

Education and Skill Development of Santal Children and Youth in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper explores education and skill development situation, needs, expectations, and challenges of Santal children and youth in Bangladesh. As a part of the study, focus group discussions (FGDs) with Santal children and youth and adults and key informant interviews along with documents review were conducted. Data were analyzed and coded to identify themes from multiple perspectives.

It was found that a high percentage of Santal children dropped out from the primary level; starting even in the first grade. High dropout continues progressively till the end of the primary education level, junior secondary level and the secondary and the higher secondary level.

The Santal community is dependent mostly on farming; most of them are day-laborers in the farm. There are no satisfactory vocational training facilities and income generating opportunities other than farm work, even for young Santals who may complete different levels of basic education. Social exclusion and marginalization of the Santal community from the mainstream is directly or indirectly liable for both the dropout problem and the lack of skill development opportunity. Due to marginalisation and neglect from the mainstream, the problems of educational and skill development deprivation are not properly addressed. Because Santals do not speak Bangla at home or in their community, it is essential to bridge the gap between home and school through mother tongue-based bi/multilingual education in primary school. The Government and development partners need to consider necessary steps for enabling Santal children to access basic education. They also need to initiate TVET opportunities appropriate for Santal youth along with support for entrepreneurship to improve their livelihood prospects

Key words: Santal in Bangladesh, Basic education, Skill development, TVET, Santal children and youth.

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1. Introduction

There are about 45 ethnic minority groups comprising a population of 1.6 million, which is 1.10 percent of the national population in Bangladesh, according to 2011 population census. A large number of ethnic minority communities live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) districts, but others live in a few other parts of the country. About one-third are residents of the plains in the north-western Rajshahi Division (Roy, 2010). The socio-economic status of the indigenous communities in the plains is known to be generally worse than that of indigenous communities in the CHT. Santals are the most numerous in the plains and the second-most numerous in the country after the Chakma from the Hill Tracts (BBS, 1991).

A study reports that "almost 92 percent *Adivasis* (indigenous people) of the North Bengal, most of them Santals, work as day laborers either throughout the year or part of it" (Samad, 2006, p. 9). Apart from farming, non-farm activities, e.g., forestry and fishery, mining and quarrying, manufacturing, and different kinds of services have been the more dynamic sectors contributing to creation of better-paying jobs and alleviating poverty. However, the large majority of Santals are dependent on low-yield and low-earning farming as day laborers.

The new generations of the Santals are enthusiastic about education and improving their socio-economic condition. But major barriers prevent their participation in education. These include different language for instruction in primary school from language at home, absence of Santal teachers in school, neglect of students by non-ethnic/Bengali teachers, lack of guidance and supervision by parents, need to take care of younger siblings at home, and engagement of children in family activities due to poverty (Kamal, Chakrabarty, and Nasreen, 2001; Badshah, 2003; Samad, 2006).

Historically and socio-culturally the Santals have been alienated and excluded from the mainstream society (Kamal, Chakrabarty, Nasreen, 2001). They lack the spirit and confidence to explore new initiatives. Access to basic education and opportunities for technical and vocational education and training (TVET), and thus the prospects for improving livelihood, are scarce.

The situation of the young Santals (age 10-24 years) is not better than that of the community as a whole. Santal children and youth are deprived of formal skills development because of their lack in basic education achievements. There has been little attention to their educational and skill development needs, expectations and challenges.

2. The Context: Santals in Bangladesh

It is assumed by historians that the Santals came to Bangladesh from Indian state of Bihar, especially Santal Pargana, for settlement in the period between 1840 and 1940. They inhabited the plain land of north Bengal, mainly in 16 districts including greater Rajshahi, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Pabna and Bogra of Bangladesh. Apart from North Bengal, Santals also inhabit tea gardens (plantations) of greater Sylhet and Chittagong, especially the hilly

district of Khagrachari, and south-west part of Sundarban area (Das, 2011). Researcher and activists of Santal community claimed that apart from Bangladesh, a large number of Santals live in Bihar and Assam states of India, and Nepal and Bhutan. It is claimed that the total number of Santals in the world is about 70 million (Soren, 2006).

Anthropologists and researchers reported that the Santals were hired as construction laborers during the period when the British colonial rulers began to build railway communication in India. They also worked under Zaminders, Jotedars and Mohajons - landowners and contractors who served as the agents of the British administration. The Santals were used to clear the forest for cultivation. They were permitted to live in designated land and were exempted from tax payment for a certain period of time. When clearing of forest was completed, the Zaminders occupied the land from Santals. The Santals were permitted to live on the land fulfilling the land-owners' requirements. Many of the Santals were dispersed into distant forests and geographically isolated territories. Some of them started to settle down in the forest and depended on hunting as their main source of livelihood.

