



Urban Living and Life Satisfaction among Scheduled Tribes: A Study in East Kolkata Using SWLS

Shibthakur Hembram

Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, Presidency University, Kolkata, India

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Abstract

The tribal People are inherently living in isolated, remote areas, in exclusion from the so-called modern world. They are accustomed to living in self-made socio-cultural settings, often in harsh environments, especially in forested areas. The tribes are among the most marginalised people in social, economic, political, and cultural terms since the history of tribal people has been one of exploitation, marginalisation, and discrimination. But after independence in India, many tribal people have migrated to urban areas due to the need for their livelihood. The isolationist approach of Verrier Elwin advocated that the tribal people should be left alone and allowed to develop in isolation, fearing that cultural contact would undermine tribal solidarity and expose them to exploitation. But Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, argued that the inclusion of tribal people in mainstream society, not forcefully but voluntarily, is the suitable way to tribal development. A study has been carried out to find out the quality of community life and life satisfaction level of the tribal community in an urban setting, and their intra- and inter-personal relationship in mainstream society using Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). To fulfil the objectives, data has been collected through a questionnaire survey, and interview. Analysing the collected data, it has been found that majority of tribal people feel that the urban environment is better to live their life, as it provides all the facilities and amenities and diverse livelihood opportunities which are unavailable in rural life.

Keywords: Tribal, Urban setting, Quality of life, life satisfaction, tribal development.

Introduction

India constitutes the second-largest tribal population in the world (Bahuguna, 2016). The Indian language term 'Adivasi', coined in the 1930s, for the indigenous or tribal people, was mainly used to delineate a group of people characterised by distinctive physical features, language, religion, custom, social organisation, etc. (Xaxa, 1999). According to the 2011 census, tribes constitute 8.61% of the total population of the country. There are over 700 Scheduled Tribes (ST) as deemed under Article 342 of the Constitution of India. Central India is home to the country's largest tribes; approximately 75% of India's tribes live there. However, the North-East has the greatest concentration of scheduled tribe population. The major tribal groups in India include the Gonds, Bhils, Santals, and Khasis. Traditionally, the tribal people lived in nature and hunting, gathering, and agriculture activities were their prime livelihood sources (Debnath et al., 2024). Nowadays, they are migrating to urban areas for better opportunities for jobs and amenities and facilities, losing their root.

However, the urban environment brings about new and dramatic challenges to the immigrant tribes. In addition, their traditional knowledge and skills are obsolete in the urban economic sector, so they tend to be relegated to low-paying jobs, thus filling the informal sector. Culture and language loss, along with weakened community safety nets, are potential threats in the cities (Vasquez and Hentschel, 2017). In addition, the STs are the lowly represented, socially excluded communities in the cities. In the context of tribal development, there are two well-known approaches. Verrier Elwin insisted on a National Park or isolationist approach, which literally meant to let the tribes live on their own, allowing them to grow in their self-created or self-designed developmental paradigm. Nehru, however, did not support permanent isolation of the tribes from mainstream civilisation; rather, he suggested selective and voluntary accommodation of advanced technology and culture into the tribal lives (Gavit and Chand 1989). Therefore, the research study attempts to shed light on the quality of life and potential life satisfaction of the tribes in an urban setting, who are living with mainstream society. The quality of life encompasses mental, physical, social, professional, spiritual, marital well-being, interactions with others, exercising one's rights and choosing own way of life and involvement in society (Chaturvedi and Muliya, 2016; Philips, 2006). They should be encouraged and allowed to preserve their individual ethnicity and basic cultural patterns through the initiatives of the government and the work of social or human, and anthropological researchers. In view of this, the present research study tries to view the quality of community ties and interactions in relation to residential segregation in cities and determine the level of life satisfaction among the respondents of the study area. It also attempts to acknowledge the changes in the socio-economic and cultural patterns of the settled tribal communities in the city caused due to the dominance of non-tribal neighbourhood influence. Measuring a community's quality of life helps development authorities identify key problem areas and provide actionable strategies to improve citizens' well-being.

