , <i>Sandi Buru</i> , <i>Patra Buru</i> , <i>Nage Bonga</i> , <i>Chandi Bonga</i> , and <i>Bir Bonga</i> .	

Their interactions with the research team posit that a significant number of respondents from this community have at times mingled their beliefs and rituals with Hinduism, consciously or subconsciously. The prevalence of Hinduism and its cult in the Munda religion is said to have existed since the medieval period. Hindus, being the only neighbors of the Mundas for a long time, left a permanent legacy on the culture and society (Sachchidananda, 1979). The religious interactions between the Hindu and Munda cultures resulted in Shiva being recognized as *Mahadev Bonga* and *Parvati* as *Chandi Bonga* (Standing, 1976, p. 316). Some Hindu rituals have been carried out in the Munda religion without being aware of their true significance and beliefs. Despite having embraced the new faith of Hinduism, they continued to venerate the old deities as well (Sachchidananda, 1979, p. 305). Anandita Munda (30), when asked about their religion, said, “Though a significant number of Mundas of this area are Hindus, we don’t perform all the religious festivals of the Hindus. We have our distinctive pujas, viz., *Sarhul*, *Karam*, *Goal*, *Kali*, *Tusu*, *Paharia*, *Boro*, and *Banbibi*.” The fieldwork also yielded some other pujas namely *Goal*, *Bura-Buri*, *Boyl*, *Deliya*, *Shitala*, *Ganga Devi* etc. Due to their poor religious understanding, this research couldn’t reconstruct these pujas in detail. The Mundas of the Sundarbans area, being a forest-dwelling community and dependent on Sundarbans for subsistence, unlike the Mundas of northern districts, perform *Banbibi* puja when they enter the forests for hunting. The devotees seek blessings from the folk deity *Banbibi* for the possible perils that the Sundarbans pose. Regarding religious festivals, the most repeated response is the

Murgi (hen) puja. What the authors perceived from the responses, it may be offered on any auspicious occasion, at any time of the year. Like other pujas of the Mundas, this ceremony also requires remembering the ancestors and offering a hen as a token of showing respect and seeking blessings from their forefathers. The *Pahans* are the key religious officials of the Mundas who perform religious duties and hold supreme authority and honour in Munda society. The above phenomena posit Redfield's model of great and little traditions on how the cultural practices of the elite or dominant community encroaches upon the Mundas. On the contrary, this ethnic community somehow escaped from being lost in the assimilation and intermingling with the dominant cultures. This phenomenon reflects the framework of cultural resistance, where a community asserts their identities in contrast to oppressive structures.

The Naming of the New Infant, *Annaprashan* (Grain Initiation), and marriages are also important social and family events of the Mundas. Marriage is compulsory and considered a significant social institution among the Mundas and could be held at any time of the year. But it is strictly forbidden to get married among the same clan. The rituals involving marriage, from the bride-search to the binding knot between the two, are analogous to those of all other communities. The Mundas of this region view marriage as a tie of blood between the married couple. A small spill of blood was taken from the pinky fingers of the couple on the day of marriage and mixed on the leaf of a mango. It embodies a spirit of everlasting togetherness and a knot of blood.

Poverty left an imprint of simplicity in the dress and food habits of the Mundas in the Sundarbans area. *Hatka*, a small piece of white colour was their traditional dress for a long time (Bulbul, 2015, p. 142). When the authors asked the respondents, they nodded positively about their distinctive dresses. However, they were unable to provide any detailed description of their attire. It appears that the pace of modernity may have long ago erased their traditional attire, and they have since adopted clothing such as lungi, dhoti, sarees, saluka, pants, and shirts. Due to not being financially solvent, ornaments and other decorative elements aren't used much in this society. Yet despite the inherent feminine approach of women to looking themselves up, the love of jewellery exists among the Mundas. Munda women wear *shikri*, *hansuli*, *hayakal*, *sribandhi*, *kan phuli*, *maduli*, etc. Apart from this, wearing earrings and bangles is also part of Munda's custom. Regarding men, the authors came to know that they used to wear pendants piercing the ears and bracelets on the hands. This community is quite cheerful and has a great love of dancing and music. The elderly interviewees entertained the research team by singing their *sadri* songs.