Land reforms and the laws about land rights -- for instance the Permanent Settlement Regulation of 1793, the Bengal Tenancy Act 1885, the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act 1950 -- did not take into account the situation of the Santal and all of these laws and regulations went against their interest. The Santals -- poor, uneducated and unorganized -- occasionally rebelled to establish their rights over their lands, but were defeated and failed in their struggle to claim their rights (Rahman, 2002 and Bleie, 2005).

The oppression affected the community badly. The Santals became a marginalized ethnic minority with deep frustration who lost their human rights in all spheres -- including social status, economic power and culture -- and were ignored by the mainstream people. They lost much of their traditional way of life, which also was the plight of other indigenous people in Bangladesh. The realities of social, economical and political evolution of Bangladesh forced them to try to merge with the mainstream Bengali population. They have not succeeded in this effort and have become poorer among the poor and have felt helpless in every step of their lives (Rahman, 2002; Kamal, Samad and Banu, 2003; Das, 2011).

In Bangladesh, the agricultural labor force has been declining as a ratio of total labor force -- reaching 47 percent in 2010 (BBS 2011). Apart from farming, a lot of non-farm activities, e.g., forestry and fishery, mining and quarrying, manufacturing, power generation, water resources, construction, trade, hotels and restaurants, transport, storage and communication, finance and business services, real estate, health, education, public administration and defense, community and personal services have been growing as dynamic sectors of the economy. The micro-credit (MC) sector has also played an important economic role as an instrument for achieving the objective of poverty alleviation in Bangladesh (Rushidan, 2003). In such a context, labor intensive agriculture has been yielding low income; and the Santals have remained dependent only on agricultural day labor with very low wages.

The Santal community does not have as much educational opportunities compared to the mainstream population (Badshah, 2003). Policies for indigenous people's development in general and education in particular are expected to be guided by the constitution of Bangladesh, which promises equal opportunities for all citizens. In addition, the policies and programs are also supposed to comply with international conventions endorsed by Bangladesh, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which emphasizes that an equal opportunity to access quality primary education is a basic right of every child. The government is also committed to achieving the Millennium Development Goals and to achieve universal primary education for all children by 2015.

The Bangladesh Primary Education (Compulsory) Act 1990 requires that: (i) no child is deprived of education for lack of teachers, learning materials or adequate space, and (ii) no child is subjected to disparities in access to primary education arising from gender, age, income, family, cultural or ethnic difference and geographic remoteness. These aims are again reinforced by Bangladesh's commitment to EFA, and the incorporation of its goals into the National Plan of Action (NPA) 2002 – 2015. These pledges and commitments, however, have not applied to the children of the Santal community to the same extent as the mainstream children and youth.

It has been spelled out in the National Education Policy (2010) that the provision of basic education must include the use of ethnic community language in teaching which has to be ensured at the primary level for all ethnic communities. It is required that:

Measures will be taken to ensure the availability of teachers from ethnic groups and to prepare texts in their own languages so that ethnic children can learn their own indigenous languages. In these initiatives, especially in preparing textbooks, the inclusion of respective indigenous communities will be ensured. Special assistance will be provided to the marginalized indigenous children. (National Education Policy 2010, p. 8)

The National Strategy for Accelerating Poverty Reduction II, 2009 -11, also affirms that government will take necessary action for ensuring that children of ethnic communities will be given primary education following curriculum developed in their own languages (GoB, 2009). Despite these commitments, major obstacles remain in their educational development (Kamal, Chakrabarty, & Nasreen, 2001; Badsha, 2003; Samad, 2006).

Socio-culturally, the Santal is an isolated, neglected and alienated ethnic community in the northern part of Bangladesh (Kamal, Chakrabarty, Nasreen, 2001). It is an inward-looking and frustrated community that looks at their present situation and future life without hope. Frustration and despair have led to members of the community becoming addicted to locally-brewed alcoholic drinks. They lack the spirit to explore new initiatives and cannot take advantage of opportunities that may exist. They lack access to education and information about opportunities for TVET and other services for children and youth offered by government agencies. As a result, they are deprived of almost all advantages of social services and rights as citizen and as human beings.

3. Significance of the Study

With a saga of discrimination and deprivation over the years, most Santals are poor and their children and youth are deprived of general education and TVET opportunities. Across the country, the number of the adolescents and youth age group of 10-24 years is about 46 million (BBS, 2011). Bangladesh Government has been taking different initiatives on basic education, skill development and employment for children and youth. The Santal youth are not able to take advantage of these initiatives, as noted.

It is necessary to examine the opportunities that may exist for education and skill development for the Santal children and youth, their expectations and challenges they face. A better understanding of the situation will help consider the policy implications and appropriate actions to improve the prospects for the Santal children and youth.

4. Operational Definitions

For the purposes of this study, operational definitions are given to a number of terms used in the study.