Objectives

The study has been conducted to fulfil the following objectives:

1. To assess the quality of life of tribal people in an urban setting.
2. To find out the contrast of life satisfaction level across the three generations related to subjective well-being among the tribes living in an urban setting.

Study Area

Kolkata is the third-largest metropolitan city in India in terms of population. The area of Kolkata city is 205 sq km, and the metropolitan area spreads over 1,886.67 sq km. The present study area is exclusively parts of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC). Out of 144 municipal wards, specific parts of 58 and 108 are under the exclusive study area, which together share 15 per cent of the total Scheduled Tribe population under the Corporation area. Namely, the study areas are Mundapara near Ruby Hospital, belonging to ward number 108 and Kachari Para, Dhapa of ward 58, both located in south-east Kolkata and share a common administrative division of KMC. There is heterogeneity in the composition of the tribal communities in Mundapara of ward number 108, consisting mostly of the Munda Tribes settled in the city of Kolkata for more than 40 years, besides other tribes in smaller numbers, comprising Santal and Oraon. Similarly, the tribal population in Kachari Para (ward number 58) consists of only the Munda tribes.

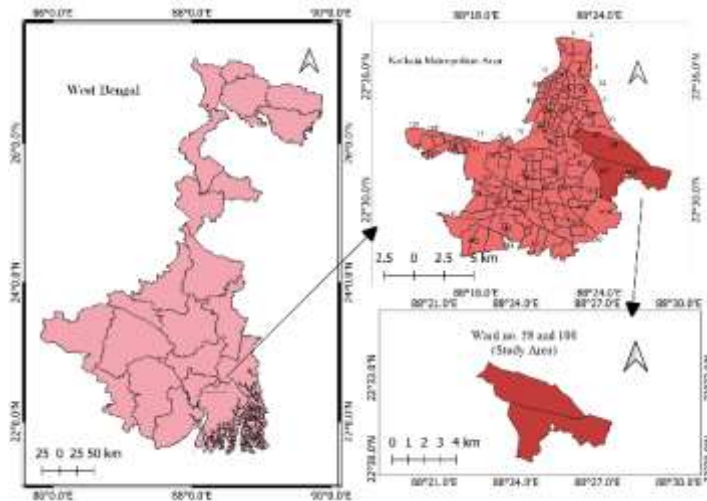


Figure 1: study area map

Literature Review

There are a few but growing studies evaluating the quality of life of tribal people in India. The deprivation index has been used to study the quality of life among the tribal and general population in Kerala. The result shows that in comparison to the state's general population, tribes have higher deprivation in terms of housing, basic amenities, economic status, etc (Thara and Nair, 2013). Basavarajaiah et al. (2020) assessed tribal livelihood in the Western Ghats using the WHO-QOL scale. The study reported a low average QOL index score of 38.68 ± 7.13 (95% CI: 24.66–52.70), with a negative correlation to health domains ($r = -0.13$). The average life expectancy among the tribes was 45.59 years. The spatial dynamics studied in the ten biggest urban-Indian cities by ward-level data suggest that there is high residential segregation in cities by caste, and even higher segregation in terms of their access to basic public and private goods (Sidhwani 2015). Study by Sana Huque (2018) on the exposure of Kolkata's development reveals marked changes in the aspirations, level of education, exposure to technology and occupational mobility of the present generation of tribal settlers in rural Kheadaha surrounding the East Kolkata Wetlands. A detailed account from the study discloses the fact that the land, originally "ryoti" land, belonged to the tribes who settled past several generations on the land and did farming, but with consecutive development taking place in Kolkata, the surroundings began to change. Consequently, this resulted in a large influx of non-tribals in the area and conversion of agricultural fields and fishery ponds to residential land, thereby displacing them and changing their tribal customs and practices. Forced displacement and exposure to mainstream economic systems have left many Kadar tribe vulnerable, pushing them into unstable and low-paying jobs, thereby deepening poverty and economic insecurity (Bagavandas, 2021 and Nazii et al., 2021). Mishra (2012) in his work on the spatial specificity of SC and ST population in Kolkata city. The scholar deduces that the marginal character of the ST population in Kolkata is attributed to their failure to merge with the mainstream population. Das (2017) in her study on the Santals living in Santragachi under Howrah Division, but spatially within the limits of Greater Kolkata, reveals that the tribes settled there for more than 35 years with periods of migration from different parts of West Bengal and the neighbouring states of Jharkhand, Bihar, and Orissa. The study deals with

