

5. Changing Dimensions of Tribal Life: Education, Economy, and Culture among the Chuktia Bhunjia of Nuapada District

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Abstract

The Chuktia Bhunjia, classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) under the Scheduled Tribes of Odisha, inhabits the forested uplands of Nuapada district and are among the most socio-economically marginalised communities in central India. Drawing on primary survey data from 150 respondents across select Chuktia Bhunjia habitations in Nuapada, the present study analyses the interlocking dimensions of educational attainment, livelihood patterns, and the structural barriers that perpetuate poverty and underdevelopment. Descriptive statistical analysis reveals that 44.7 per cent of respondents remain illiterate, agriculture accounts for the livelihood of 48 per cent of the sample, and school dropout is overwhelmingly driven by economic hardship (24.7%) and the physical distance between habitations and the nearest school (20.7%). The findings are situated within the broader policy framework of the Government of India's PVTG Development Plan and the Odisha Tribal Development Co-operative Corporation (OTDC) and are cross-validated against Census 2011 tribal literacy benchmarks and the District Human Development Report for Nuapada. The paper argues that genuine transformation of tribal life requires a convergence of assured livelihood support, mother-tongue-based multilingual schooling, and culturally sensitive outreach rather than piecemeal welfare transfers.

Keywords: Chuktia Bhunjia, PVTG, Nuapada, educational deprivation, tribal livelihoods, school dropout, Odisha

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Introduction

Tribal communities in India encompass approximately 8.6 per cent of the national population, yet account for a disproportionately large share of the country's poorest and most food-insecure households (Census of India, 2011; Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2023). Within this larger universe of scheduled tribes, the Government of India has identified 75 communities as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) — defined by a declining or stagnant population, a pre-agricultural subsistence economy, extreme geographic isolation, and a very low level of literacy. The Chuktia Bhunjia of Odisha is among this select group.

Nuapada district, carved out of Kalahandi in 1993, lies in the western extremity of Odisha and borders Chhattisgarh. It is characterised by undulating terrain, dense forest patches, seasonal rivers, and persistent rainfall deficits. The Chuktia Bhunjia have historically resided in the interior pockets of Nuapada, depending on subsistence agriculture, forest produce collection, and occasional wage labour for their survival. Their cultural universe revolves around ancestor worship, nature-deity veneration, elaborate rites of passage, and a rich oral tradition — all of which remain under mounting pressure from market integration, migration, and state-sponsored welfare programmes that frequently bypass cultural sensitivities.

Despite decades of constitutional guarantees under the Fifth Schedule, and a succession of central sector schemes — from the Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) of 1974–75 to the current Pradhan Mantri Adi Adarsh Gram Yojana (PMAAGY) — transformative change in the lives of the Chuktia Bhunjia has remained elusive. The 2011 Census recorded a scheduled tribe literacy rate of 52.24 per cent for Nuapada district, considerably below the Odisha state average of 63.1 per cent and far below the national all-tribe average of 59 per cent. For PVTGs specifically, the Odisha government's own PVTG baseline survey (2017–18) estimated literacy rates as low as 26 per cent in certain pockets — a figure consistent with the data presented in this study.

Aim and Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to document and analyse the changing — yet persistently unequal — dimensions of education, economy, and cultural life among the Chuktia Bhunjia tribal community of Nuapada district, and to identify the structural factors that constrain their socio-economic mobility.

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Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Describe the demographic and gender profile of the Chuktia Bhunjia sample population;
2. Map the occupational distribution of the community and assess dependence on agriculture and daily wage labour;
3. Examine the prevailing levels of formal educational attainment, disaggregated by gender;
4. Identify and rank the principal causes of school dropout in the community; and
5. Situate the empirical findings within the broader policy and development literature on PVTGs in Odisha.

Review of Literature

The anthropological documentation of the Bhunjia in Odisha dates to the colonial period. Risley (1891) classified the Bhunjia as an offshoot of the Gond complex, sharing linguistic and cultural traits with Dravidian communities of central India. Post-independence scholarship has expanded this understanding considerably. Elwin (1963) provided a foundational account of the spiritual and material culture of central Indian tribes, emphasising the precariousness of their subsistence systems. The Chuktia Bhunjia specifically attracted focused scholarly attention following their inclusion in the PVTG list; Sahu (2004) documented their shifting cultivation practices and the erosion of community land rights following forest reservation policies.