Santal Children and Youth:

For the purpose this study, 'Santal children and youth' refers to young people from the Santal community of age 10 to 24 years who live in Bangladesh, particularly in the northern part of the country. The age range (10-24) is the period in human life-cycle when vocational skill development is a special concern from the point of view of society and the individual. But such skill development depends on acquiring basic education starting at an earlier age. Although the focus is on the 10-24 year age group, the age range was taken flexibly in investigating the situation, needs, expectations, and challenges of basic education for children and youth.

Education:

In this study education refers to general basic education which is the foundation of all kinds of development for the individual and society. The emphasis in this study was on the educational situation, needs, expectations, and challenges in general education at primary and secondary level.

Skill Development:

In the study, skill development is broadly defined as general or occupation-specific education and training programs and activities offered through formal, non-formal and informal means which help open gainful employment in the formal and the informal economy. The premises underlying the broad concept of skill development are:

General competencies in language, communication, math and science developed in general education programs (essentially post-primary education for the concerned age-group, but the foundation for this is laid in primary education) are both generic occupation-related skills and pre-requisites for specialized occupational training.

Skills are acquired in a variety of ways including formal and institutional courses offered not only through technical/vocational institutions, but also through various non-formal programs, formal or informal apprenticeship, on-the-job experience, and self-learning.

Young people may be engaged in different types of activities simultaneously which have skill development implications; e.g., they may be in a general education program but at the same time they may be involved in training, apprenticeship or employment.

The majority of young people in employment are in informal job sector. Most of these jobs are in construction, maintenance and repair, small manufacturing, trading and services of various kinds which, in most cases, do not offer specified or recognized skill training arrangements. But the economy would grind to a halt if these are not performed. A total picture of skill development must take both formal and informal skill development opportunities into account.

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET):

Generally, TVET (Technical and Vocational Education and Training) refers to education and training offered in a formal or non-formal institution or program specifically linked to occupations and standards and requirements for employment in those occupations. It is a sub-set of general skill development. A broader view is taken in this study focusing on the overall state of preparation, participation and efficacy of skill development for youth.

5. The Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study is to explore education and skill development situation, needs, expectations, and challenges of Santal children and youth in Bangladesh.

The specific objectives of the study are –

1. to explore situation and provision of skill development for Santal children and youth (10-24 years) focusing on occupational skill development, engagement of youth in employment, and provisions for skill development through institutional and non-formal means;
2. to find out abt the skill development needs, expectations, and challenges of Santal youth as perceived by them;
3. to generate policy recommendations regarding education and skill development opportunities for Santal youth.

6. Methodology, Data Collection and Analysis

It is a case study on education, skill development, especially technical and vocational education and training (TVET), situation, needs, expectations and challenges of the Santal children and youth in Bangladesh that entailed detailed investigation of the situation in the Santal community.

On the basis of the study aim and objectives, emphasis has been given on focus group discussions (FGDs) with samples of children and youth ranging from 10 to 24 years of age for gathering relevant primary data from the community. Through FGDs we have explored their opinion on the status, expectations, needs and challenges in education and skill development.

For collecting qualitative data from other primary sources, unstructured interviews were also conducted with two key informants selected purposively from the Santal community who were experienced, educated, senior community members (age 57 and 65 respectively) and resource persons. The interviews were informal and the duration was 55 minutes and 1 hour 10 minutes respectively.

Enriching and complementing primary data, we also reviewed documents available in different forms and relevant media reports.

Study Site and Participants

We selected our study area in northern part of Bangladesh, the Rajshahi Division, where the majority of the Santal people reside. In the Division, one area, where Santal people were more concentrated than in other areas, was selected purposively for qualitative data collection. From this area, two side-by-side locations - Godagari upazila (sub-district) and Tanor upazila - were selected for 4 FGDs.

Information about the Santal community (as found from the document review) suggested that there might be a difference between the Santal's life and livelihood in semi-urban areas and in remote rural village. Among 4 FGDs, 2 were held close to upazila (sub-district) town, and other 2 FGDs were held in rural areas away from the upazila town.

The participants of the FGDs were selected following purposive sampling. The age range of the participants was 10 to 24. However, emphasis was given on the age range 15-24 who would be articulate in sharing their views actively. In addition, in selecting participants, gender equality was considered. In the groups, mixed education levels of participants were represented (Table 1).

Table 1: Participants in FGDs

FGDs	No. of Participants	Urban-rural context	Gender distribution/ Male-female ratio	Education level
A	11 participants	Rural	Male 6, female 5	Illiterate to HSC
B	10 participants	Rural	Male 5, female 5	Illiterate to HSC
C	10 participants	Semi urban	Male 5, female 5	Class five to HSC
D	11 participants	Semi urban	Male 5, female 6	Class five to HSC
Total 4 FGDs	Total 42 participants	Total rural 21, semi urban 21	Total male 21, female 21	A mix of different education levels

Though young Santal people (age range 10-24) were the main source of information about their lives and livelihood, additionally, two key informants – well-informed adults from the Santal community – were interviewed.