contestations regarding the introduction of mother tongue, Santali, in indigenous script, *Olchiki* and using the script to formal education for the migrant tribal community. Major studies on the Scheduled tribes living in urban areas have explicitly emphasised the impact of urbanisation on various aspects of health and education of these groups. Researchers have contended an adverse impact of adoption of urban life-styles on the cardiovascular risk factors of tribals in their study.

Methodology

The study is based on a mixed method, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The data has been collected through a questionnaire survey and interview in January 2025 to understand the quality of life and life satisfaction level among the tribal communities living in urban areas. To assess the objectives set forth, a random sample survey at the ward level has been carried out. Two wards (ward no.108 and 58) were selected based on the largest frequency of tribal population. A total of 120 families, consisting majority of Munda tribes, followed by Oraon and Santal tribes, were identified as samples for the study, and interviews were conducted across three generations. The average interview lasted 20-25 minutes. The interviews were structured and formal, both time and place were decided in advance through secondary data and a pilot survey. The collected quantitative data has been analysed by using basic statistics. Life satisfaction has been measured using The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) devised by Diener *et al* (1984). It consists of 5 items [i.e. (i) In most ways my life is close to my ideal, (ii) The conditions of my life are excellent, (iii) I am satisfied with my life, (iv) So far I have gotten the important things I want in life, (v) If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing], each rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

Total Score Range: 5 to 35

31-35: Extremely satisfied

26-30: Satisfied

21-25: Slightly satisfied

20: Neutral

15-19: Slightly dissatisfied

10-14: Dissatisfied

5-9: Extremely dissatisfied

Results and Discussion

Demographic and Socio-economic profile

The socio-demographic profile of the respondents reveals significant insight into their socio-demographic composition (Table 1). A total of 120 individual samples have been collected and equally distributed for both genders. Most of the tribal people who live in East Kolkata (Ward 58 and 108) belong to the Munda tribes (80.8%), a few are from Santal (7.5%) and Oraon (11.7%) communities. Most of the respondents are from the 25-35 age group (35%), followed by the 36-45 age group (20%), and more than 55 years (19.2%). The presence of younger individuals is minimal, i.e. 8.3%. The marital status of the respondents indicates that the majority are married (72.5%), followed by separated or widowed (15.8%) and unmarried (10.8%). Regarding educational level, half of the respondents, i.e. 51.6% reported their educational qualification between I-VIII. About 18.3% individuals reported having no formal education. The higher education level among the tribals is significantly low, i.e. 11.7%. So, overall education level among the tribal respondents living in an urban

setting is low, which limits their access to better opportunities in employment. Having a low level of education and skill, tribes are forced to engage in low-income jobs even in urban areas. The income data reveals that the majority (44.2%) of respondents have less than Rs. 10,000 monthly incomes, and 35.8% reported their income level between 10,000. 20,000. Only 5.8% respondents reported having > 40,000 rupees monthly income.

Table 1: Socio-demographic profile of the respondents

Demographic Characteristics	Frequency (n=120)	Percentage (%)
Sex		
Male	60	50
Female	60	50
Tribal groups		
Munda	97	80.8
Santal	09	7.5
Oraon	14	11.7
Age		
<25	10	8.3
25-35	42	35.0
36-45	24	20.0
46-55	21	17.5
>55	23	19.2
Marital status		
Unmarried	13	10.8
Married	87	72.5
Separated/widow	19	15.8
Educational Level		
Illiterate	22	18.3
I-VIII	62	51.6
IX-XII	22	18.3
Above XII	14	11.7
Income level		
<10000	53	44.2
10000-20000	43	35.8
21000-30000	9	7.5
31000-40000	8	6.7
>40000	7	5.8

Source: Primary survey, 2025

Quality of community life

The study highlights a change in traditional tribal practices in urban settings (Fig. 2). Only 10.8% of respondents wear traditional attire during ceremonies, and just 3.3% continue the practice of body inscriptions. However, cultural knowledge remains strong, with 90% aware of tribal songs and dances, and 88.3% actively performing them during celebrations. Rituals such as washing guests’ hands and feet persist among 77.5% of respondents, and

over 80% consume traditional rice beer regularly or on special occasions. Belief in nature worship, once central to tribal life, is now held by only 26.7%.