The food items and cooking patterns of the Mundas aren't much different from the other communities living nearby. However, the Mundas take some of the food items, viz., snails, oysters, mice, and pigs that are considered inedible and

prohibited by the majority of Bengali-speaking people. *Haria*, or locally brewed rice beer, is the most popular drink among the Mundas.

Unveiling the Vicissitudes of the Mundas in Language, Education, and Culture:

Language, the key means of communication, is considered a fundamental aspect of human existence. It is linguistic identity that creates a thread that binds the members of a community together. Probably this is the reason that ‘the great tradition’ encroaches upon ‘the little tradition’ to perish the language of the latter either forcibly or not safeguarding the tottering lingual identity. No matter where they live, the Mundas, whose legacy may have been stretched before the arrival of the Aryans, are at risk in every aspect of life. It is the language that could have protected their culture from becoming extinct and reinforced their status as a distinct ethnic community. The authors were a bit surprised when it turned out that five respondents stated their language as ‘bonua’. The local inhabitants who have seen the Mundas clearing the jungles and doing agricultural work in the Sundarbans usually call them Coolie (low-wage labourers), *Sarder* (Clan Head), and *Buno* (wild) in a very inferior sense. Their language, known to the locals as *Bonua*, is probably derived from the word *Buno*. The usage of this language is limited to internal communications only. It is perceived that, on average, a Munda in the Sundarbans area speaks at least 60% of all his conversations in his mother tongue, with the rest in Bengali. A strong command over Sadri isn’t possible nowadays among the youths, who are considerably engaged in various activities with the Bengalis. The more Binodita Munda (70) was loud and confident about his mastery of the Sadri language, the more she fretted about the future of her language and the generations to come.

“Why can’t I speak in the Sadri? Even though our children now speak Bengali, our parents never used to speak Bengali (with a heavy heart). I have learned it naturally from my parents.”

This non-alphabetic language posed severe hurdles to the learning process of the children. Consequently, it became difficult for them to achieve a satisfactory literacy rate, and the preservation and widespread use of the Sadri language have become challenging. Nilratan Munda (66) appropriately pointed out how this non-alphabetic language is pushing itself backwards.

“This language neither has an alphabet nor any books. That is the reason we lagged in our early school days and weren’t able to keep pace with the times. Though the medium of instruction is Bengali, we can now write some, at least in Sadri, using Bengali script”.

There is no special arrangement or any official initiative for the Mundas to learn their language. Their children are getting admitted to the Bengali-medium schools. When a

student enters the classroom, he/she has to encounter a new environment and context that make learning unhappy, and he/she falls behind. To facilitate their learning process, Fr. Luigi Paggi, a Xaverian from Italy who works for the Munda community of Sundarbans, has started a community teaching school program (CTSP) where blended tuition is given to primary-level students in a mixture of Sadri and Bengali. The authors have been to one such school in the Datinakhali village, situated just several meters away from the Sundarbans, but unfortunately, all fourteen schools aren't operating in full swing. Due to a shortage of efficient teachers and interested students in the community, some have already been closed.

Some of the respondents have let the authors know that they have participated in the human chains arranged on the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, demanding the preservation of their language and go for Sadri as the medium of instruction for primary and non-formal education. The Mundas of this region appeared in large numbers on August 9 each year on the premises of Upazila headquarters upon being mobilized by several NGOs to take part in conferences, human chains, and other activities regarding this issue. Following the recommendation in the National Education Policy of 2010 to provide primary-level education in the mother tongue, NCTB printed textbooks in five indigenous languages: *Chakma*, *Tripura*, *Marma*, *Garo*, and Sadri. There are only 220 Sadri-speaking students in Shyamnagar upazila dispersed in around 30 primary schools, with the number of students varying between 10 and 12 in each school. These schools have no teachers from the Munda community, and the number of children is quite low, making it impossible to offer lessons using these books. The Mundas interviewed for this research postulated a few reasons behind the distressful situation of the Munda language in the Sundarbans.