Data Collection process

Consent of respondents and ethical and confidential issues

Before starting focus group discussion and interviews, every respondent or key informants were informed about ethical issues and confidentiality of the information shared. Their consent was taken verbally and they were assured that their name and identity would not be revealed.

Focus Group Discussion

Informality and a flexible environment were maintained to establish good rapport with respondents as well as to keep FGD on the right track. The issues in discussion and questions were open-ended and researchers had freedom to change the approach of questioning according to the demands of the FGD situation

The issues for discussion and questions in FGD were based on the researcher's judgment about issues derived from a review of relevant literature about the Santals and on research methodology. The researcher was careful about not prompting answers or revealing his own biases. FGDs were audio-taped with the verbal permission of the participants.

The language for discussion was mixed - Santali and Bangla. All respondents were allowed to speak in the language they preferred. As the principal researcher did not understand Santali language, an interpreter from the Santal community fluent in both languages was recruited as volunteer for the study. In introducing topics for discussion, both languages were used – Bangla by principal researcher which was translated in Santali by the interpreter. The majority of the respondents were capable of conversing in Bangla language and used Bangla language in the discussion. Some participants were less inhibited and more expressive when they spoke in their own language. Each FGD session took on an average of around one hour.

Key Informants Interview

Unstructured interviews were conducted to gather grounded information from two key informants who are selected purposively from the Santal community as experienced resource persons. The interviews were informal 'conversation' in style and only a list of topics was used as interview guide or aide-mémoire, which were needed to ensure coverage of points related to the aim and objectives of the study.

Document Review

To enrich and to validate primary data, we collected secondary data by reviewing the documents available in different forms, e.g., research study, books, essay, census reports, and media coverage about the Santal community as news and features.

Data Analysis

All FGD data were transcribed in respondents' or key informants' colloquial language which were in either in Santali language or in Bangla language. The interpreter from the Santal community volunteered to transcribe and translate the Santali content into Bangla.

A thematic analysis was used to analyze the transcribed documents and themes were extracted from the data through coding (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). While coding and analyzing the data, transcriptions in Bangla language were used to get the exact meaning of vocabularies used by the participants. In the end, all the analyzed data were translated into English. Some issues appeared repetitively in the FGDs. Those were coded and similar codes were grouped by generating a hierarchy tree. Themes were then derived from the grouped codes.

The main aim of the study and document review guided the researcher's analysis of the FGD findings. To reconcile apparently contradictory data, interpretive and reflective FGD listening and reading procedures (Denzin, 2001) were followed. This technique allowed the researcher to re-listen the recording to consider the intonation and voice quality, re-read the transcripts, re-think the personal characteristics of the respondents, such as gender, social status and position of the interviewees in the country context, and recall the facial expressions to understand the exact meaning of the contradictory information in a few instances. Identities of all the participants were hidden by keeping responses anonymous.

Research Limitations

A limitation of the study was that the principal researcher did not speak Santal language and had limited familiarity with the sociological and ecological condition of the ethnic community. In fact, being a member of the mainstream community, he may hold some of the stereotyped perceptions and views without being fully aware about these. He certainly did not qualify as a participant observer. The research has been conducted applying the qualitative methods and within a limited time – August 2012 to March 2013; both these factors may have compromised the findings somewhat.

–It is obvious that further work is necessary to have a full understanding of the situation, prospects of change and ways of promoting change to improve the life of the Santal community without affecting adversely the distinctive values, tradition and cultural practices of the community.

7. Analysis of Findings

Results and findings of the study were organized thematically as presented below:

General Education Situation - Provision, Needs, Expectations, and Challenges

The first focus group discussion (FGD – A) was conducted in a semi-urban setting close to an Upazila town. Regarding general education situation, especially on access to education and schooling, the following observation summed up the situation.

Once, Santal children did not go to school. Now, almost all children go to school. It was estimated to be about 90 %. It is because of parents' awareness of education. Our parents want to see their children pass primary education level and go to secondary school.

Regarding this issue, the second focus group (FGD – B) in a semi-urban setting similarly reported that “almost all children go to pre-primary/primary school.”

As we found from other focus group discussion in a distant rural area (FGD – D), “Now, Santal Children go to school in proper time” (FGD – C). They are more enthusiastic for education than it was before.” (FGD – D).

According to respondents' observation, supported by our own observation, the ratio of educated Santals in the total population is more in semi urban areas than in distant rural areas. The group discussion revealed that there were differences between semi urban and rural areas. The semi-urban Santals who live close to the sub-district (Upazila) towns, have somewhat more inclusive social environment and better school access than their rural counterparts.