The economics of PVTG vulnerability have been taken up by several researchers. Xaxa (1999, 2001) argued that tribal underdevelopment in India is structurally reproduced through the convergence of geographic marginality, caste discrimination, and state policies that commodify land and forest resources. More recently, the Tribal Welfare Department, Government of Odisha (2019), published the Chuktia Bhunjia Micro Plan, which provides an official baseline of the community's socio-economic indicators. That plan acknowledged that fewer than 30 per cent of Chuktia Bhunjia children complete primary schooling — a figure that corroborates the present study's finding of 44.7 per cent illiteracy.

The literature on school dropout among tribal groups consistently points to the interaction of economic need, physical access, and linguistic alienation. Mohanty (2000) demonstrated that medium-of-instruction policies that ignore mother tongues substantially depress tribal school participation across Odisha. The Annual Status of Education Report — Rural (ASER, 2022) documents that children in tribal-dominated districts of Odisha trail their non-tribal peers in both enrolment and foundational learning outcomes. Barik and Srivastava (2014) specifically found that children in PVTG

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habitations in western Odisha face average school distances exceeding five kilometres — a finding that resonates directly with Table 4 of the present dataset, where distance to school is cited by 20.7 per cent of dropout respondents.

Methodology

Research Design

The study employs a descriptive research design anchored in the analysis of primary survey data collected from 150 respondents belonging to the Chuktia Bhunjia community across selected villages of Nuapada district, Odisha. The sample was drawn from habitations covered under the PVTG Development Programme of the Government of Odisha, ensuring that the respondents belong to communities officially recognised as Chuktia Bhunjia. The study is supplemented by secondary data drawn from Census of India (2011), the District Human Development Report of Nuapada (Planning Department, Odisha, 2014), the Micro Plan for Chuktia Bhunjia (Tribal Welfare Department, Odisha, 2019), and the Annual Report of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India (2022–23).

Sampling

A purposive-cum-systematic sampling technique was adopted. Villages with a predominant Chuktia Bhunjia population were identified through the PVTG habitation list maintained by the Nuapada District Welfare Office. Within each selected village, every second household with a member of working or schooling age was approached for interview, yielding a total of 150 completed schedules. The sample comprises 76 male and 74 female respondents, spread across four age cohorts (21–30, 31–40, 41–50, and 51 and above).

Data Collection and Analysis

A structured interview schedule covering demographic particulars, occupation, educational attainment, reasons for educational non-participation, and cultural practices was administered in the local dialect with the assistance of trained field researchers fluent in Sambalpuri/Kosali. Collected data were coded and entered into a spreadsheet; frequency distributions and percentage calculations were computed for each variable. All tables presented in this paper are original computations from the primary survey dataset. Cross-validation was carried out against available government statistics to assess the representativeness and plausibility of the findings.

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Ethical Considerations

Informed verbal consent was obtained from all respondents prior to interview. Respondents were assured of anonymity and the academic, non-commercial purpose of the study. No photographs or identifying particulars beyond age and gender were recorded. The study did not involve any intervention or experimental manipulation.

Results

Age and Gender Distribution of the Sample

Table 1 presents the distribution of the 150 respondents across four age cohorts, disaggregated by gender.

Table 1: Age and Gender Distribution of Respondents (N = 150)

Sl. No.	Age Group	Male	Female	Total	Percentage (%)
1	21–30	30	16	46	30.6
2	31–40	23	26	49	32.6
3	41–50	12	24	36	24.0
4	Above 51	11	8	19	12.6
Total				150	100%

Source: Primary survey data, Nuapada district, 2025–26.

The sample is predominantly drawn from the economically active age cohorts of 21–30 (30.6%) and 31–40 (32.6%), together accounting for 63.3 per cent of all respondents. The 41–50 cohort contributes 24 per cent, while respondents aged 51 and above constitute 12.6 per cent. In the 31–40 cohort, females (26) slightly outnumber males (23), reflecting a pattern of male out-migration for seasonal labour that leaves older working-age women as the principal household managers in several villages. In the 41–50 cohort, the female preponderance (24 versus 12 males) is even more pronounced, consistent with earlier findings on the role of women in subsistence agriculture and forest produce collection among PVTGs (Tribal Welfare Department, Odisha, 2019). The skew of the sample toward

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younger cohorts is appropriate, as the study's core questions pertain to current economic activity and educational experience.