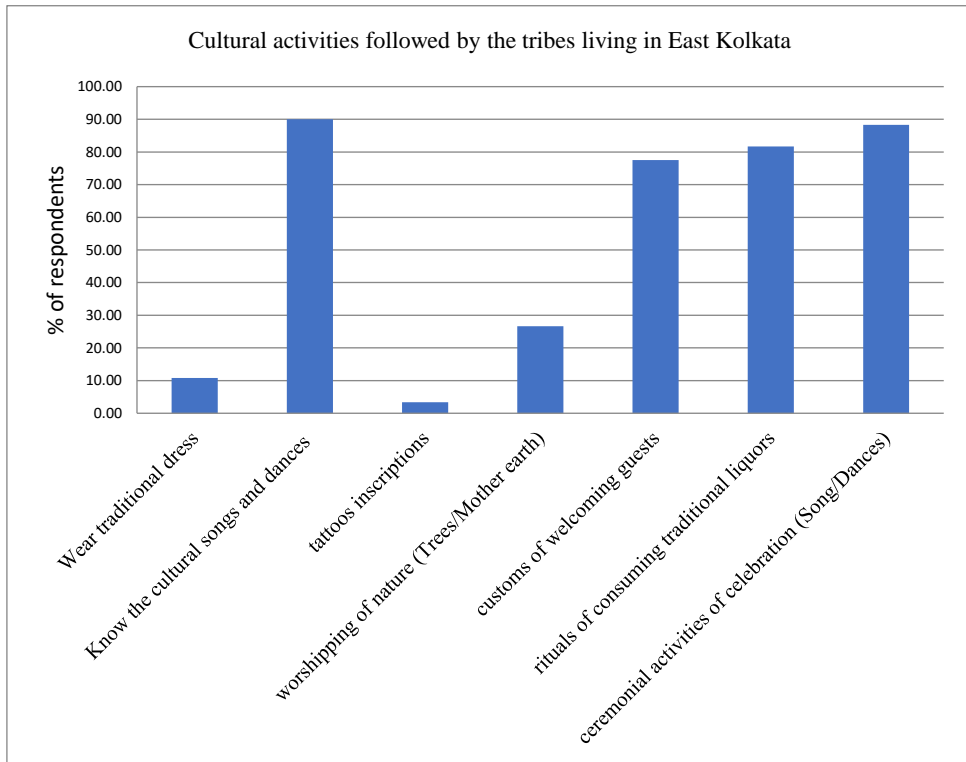


Figure 2: Cultural activities of the tribes living in urban areas.

Previous research suggests that social networks and interactions are fundamental to fostering social cohesion and community participation. A strong sense of belonging enhances these interactions, which in turn contributes positively to individuals' perceived quality of life within neighborhoods. Figure 3 illustrates that a majority (81.7%) of respondents are highly satisfied with the level of contact they maintain with members of their own community. An additional 15.8% reported being somewhat satisfied, while only 2.5% expressed dissatisfaction. Likewise, 80% of respondents acknowledged receiving support from neighbors during family functions or in times of need, with 17.5% reporting occasional assistance and 2.5% denying any such support. Furthermore, 52.5% of respondents strongly agreed that the tribal community unites to resolve collective issues, and the remaining 47.5% agreed with this statement.