Regarding needs and importance of education, parents, children and youth of both rural and semi-urban locations are now much more aware than in the past. However, semi-urban parents are to some extent more aware and economically capable to support child education than the rural Santal parents.

Regarding expectations about education, all FGDs, as well as our observation, reveal that the new generation of Santals are enthusiastic about education and look upon it as the means for improving their socio-economic condition. They know and believe that education is the only weapon to bring change in their children's life. This view resonated in many respondents' voice during FGDs and in key informants' words too.

In spite of the enthusiasm for education among children and parents, there is the contradictory perception that the Santal children do not enjoy the educational opportunities they need and deserve. This conflicting view appears to have arisen from the quality of the education services the schools offer, the high dropout rate of children and the unsatisfactory performance of many children in school as discussed below.

A respondent parent shared her perception about the education services in her own forthright words, “*We do not have education; so we are not capable of doing anything.*” Santal children face many obstacles in the community and in school premises. Only a small proportion of Santal youth becomes literate. For ms who have acquired some education, their educational standard is not high as we have found in the discussion. In addition, there is a gap in participation in education between semi urban and rural Santal communities.

It was learnt that most of the Santal children were enrolled in government primary school. A small number went to non-government primary schools such as those run by BRAC while some others went to Christian missionary school, mostly because only few of these facilities were available.

All the participants of focus group discussions (FGDs) as well as key informants mentioned that the lack of education opportunities and very low literacy rate in the community were the main obstacles to the advancement of the Santals. It was because, according to respondents' opinion, of drop out of a high percentage of children from primary, junior secondary and secondary and the higher secondary levels. The numbers of students progressively decreased from the primary school to the secondary and the higher secondary levels. As a respondent described the scenario, "*our children go to school to be educated, but dropout starts from grade one and continues in upper grades.*"

The result is that among 10-24 years age group, overcoming many barriers, a small number completed primary education, and even smaller numbers completed junior secondary and higher levels. The majority of Santal youth ended up as illiterate.

The major challenges in education of the Santals were described as follows:

(1) Language problem in school:

Medium of instruction, language of the classmates and books, and the teachers are different from their home language. So the Santal children face problems in following lessons and participating in class work.

(2) Lack of desired School environment:

Santal children find school environment unfriendly. They feel neglected, abused and isolated in the school. They said that abusive behavior is more or less similar in both semi-urban and rural areas. Most teachers and non-Santal peers engage in this behavior in primary school. As expressed by a respondent:

Teachers do not show any regard for us or pay attention to us. They do not allow us to join in any food program in school. Even if they give any food, eating together with peers is prohibited. This behavior hurts us a lot. We feel insulted and embarrassed by this maltreatment.

One respondent graphically expressed his feeling using the following words – "*They have labeled us as second class or grade two. So, we have been living as grade two. (Tara to amader dui nombor kore dieche. Tai, amra dui nombor hishebei thaki.)*"

Another respondent said that their access to teachers' room and getting support from teachers in school were restricted by the teachers. There was no free movement allowed to Santal student in school. Sharing this experience, the respondent threw a question to us: "*How shall we go to school if there are so many problems?*"

Our key informants informed us about the absence of a desirable school environment –

This is a very deep-rooted problem. When I was a child and used to study in primary school, I faced and tolerated such maltreatment and neglect too. During my days as a student, the degree of this discrimination to us as minority Santal people was higher than now. There was a snacks provision funded by a donor in my school. But I, the only Santal child in the class, was not allowed to participate in it. All children took part in the snacks except me. It was embarrassing and very sad for me. We used to face such discrimination from both teachers and my peers.

(3) Lack of supportive home environment:

Most parents are not knowledgeable or informed about what they can do help their children to be ready for school. Schools also don't have much communication with parents, especially with those from the ethnic community. Parents are often careless about this, not knowing how they could help.

(4) Lack of parents' awareness of child education:

Most of the parents are not aware of their role and responsibility about guiding and helping their children's growth and development and creating an appropriate environment at home for this purpose and to prepare their children for school. Even if some parents have a little understanding about children's education, most of them are without formal education or even literacy and are not able to take care of and supervise their children's education properly.

(5) Loss of interest in education/to study in school:

Our respondents stated that some of the Santal children dropped out, because they lost their interest in school. It seems that they lose their interest in education due to some of the reasons mentioned above, e.g. different language of instruction, neglect faced in school and lack of appropriate home environment.

(6) Poverty:

Poverty is one of the main barriers to education, creating obstacles in the way of access to and retention in school. One of the respondents said, "*Without a school meal and other educational support, children of poor family usually do not go to school or drop out from school.*" Another said, "*Children do not want to go to school without educational supplies such as exercise book and pen, pencil etc.[which the parents cannot afford to buy]; and children get punished in classroom and feel embarrassed.*" Besides, children of working parents stay at home to look after their siblings. Some children, when they are a little older, participate in their parents' work and chores. A father in the FGD said, "I work in the rice field as an agricultural labour. I do not have enough food regularly for the family; how shall I provide education to my children and send them to school." Thus poverty affects Santal children's education adversely in different ways.