- i. A very small number of indigenous people live in this area. Even a few years ago, no official records spoke about the existence of indigenous people in the greater Khulna region. They need to speak Bengali in nearly every sphere of daily life. On the one hand, because of their uneasiness and awkwardness in speaking their language, and on the other, to make communication more effective, they tend to learn Bengali rather than Mundari.
- ii. The local inhabitants used to humiliate them by addressing them as *Buno* and their language and culture as 'weird' and 'backward'. A sense of separation has thus been maintained from both ends for years, which was eventually dismantled in the last few decades when the children started to get enrolled in the schools. This togetherness and education inspire them to speak Bengali, even in internal communication. Therefore, it is nearly impossible for parents to avoid speaking Bengali with their school-going kids. Thus the dominant culture (great tradition) absorbs the vitality of the Munda language (little tradition) using formal mechanisms (Redfield, 1956).

- iii. Access to satellite television and internet connections has opened a new world of interconnectedness with the global cultural landscape. Bengali/Hindi songs, dramas, movies, and web series have a profound impact on them. The intensity of these languages is slowly driving Sadri out of their mindset.
- iv. The Munda community feels a bit shy or fearful in speaking the Sadri language, even among themselves when they are around Bengalis. The reason is that many make it a matter of jokes or mocks. For this reason, those who used to speak in the Sadri language, now reduce it considerably. Moreover, they become morally weak to be confident enough to take pride in their language and culture.

The statistics on literacy and child education among the Mundas living in the Sundarbans area are extremely frustrating. Despite a satisfactory number of Munda children being admitted to primary schools, many left shortly thereafter. The drop-out rate among the Mundas is quite high, compared to the national rate of 14.15% (BANBEIS, 2023). The analysis of the educational qualifications of the interviewees of this research can be a representative figure of the overall literacy among the Mundas of the Sundarbans area.

Table 3: Educational Qualifications of the Interviewees

Age Group	Illiterate	Class i-v	Class vi-x	Class xi-xii	Graduate	Percentage of Illiterate
20-30	2	2	5	0	3	16.66%
31-40	1	0	1	0	0	50.0%
41-50	6	1	0	0	0	85.71%
51-60	3	0	0	0	0	100%
61-70	3	2	0	0	0	60%
71-80	1	0	0	0	0	100%

The saying of Binodita Munda (70) juxtaposes the almost zero literacy among adults and the reasons for the increasing rate of enrollment of children in recent years.

“I wanted to educate my children, but their father didn’t. Rather, he used to say what to eat if they started to go to school. Nowadays, the government has freed the education, but it wasn’t free before. Earlier, we had to pay money for the teachers and schools. As a result, my children were unable to pursue education.”

Intending to investigate the issue of high dropout from schools, the research team engaged in close interaction with the respondents to reveal the key reasons. The following factors are the portrayal of both the observations of the authors and the

responses of the interviewees:

- i. The first and foremost reason every respondent advocates for is extreme poverty. For years, this landless community was dependent on the agricultural lands of the local landlords and Sundarbans for their subsistence. However, the extensive shrimp cultivation coupled with the infiltration of saline water driven out the agricultural operations and regulatory actions from the forestry department, aggravated by climatic hazards, made it impossible to depend on the Sundarbans. They become economically weak and reliant on the labour of the children and female members of their society as well. The shrimp cultivation projects take advantage of the low-cost labour of the children, and the female members are employed to do household chores for minimal pay. This economic backwardness forced them to give up their education.
- ii. Another noteworthy factor that leads to early dropouts from school is early marriage. A Munda young girl is expected to marry as soon as she begins menstruating. UNESCO found in South Asia that 1 young girl in every 4 girls gets married before their 18th birthday (UNICEF, n.d.). We met some housewives in the Munda villages who were forced to get married at a very young age. It happened due to their deep-rooted religious beliefs, societal, and economic outlook towards the girls.
- iii. Bengali-medium curriculum and Bengali-speaking teachers made learning uncomfortable for them. Those who continued by overcoming all the difficulties soon discovered a weak educational base and couldn't achieve any considerable success in life. Lack of enthusiasm and proper guidance led the Munda students to deviate from the track.
- iv. The authors have noticed the presence of tiger widows in every village. When the sole breadwinner becomes the prey of tigers or dies for other reasons, they have no other way to earn money than by leaving school. Kabita Munda (30) described her sufferings, saying that they had a family of five. Her mother ran the family alone. At that time, her daily wage was only BDT 30 (0.25 USD). They had to buy books and pay tuition. Her mother couldn't manage alone. So she had to leave her studies. Priyadarshini Munda, an NGO worker, said, "The boys have to take the burden when there is no one else in the family to run. In our area, most of the boys are dropping out of school and going to the Sundarbans and brickyard for earning livelihood."