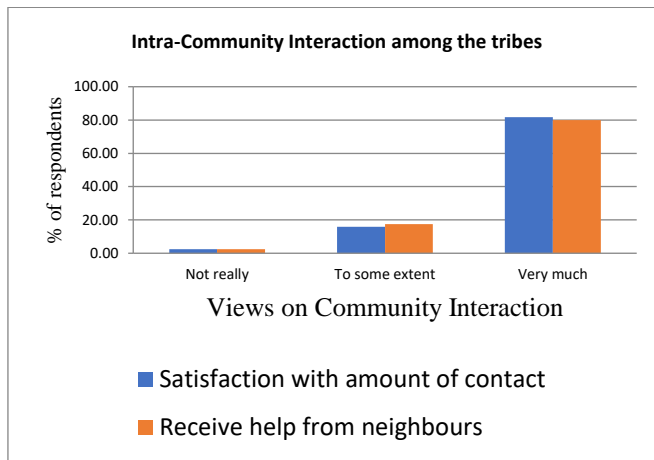


Figure 3: Level of intra-community interaction among the tribes.

Figure 4 presents the patterns of socialisation between tribal and non-tribal communities. A significant majority (91.7%) reported regular social interaction with non-tribal groups, facilitated by co-residence in the same locality and close friendships formed through neighbourhood ties, schools, and daily interactions. Additionally, 66.7% of respondents engage with members of other communities at their workplaces, while 28.3% attend social functions such as marriages and ceremonies hosted by non-tribal families, often through invitations from neighbours or colleagues. Only 0.8% expressed a reluctance to socialise within the locality. Notably, inter-community marriages are reported with Bengalis (13.3%), Scheduled Castes (5%), and Biharis (0.8%), reflecting a degree of social integration across community lines.

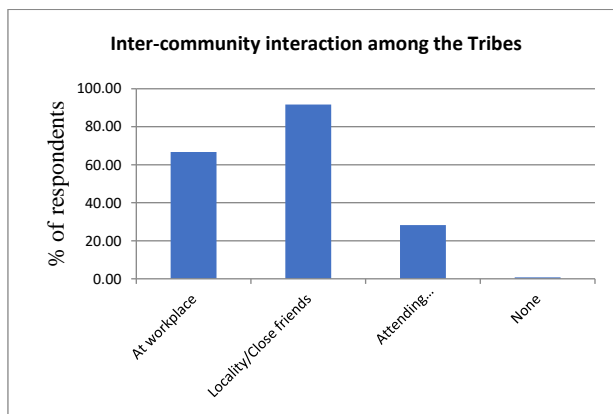


Figure 4: Level of inter-community interaction among urban tribes.

The findings indicate that a vast majority (96.7%) of respondents perceive urban life as better compared to villages or small towns, while 2.5% disagreed and 0.8% remained neutral (Figure 5). Similarly, 96.7% of respondents felt well accepted by the mainstream society, with no reports of overt discrimination (Figure 6). However, 2.5% expressed concerns about limited involvement from other communities in tribal welfare matters, and 0.8% reported being accepted with reluctance by the mainstream population.