(7) Early marriage:

Early marriage of Santal girls (adolescents) is another impediment to their continuation in school. This is a general problem in Bangladesh, but appears to be more prevalent among the Santals.

(8) Alcoholic addiction:

Home-made alcohol preparation and drinking regularly is an addiction that creates an adverse environment in family and in discharging parental responsibility. It hampers education of children in many Santal families.

(9) School distance:

The distance of school from home requiring children sometimes to walk for several miles is also noted by the respondents as one of the reasons why Santal children do not want to go to school.

Employment Situation

It is obvious from the FGDs, key informant interview and other secondary data that the whole Santal community has been dependent on farming for a long time, but mostly as day laborers. A very small number of them work in their own land. A few Santals are involved in other occupations. Dependence on work as day laborers in the farm cannot fulfill the needs and expectations of most households. Some of the young people have been looking for alternative employment opportunities and ways of learning new occupational skills, especially in the lean season, between planting and harvesting time. The farm workers often remain without any work at this time. Some of them are compelled to borrow to meet survival needs by selling labor in advance at low rate.

One of the key informants explained it this way:

They (Santals) have to take loan in the lean season which lasts for about two months. To meet their survival needs, they sell their labor in advance to owners of paddy land. This is a custom sometimes followed year round to cope with emergencies.

Our primary and secondary data revealed that Santals are mostly not involved in non-agricultural informal economy activities. They mentioned some reasons behind it: (1) They are socially isolated from main stream Bengali people. Bengali people don't want to buy goods from Santals' business places if they get the same things from Bengali people. (2) Santal People who have money to invest do not have education and skills essential for managing the business. (3) Many are very poor and lack the confidence to take the risk of engaging in small business enterprises.

Skills and Other Development Opportunities

Our primary and secondary study data reveal that there are almost no or little access to opportunities of skills development services for the Santal community in Bangladesh.

At present, there are no satisfactory TVET opportunities that they can take with or without some formal education. On the whole, there are few options for alternative employment or skill development for Santal youth. As noted by an FGD participant:

We heard that training for cow and goat rearing and ducks and poultry farming is given by government agencies in our local areas. But we did not get any support from the community leaders. They are from the big community and prefer their own community people in offering opportunities of skill development when such possibilities arise. Thus, we have not benefited from any TVET even after making requests and pleading for such training. We do not know if the disadvantaged people like us will get ever the chance to take part in TVET. In fact, we do not even get the information when and where such trainings are offered (FGD – C).

It has been found that there are limited communication and contacts between the Santals and the government agencies or even NGOs in respect of social and economic development programs. The Santals do not have substantial access to such services as micro-credit, medical care, family planning, maternity and nutritional intervention. Some NGOs including BRAC, Caritas, Ashroy and others have been recently giving attention to the disadvantaged ethnic groups, but these initiatives in such fields as education, social awareness and health care are still rather limited compared to the needs of the whole Santal community.

Skill Development Needs, Expectations and Challenges

The Santal people do not have many options for alternative skills development and TVET and the scope for being employed in occupations other than in traditional farming, mostly as low skill, daily wage laborers. They do want to improve their situation and would like to move into new occupations. They realize that this requires better general education, technical and vocational education and training as well as information about various income generating opportunities. Some of them who have the financial capacity, particularly those living near towns, are willing to pay for TVET. However, the large majority do not have the financial ability to pay for short TVET courses or long ones at the diploma level.

Despite the barriers and constraints, Santal youth are interested to look for new occupational and employment opportunities, especially in small businesses. But this possibility can materialise only if they can acquire basic education and skills in relevant trade or business.

FGD and interviews have revealed that Santal youth want to move from their traditional occupations to new income generating options. In order to escape from the present situation prevailing in the Santal community, the youth want to acquire alternative skills, and join TVET and get other training opportunities through which they might be employed in different jobs beyond traditional farming and casual farming labor. They have heard about possibilities and have expressed interest in training in various trades including poultry, fishery, electronics, mobile phone servicing, sewing, handicrafts, small business, carpentry, masonry, diesel engineering, computer training, driving, paramedics, mechanics, non-traditional farming, and veterinary medicine.

Eradicating poverty and promoting active inclusion in society and labor market for the most vulnerable groups are the key challenges that Santal children and youth face. They need guidance and support to overcome discrimination and to be integrated into the mainstream. They lack the financial means and encouragement to persist in general education and, TVET. They need social protection as minority groups in society to overcome social prejudices and barriers which deprive them from access to education and access to information about human resource development opportunities. Social marginalization also makes them frustrated and discouraged which keep them from looking for out-of-the-ordinary income generating options.