Despite the fact that a few had completed their education, the Mundas had difficulty finding work due to the lack of proper and quality education. No one from the study area is serving in a government job. The authors have attempted to reveal the barriers

that the Mundas face in entering public and private employments. Most of the respondents hold that the lack of transparency and accountability in hiring practices, as well as their Munda identity and corruption in government-funded entities, impede securing jobs for them. The curse of nepotism and bribery is portrayed in the sayings of Anandita Munda (30).

“We don’t get a job because the Mundas have no ties with the *Mama-Khalu* (big guns) and cannot afford to bribe them. Mundas have quotas in name only, but not in practice (sigh).”

Moreover, the wrath and displeasing attitude of the Bengalis towards them is also a key barrier to getting into mainstream services. When any one of them goes to work outside, they suffer discrimination from the others. Their caste identity is also pushing them backwards. Apurupa Munda (25) appropriately pointed out,

“We can’t get jobs because of our Munda identity; we are from a low caste. It is beyond the imagination of the upper-caste Hindus to work with the Mundas. Suppose (indicating to the interviewer) that you are working as a teacher; you won’t accept a Munda in your workplace! Do you? Such incidents caused a lack of confidence, and our community is going more backwards.”

Sumita Rani (45), addressing themselves as valueless in society and on the verge of extinction, says nobody is there to support them- not even in court.

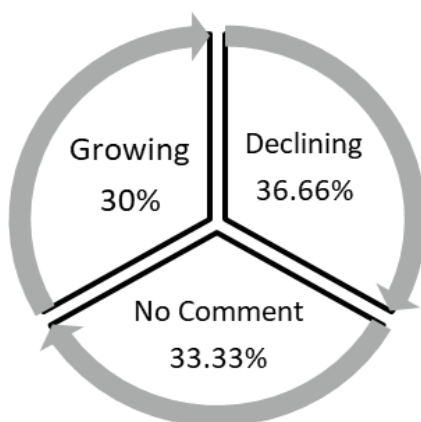
When the authors attempt to comprehend the religion of the Mundas living in the Sundarbans area, 56.66 percent of the responses held ‘Hindu’, and these responses postulate having their own distinct religious rites and customs. Rest identified it as *adi* or *prakriti* (naturism) or in other names; most importantly, our KII with Krisnapada Munda (45), who is the key activist of the Mundas in this area and also a director of SAMS, revealed their religion as *prakriti* (naturism), and he boldly stated that it is quite different from Hinduism. It seems to the authors that they don’t have a clear understanding of it and subconsciously converged in Hinduism due to deep adherence to the latter. A remark ought to be mentioned here when we asked Jibon Munda (25) about the extent of change and alteration in the Munda religion.

“I must admit that the change in cultural traits is worse than before. The orthodox Hindu culture had been infixing into us. Suppose we worship goddesses Saraswati, Kali, etc. and never needed a Brahmin earlier. Now we have to go along with Hindus and become more like them”.

The young Mundas are more interested in performing Hindu religious festivals. It’s basically about having more fun, the scope for moving around more places, and mingling with a larger society. The Mundas strode alongside the Hindus, giving up their distinctiveness in the hope of maintaining a sense of togetherness. The Mundas

have doubts about whether their interest in practicing their religion is growing or declining.

Figure 1: The Munda's Interest in Practicing Religion.



Some are in favour of growing popularity; on the other hand, some opine that educated youths have friends from other communities, and being concerned about their prestige and acceptance, are now anorexic about eating rice beer (*haria*) and participating in their religious festivals.