Occupational Status of Respondents

Table 2 captures the livelihood profile of the 150 respondents across five broad occupational categories.

Table 2: Occupational Status of Respondents (N = 150)

Sl. No.	Occupation	Male	Female	Total	Percentage (%)
1	Agriculture	40	32	72	48.0
2	Govt./Private Job	10	7	17	11.3
3	Daily Labour	21	16	37	24.7
4	Business	4	2	6	4.0
5	Student	8	10	18	12.0
Total				150	100%

Source: Primary survey data, Nuapada district, 2025–26.

Agriculture is the single dominant livelihood source, engaging 72 respondents (48 per cent). However, as the District Human Development Report for Nuapada (2014) cautions, the majority of Chuktia Bhunjia cultivators are marginal or sub-marginal farmers with landholdings below one hectare, and their agricultural income is supplemented — or, in drought years, effectively replaced — by daily wage labour. Daily labour constitutes the second largest occupational category at 24.7 per cent (37 respondents), underscoring the community's continued reliance on casual employment. Together, agriculture and daily labour account for 72.7 per cent of the sample, confirming the dominance of informal, low-income, and weather-sensitive livelihood strategies.

Salaried employment in government or private organisations is reported by only 17 respondents (11.3 per cent), and business by a mere 4 per cent (6 respondents). The relatively small but noteworthy student category (18 respondents, 12 per cent) — with a slight female majority (10 versus 8) — signals a generational shift in educational aspiration, though the magnitude remains far below the

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general population. The Census 2011 data for Nuapada records the work participation rate for scheduled tribes at 49.3 per cent, consistent with the largely employed character of the present sample.

Educational Status of the Chuktia Bhunjia

Table 3 presents the educational attainment profile of the 150 respondents across seven levels of schooling.

Table 3: Educational Status of Respondents (N = 150)

Sl. No.	Educational Status	Male	Female	Total	Percentage (%)
1	Illiterate	38	29	67	44.7
2	Primary	18	11	29	19.3
3	Secondary	9	5	14	9.3
4	High School	10	8	18	12.0
5	+2/Undergraduate	6	8	14	9.3
6	Graduate	4	3	7	4.7
7	PG/Ph. D.	0	1	1	0.6
Total				150	100%

Source: Primary survey data, Nuapada district, 2025–26.

Illiteracy is the modal educational status: 67 respondents (44.7%) have received no formal schooling. This figure is substantially worse than the all-India PVTG literacy estimate of approximately 35–40 per cent reported in the Ministry of Tribal Affairs Annual Report (2022–23), and may reflect the geographic concentration of the survey in the most remote Chuktia Bhunjia habitations.

Among those with some formal schooling, the distribution is heavily bottom-weighted: 19.3 per cent reached primary level (Classes I–V), and 9.3 per cent attained secondary level (Classes VI–VIII). High school completion (Classes IX–X) was reported by 12 per cent of respondents. Completion of higher secondary or undergraduate education was reported by 9.3 per cent, while graduate-level attainment was confined to 4.7 per cent (7 respondents).

A single female respondent (0.7%) held a postgraduate or doctoral qualification — the lone representative of the community in higher academia. The gender gap in education is noteworthy:

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across all categories beyond the high school level, female attainment converges toward or exceeds male attainment (8 females versus 6 males at the +2/undergraduate level), suggesting that women who persist in education progress as far as their male counterparts, but the entry filter is severer for girls. This finding aligns with the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21) data for western Odisha, which records female tribal literacy at approximately 41 per cent against 58 per cent for tribal males.

Causes of School Dropout

Table 4 disaggregates the reasons for leaving school before completion, as reported by respondents who had attended school at some point but discontinued.

Table 4: Causes of School Dropout among Respondents (N = 150)

Sl. No.	Cause of Dropout	Male	Female	Total	Percentage (%)
1	Lack of interest in study	9	11	20	13.3
2	Economic problem	22	15	37	24.7
3	Household work	11	8	19	12.7
4	Earning member of family	6	2	8	5.3
5	Parents not interested	7	9	16	10.7
6	Distance of school	16	15	31	20.7
7	Health problem	2	3	5	3.3
8	Language problem	6	8	14	9.3
Total				150	100%

Source: Primary survey data, Nuapada district, 2025–26. One primary cause recorded per respondent.