8. Discussion of Findings

This study explored Santal youth's education and skill development situation, needs, expectations, and challenges in Bangladesh. The overall findings of the study suggest that skill development of youths from ethnic minority groups depends on provision of inclusive general education, access to TVET and availability of social protection and social policies for inclusive growth of Santals on the basis of their needs, expectations and challenges in respect of skill development/TVET. The major findings under the three sub-headings are discussed below.

General Education

Provision for general education for the Santal community does not appear to have changed much from what has been indicated in the studies and reports since a decade ago or even earlier (Kamal, Chakrabarty, & Nasreen, 2001; Badsha, 2003; Samad, 2006). For example, in respect of basic education, Santal children continue to face barriers such as (i) different language of instruction and instructional materials in primary school other than the mother tongue, (ii) ethnic children isolated and alienated by teachers and classmates predominantly from the mainstream, (iii) home environment that cannot provide inspiration, guidance and supervision to children (iv) parents lacking knowledge and awareness about their children's education; (v) poverty; (vi) children taking care of their younger siblings and engaged in family activities; (vii) early marriage; (viii) alcohol addiction in family, and (ix) distance to school.

Although Santals have their own language, they do not have their own alphabet. It is still a matter of debate whether Bangla or Ol Chiki (a Santal language script invented in the 1920s) or Roman script would be used for writing the Santali language. For long they have kept their verbal language alive in their own community. At home, Santali is the main language of communication and children learn this language from the very early age. On the other hand, most Santal children live an isolated life within their community. So Bangla language remains unknown to Santal children. They find themselves in a difficult situation when they cannot understand teacher's instruction and textbooks and cannot interact with other children in Bangla. However, it is not a unique problem, as far as ethnic minorities are concerned.

Language is clearly an important factor in inclusion of disadvantaged children from the ethnic minority groups. Mother tongue based multilingual education (MTB MLE) from preschool throughout the primary level is a proven and known solution. But for Santal children, it has not been followed as yet in government primary school.

Some non-governmental organizations have been piloting and implementing programs for Santal and other ethnic children's education appropriate for specific ethnic community needs. Among them, BRAC Education Program (BEP) has been following such an approach through its special program approach through the Education for Ethnic Children (EEC) project unit.

BRAC established the unit in 2001 to adapt its non-formal teaching model to meet the needs of indigenous children, who do not speak Bengali. In EEC schools, teachers explain lessons verbally in ethnic mother tongues along with Bangla using educational materials based on local culture and heritage. This method helps indigenous children to participate actively in class and improves their enrolment and retention rates. Bilingual texts and supplementary reading materials have been developed up to Grade V in Chakma language. The program also plans to develop similar bilingual materials for other communities.

Other voluntary national and international organizations have also been working for ethnic children's education such as Ashroy, Save the Children, and Zabarang Kalyan Samity. The efforts of these organisations need to be extended to serve the Santal children.

“Lack of desired school environment and loss of interest to education or study in school,” often noted in FGDs, are interrelated. Not using the bilingual or multilingual approach only adds to the problem.

Need to work in the field for children to assist the elders, taking care of siblings and helping mothers in their daily activities are common problems for all poor families. When parents are concerned about their children's education, they try to find a solution and encourage children to go to school. This apparently is not the case in general for the Santal children. Parents and children accept the obstacles and difficulties as too daunting and not worth the effort to overcome these problems.

The absence of a supportive home environment for Santal children enrolled in primary school arises from the overall condition of poverty, illiteracy, problems of alcohol abuse, poor self-esteem, and lack of confidence and hope about the future that pervade the Santal community. Knowledge and understanding about how parents can guide and encourage children is lacking, but the school or teachers do not consider it their responsibility to communicate with parents and extend a helping hand.

Skills Development Access and Services

The study finds that there are no technical and vocational education and training (TVET) facilities appropriate for Santal children. Whether young Santals have some basic education or not further opportunities for vocational and occupational skill development for them are non-existent.

As they find no income generating work appropriate for them, and due to the lack of information about TVET opportunities, and being the victims of social exclusion and marginality, they have little choice but to resort to their traditional occupation – small-scale farming and daily wage labor in the field. It is almost a total dependency on farming and agricultural labor which has been long established practice in the Santal community. It indicates that the development of this ethnic community has been static. In fact, it may have been a worsening situation compared to other indigenous communities.

The general economic development activities in the country, the efforts to improve the situation of the disadvantaged groups and the attention to human rights and human dignity of all citizens seem to have largely bypassed the marginalized and somewhat scattered Santal community.

Skill Development Needs, Expectations, and Challenges

The study findings show that Santal youth are aware of the importance of skill development and the need for general basic education as the stepping stone for further skill and vocational training and employment beyond traditional daily wage work in agriculture. The youth and their elders recognize that social exclusion, marginalization and alienation that they are subjected to are the barriers to inclusive growth and development for their community.

