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## The Sabars of Singhbhum

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*A photo-essay on the Sabars, an identified Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group, who survive—live is hardly the word—in the most extreme conditions in East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand.*

In the forested hills of East Singhbhum district, Jharkhand, the hunter-gatherer Sabars live in distress and despair. The myopic, profit-driven mainstream development paradigm is at the heart of forest resource depletion and wildlife extinction that has affected the lives of the Sabars.

The Sabars are left without their traditional resource base for livelihoods and economic growth has not given them the benefits their fellow citizens have enjoyed the past two decades.

The Sabars are one of the eight Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups in Jharkhand. They are spread over the forested hills of south-eastern Jharkhand. The Socio-Economic Caste Census (2011) puts their count at 86,110, barely 0.27% of the Jharkhand population, and their population is said to be falling. This has prompted the state government to design special interventions on mortality, literacy and nutrition.

This photo essay based on visits to one Sabar hamlet in East Singhbhum district in July and September 2020 gives a glimpse of the lives and livelihood of Sabars.

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Sukwaro Sabar is middle-aged and lives in the Meetha Jharna hamlet of Tentla village. He and his wife, Sukarmani Sabar, built their kutchha house (in the background) themselves. They barely have any material possessions let alone capital. Sukawro learnt the skill of building houses from his father. In the non-tribal world, Sukawro would be called “unskilled”.



Sukwaro Sabar outside his house

His eldest daughter enrolled in a tribal residential hostel in another district. However, after the first summer vacation she did not go back. She couldn't relate to the contents of curriculum and felt trapped in the hostel.

When asked about the state's newly launched Dakiya Yojana for doorstep delivery of PDS items to every household, Sukwaro said he had received 30 kg of rice the previous month and not the 35 kg he was entitled to. Provision of "doorstep delivery" had no significance as they had to travel the same distance to collect the essentials.

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Dilip Purty, a Santhal teacher at the upper primary school in the plains of Tentla village, which is spread across a wide area, casually remarked that Sabars don't want to educate their children. "Not a single Sabar child attends the school even though it's just about an hour's walk from the Sabar settlements," he said. This school is attended largely by Santhal children of the area.



The Santhal school near Tentla village

Later, Sukarmani Sabar admitted they teach their children traditional skills like working with bamboo, collecting fruits and vegetables from the forests and the like, which would help them secure their livelihood. They see these skills as protecting them from hunger and death, and do not see any returns from attending school.

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Sabar children are terribly malnourished (Dreze 2015). Those I saw were either dreadfully skinny or pot-bellied due to poor nutrition. During my time at Sukwaro Sabar's house, the children ate only the water of fermented rice, without even adding salt. Had the school in the hills near the Sabar settlement been open and had they attended it, they could have eaten comparatively better nutritional meals just like the Santhal children do.

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The village school for the Sabars, now an abandoned structure that is hard to see amidst the vegetation that has covered the building, is located in the hills at the corner of the hamlet. Years back, when a Munda teacher was posted there, he would call children from every house of the locality and make them sit together and teach them. His village was in a different block and it would take him more than three hours to travel to the school. When there was an opportunity to get transferred, he chose to teach in a nearby school. No one knows anything about the teacher now appointed to the position.



The abandoned primary school for Sabars in Meetha Jharna hamlet of Tentla village

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The Jharkhand government had earlier launched a special housing programme for indigenous people. It was titled the Birsa Awas Yojana, named after the legendary adivasi freedom fighter, Birsa Munda. The programme is far from successful. The number of houses allotted is much less than the number of families who are entitled to houses under the scheme. More importantly, the quality of houses that have been constructed is pathetic. It is hard to call them “houses”. Consequently, they are usually abandoned. A close look at the house on the right reveals rusted iron rods for a roof.



Poor quality of houses built under the Birsa Awas Yojana

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The young girl standing outside her unfinished house is Asrita Sabar. Asrita's family was among the few fortunate ones selected for a house under the other housing scheme, the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Grameen (PMAY-G).

Though the family was informed of its allotment in 2016, construction commenced only two years later. But the house remains partially constructed. The family decided to complete construction of the house themselves and requested the pradhan to disburse the remaining instalments under the PMAY-G, but they haven't heard from him since then.



Asrita posing outside her half-completed house under the Prime Minister housing scheme

There is no source of round-the-year income for the family. It is only during the monsoon, when they collect wild mushrooms and bamboo stems to sell in local market that they get to see cash, but that does not add up.

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Tirla Sabar is a seasonal migrant. She works as a casual labourer in Kolkata. After losing both her parents at a young age, she left the village along with her brother to find work in Jamshedpur, while their siblings stayed back. After a few months, the contractor sent them to Kolkata. She continued to stay in the city while her younger brother came back citing ill health. She is in the picture as she had come to visit her family and intends going back soon.



Tirla Sabar with her nephew outside her house

Tirla believes she is more empowered than her village counterparts. Her beautifully painted and decorated abode stands in stark contrast with other dwellings. Inside the house, the presence of locally made products and packaged foods like biscuits indicated her cognizance of the ways of the outside world and also of the availability of money.



Tirla's brothers scrape bamboo stems to sell in the local Santhal market

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Only a state-led effort can make a difference to the living conditions of the Sabars. In addition to access to diverse and adequate quantities of nutritional food, the Sabars need well-functioning and adequately staffed schools (with a curriculum they can relate to), so that they can push themselves and future generations from the cage of hunger and poverty.

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