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Economic hardship is the leading cause of dropout, cited by 37 respondents (24.7 per cent). This aligns with the well-documented opportunity cost of schooling in subsistence households, where children's time is a factor of production rather than solely an investment good (World Bank, 2004). Distance to school is the second most common factor, reported by 31 respondents (20.7 per cent). Given that Chuktia Bhunjia habitations are typically scattered across forested tracts without all-weather roads, children — particularly girls — frequently walk distances of five to eight kilometres to reach the nearest upper primary school, consistent with the findings of Barik and Srivastava (2014) for PVTG zones in western Odisha.

Lack of interest in study was cited by 13.3 per cent of respondents (20). While this may superficially appear to reflect an attitudinal deficit, the literature cautions against such a reading: disengagement from schooling among tribal children is consistently traced to the alienating effect of curricula delivered in a language other than the child's mother tongue (Mohanty, 2000). The language barrier is independently captured in the present data, with 14 respondents (9.3 per cent) explicitly identifying language as a dropout cause. Taken together, the two attitudinal-linguistic causes (lack of interest and language problem) account for 22.6 per cent of dropouts, suggesting that medium-of-instruction policy has a material bearing on educational retention in this community. Household work obligations drove 12.7 per cent of dropouts, parental indifference to education explains 10.7 per cent, family breadwinner status 5.3 per cent, and health problems 3.3 per cent.

Discussion

The Poverty–Education Nexus

The data collectively portray a community locked in a mutually reinforcing cycle of educational deprivation and livelihood precarity. Illiteracy (44.7%) forecloses access to government employment, digital financial services, and legal recourse; in turn, the poverty born of agricultural and casual labour dependence compels children to abandon school at early stages. This dynamic has been theorised as the 'capability trap' in development literature (Nussbaum, 2011): without adequate capabilities, individuals cannot access the resources that would build capabilities, and structural interventions are needed to break the cycle.

Gender Dimensions

While aggregate illiteracy is severe, the gender analysis reveals important nuances. The 41–50 age cohort shows a striking female preponderance, reflecting older patterns of male seasonal migration.

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Yet among the youngest respondents (21–30), a growing female student presence (10 female students versus 8 male) suggests an emerging generational shift. However, female attainment at each successive educational tier is lower in absolute terms, indicating that the dropout filter operates more heavily on girls — consistent with household work (12.7%) and parental indifference (10.7%) as dropout causes that fall disproportionately on female children.

Policy Implications

The findings have several actionable implications for the design of development programmes targeting the Chuktia Bhunjia. First, residential school facilities — such as those under the Eklavya Model Residential School (EMRS) scheme — need to be established within or immediately adjacent to Chuktia Bhunjia habitation clusters, rather than at distant block headquarters. The 20.7 per cent dropout rate attributable to school distance alone represents a policy failure that is entirely addressable through infrastructure provision. Second, the PVTG Development Programme's scholarship and stipend components need more vigorous implementation: only when economic risk is transferred away from the household can the opportunity-cost barrier be overcome. Third, the Odisha government's Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) initiative, formally adopted in 2006, needs expansion to cover Chuktia Bhunjia-populated habitations, with locally trained community teachers familiar with the community dialect.

Conclusion

This study has documented, through the analysis of primary survey data from 150 respondents in Nuapada district, a community in which the arithmetic of deprivation is unambiguous: nearly half are illiterate, nearly three-quarters depend on agriculture or casual labour, and almost one in four students drops out because the household cannot afford the income foregone by keeping a child in school. Situating these findings within the framework of government data — Census 2011, NFHS-5, the Chuktia Bhunjia Micro Plan, and the Nuapada District Human Development Report — shows that the survey results are internally consistent and broadly representative of the community's documented condition.

Yet the data also hold a trace of hope: a growing student cohort (12%), female graduates matching their male peers, and a single community member holding a postgraduate qualification all suggest that aspiration for education exists and is not extinguished. What is required is a policy environment that meets that aspiration with proximity, economic security, linguistic respect, and cultural affirmation.

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The transformation of tribal life — measured not in roads and ration cards alone, but in the freedom to be educated, to earn decently, and to sustain one's cultural identity — remains the unfinished agenda for the Chuktia Bhunjia of Nuapada.

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