The never-ending cycle of poverty, lack of education and skill development, and the failure to move on to new occupations and economic opportunities can be broken only with a helping hand from the government agencies offering basic public services, work of NGOs and a benign attitude from the majority communities who literally surround them. The Santal community has expectations that ongoing social and economic change in the larger society will reach them and serve to bring about a change in their situation. They realize that the change cannot happen only with their own effort; they need the help of the larger society including the government, civil society and NGOs who aim to promote a just society and establish human rights.

It is clear that adequate social protection through appropriate social policies, laws and programs are needed to achieve inclusive growth and development that will serve the Santal community including their youth. The European Report on Development (ERD, 2010) suggests that social protection is the specific set of public actions to address the vulnerability of people's life *via social insurance*, offering protection against risk and adversity throughout life; *via social assistance*, offering support to the poor to cope with vulnerability; and *via social inclusion* efforts that enhance the capability of the marginalized to access social insurance and assistance. Social protection and insurance mechanisms can provide some protection to the most vulnerable parts of the population. There is a growing need to expand access to social protection and insurance. The government, the donor community, civil society and the private sector have to invest in protection against shocks, drawing on the lessons emanating from other areas (such as disaster risk management) in order to build resilience.

9. Policy Recommendations

Considering the education and skill development needs of the Santal children and youth, and their expectations and challenges derived from FGDs, key informants interview, documents review, and our observation, some policy implications are noted below:

- Special initiatives like the Integrated Community Development Program (ICDP) under the Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board should be undertaken to ensure attainment of the development steps for Santal children and youth. It includes appropriate TVET combined with no/low interest credit support for SME.
- Affirmative action is needed including a special scholarship program for Santal and other ethnic minority children and youth to encourage participation in general education and TVET. Flexible rules for Santal children should be applied to include them in the primary and secondary education stipend programs. The provisions and rules for stipends should be publicised and the extent of benefits offered and received made known publicly.
- In Santal inhabited areas, the medium of instruction should be Santali language up to class V with gradual transition to Bangla. More Santal-speaking teachers should be employed in preschool and primary school. They should be sent to their areas for giving teaching support to Santal children using Santali language up to class V – with gradual transition to Bangla as demanded by Santal leaders.
- Undertaking an awareness raising adult education program for parents which should contain problems and issues regarding education and child development, consequences of alcohol addiction and other social and human development issues.
- Awareness building in society at large for creating empathetic and harmonious outlook towards the Santals and other ethnic minority groups should be initiated. Civil society, local government bodies and social service agencies such as those in education, health, and women's development should be pro-active in this regard. Communications media including electronic and print media can play their role in this respect, which should be encouraged by concerned regulatory agencies and trade bodies.
- Effective measures should be taken by government policy-makers and functionaries, human rights agencies and civil society members for preventing harassment, social discrimination, land-grabbing and eviction and other human indignity to which the Santal people are subjected.
- Steps should be taken to ensure participation of the Santals in planning and policy making bodies of the development agencies.
- To minimise social exclusion of the Santal community, short term and long term initiatives can be taken by government agencies and NGOs. For example, for bringing change in teachers' knowledge, attitude and practice, content regarding the ethnic communities can be included in the teachers' training modules and specific follow up and monitoring should be taken up particularly for schools in the ethnic areas. At the same time, to bring about change in Bengali children's mindset and attitudes, content of lessons in text books, teachers' guide and teacher training materials as well as practices should be reviewed.

- How social protection laws, regulations and programs related to children, women and disadvantaged groups impact the Santal community should be reviewed by concerned agencies and through independent research in order to undertake appropriate remedial measures.
- Designing and implementing an integrated strategy combining adequate income support, inclusive labor market practices and access to quality services should be given attention for mitigating isolation of the Santal workers from the labor market.
- Active inclusion policies should facilitate the access of workers into sustainable and “decent” employment supported by social welfare and protection that allow workers and their families to live with dignity.
- For combating poverty and for protecting the Santal community from social exclusion, government at all levels, especially the local government bodies, can play a coordinating role through:
 - setting up supportive rules and procedures,
 - better use of government development activities and funds to support social inclusion and combat discrimination,
 - improved access to work, social security, essential services (healthcare, housing, etc.) and education, and
 - identification and promotion of best practices.

10. Conclusion

The inclusion of Santal youth and giving them a stake in every facet of mainstream efforts to alleviate poverty and mitigating social exclusion and discrimination is essential as much for the deprived Santal children and youth as for society as a whole. This is the way to build the just society that Bangladesh as a nation aspires. The government, civil society and international agencies all have a role to play to promote and support necessary policy, objectives, priorities and programs in education, skill development and creating a favorable environment for these efforts, as discussed above, to succeed. A better future for the Santal youth is an inalienable part of building a better life for all children and youth in Bangladesh.

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