The reaction of the Hindus is also influencing their funerals. It is Munda practice to bury the deceased (Roy, 1912, p. 122); however, they now treat the dead bodies the same as Hindus. Sumita Rani Munda (45) explained their grief over maintaining the traditional way of treating dead bodies. If they were buried, Hindus would ridicule them and refuse to co-exist. Similar incidents also occur at weddings; the Brahmins are obdurate about complying with their traditional ways of getting married. The authors' look into the long past of this marginalized group and research findings support the theory of cultural hegemony that the norms of the 'ruling'/'dominant' class have been shown to be better or universal, and the other classes are pushed to fit in.

The Muslims have long been economically repressive to them, placing hindrances in performing religious rites as well as making or spreading irritating remarks. The Mundas are subjected to disparaging treatment and their practices are openly ridiculed. This unpleasant atmosphere often provokes them to get imbued with Hinduism. Some senior members of the Munda community recalled their memories of being attacked by the Muslims when they were drunk by *Haria*.⁴ Influential Muslim clerics or individuals nowadays are unlikely to welcome the music and dance, whether

4. Binodita Munda (70), Ganendranath Munda (63), Satindra Munda (70)

for religious or recreational purposes, and have set a timetable to finish or constrain within it. The Mundas want to coexist peacefully and foster mutual coherence and respect. Whatever the Mundas do, they must endure the mockery and various forms of repression from the two dominant religious groups, the Muslims and the Hindus. Being 'silent' instead than 'protesting' is the only means in dealing with them. Though they have some kind of good terms with the Hindus for religious commonalities, they have hardly any ties with the Muslims. However, the foundations of SAMS, as well as the active presence of numerous NGOs, media and law-enforcing agencies, foster a sense of 'protection' among the Mundas in recent years.

The blow in recreational activities endangered their distinct existence as an indigenous community. Every social and religious festival is usually celebrated by singing and dancing. Haria (rice beer) is intertwined with all these contexts. The more they drink the more they enjoy the events. In Muslim society, it is highly prohibited to consume wine and engage in recreational activities. As a result, the school-going students and Mundas who take part in mainstream activities incur extreme social humiliation. Recreational activities have thus considerably decreased. Only the elderly members of the Mundas have retained their traditional songs and dances. The youth's exposure to the mainstream culture has imbued them with Bengali or Hindi songs/dances to an extent wherein they have lost enthusiasm for preserving their own culture. In addition, because the language was non-alphabetic, they were unable to record or preserve the lyrics. These songs are transmitted orally and passed down through generations. Unfortunately, the present-day generations are reluctant to drag on the cultural legacies of the Mundas largely due to the 'inferiority' complex. Their food habits have also been affected due to the public shaming and the climatic change. Saltwater intrusion into the coastal areas made it difficult to avail rats, cuchia, snails, rabbits, tortoises, and ingredients to prepare haria. So, finding no other way to source these, this poor indigenous community has omitted these from their feasts and become hardly discernible from the Bengalis regarding food intake. The dominant Bengali-speaking community in general and the Muslims in particular are supposed to be empathetic in the core ideas of the theory of political recognition that is reflected in the responses of the Mundas. This community, to a certain extent, withstands the influential cultural narratives, practices, and ideologies, and is culturally vibrant enough to resist the hegemonic approaches of the Bengali-speaking community.

Conclusion

The Mundas in the Sundarbans still are far behind in getting the attention of the Government and other development agencies. The NGOs and the government became aware of the Mundas in the Sundarbans region when Fr. Luigi Paggi S.X., SAMS, journalists, and researchers initiated several development and research projects

for them. They now have their Munda identity and have been documented in the official records as the ‘ethnic minority’ living in the Satkhira district. However, this ‘identity’ will mean nothing if their distinct language and culture do not survive. Moreover, improving literacy and education is crucial for providing the disadvantaged Mundas with opportunities for meaningful and sustainable livelihood. The authors acknowledge that the scope of this study is limited and that the Mundas have experienced numerous other challenges in their language, education, and culture. Further research incorporating the entire Munda community of Bangladesh could make a substantial contribution to this field, offering insights across multiple areas and benefiting the Mundas nationwide.

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