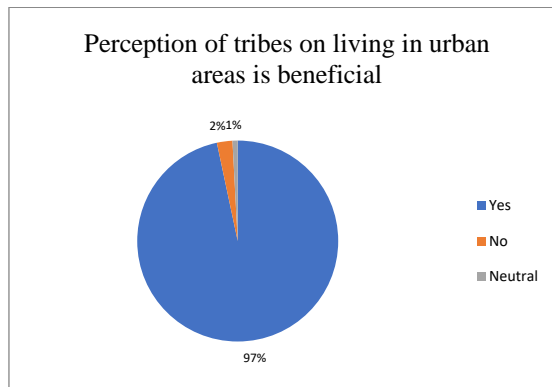


Figure 5: Perception of tribes on living in urban areas is beneficial

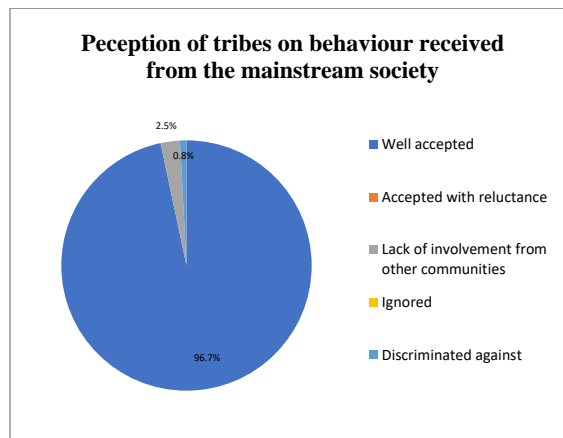


Figure 6: Perception of tribes on behaviour received from the mainstream society

The findings reveal a strong sense of attachment to the urban setting among tribal respondents, with 94.2% expressing no intention of returning to their place of origin (fig. 7). This sentiment is further reinforced by the fact that some respondents have never visited their native villages, thus lacking any emotional or cultural ties. These individuals are categorised under the 'never' group by default. In contrast, a small proportion – 1.7% – indicated a clear intention to return, while 4.2% expressed some interest in going back to their native place. The co-existence of tribal communities with the mainstream urban population is primarily driven by the pursuit of improved living conditions. The urban environment has positively influenced tribal life, offering enhanced access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and markets, facilitated by well-developed transportation and communication infrastructure.

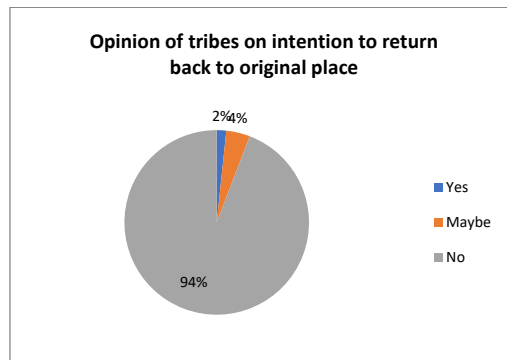


Figure 7: Opinion of tribes on intention to return to their original place

Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction refers to a positive evaluation or affirmation of one's life. It is a key concept in both philosophical and psychological discussions of happiness and well-being, and is widely recognized as a central element of overall quality of life (Argyle, 1987; Diener, 1984). The SWLS by Diener was designed to measure an individual's evaluation of their life in comparison with a standard that each individual set for him or herself. One of the most important and positive influences on happiness is social relationships. People who score high on the life satisfaction scale tend to have close and supportive family and friends, contrary to dissatisfaction among people arising from the absence of close friends and family. A third factor related to the life satisfaction of most people is personal satisfaction with the self, religious or spiritual life, learning and growth, and leisure.

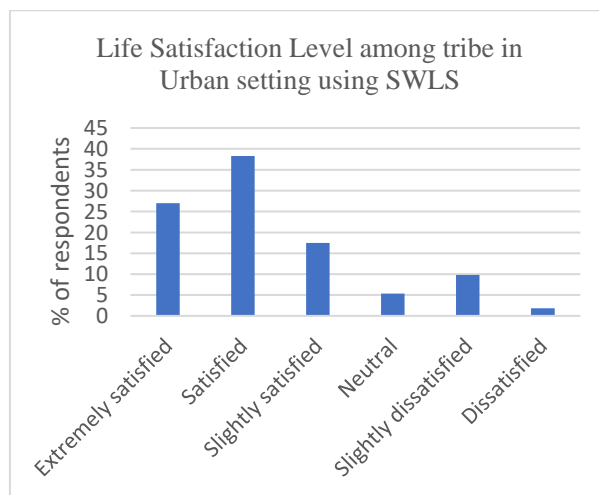


Figure 8: Life satisfaction level among tribes

The aim is to find out the situation of life satisfaction level in an urban setting and their perception about the urban lifestyle. It helps not only their adaptation level in an urban environment, future perspective in urban society can be predicted from the present life satisfaction level. The higher the value of life satisfaction level, the higher will be the adaptation level and good perception towards urban society and vice versa. Figure 8 shows that most of the tribal people are satisfied (38.3%) with their life in urban area. About 27% of tribal reported extremely satisfied with their life in urban setting followed by

17.5% people who are slightly satisfied. Only 5.3% remained neutral in that issue; however around 10% tribal people expressed their dissatisfaction with life in urban environment.

Conclusion

Scheduled Tribes in India are distinguished by their geographical isolation and unique cultural identity. Historically, they have faced social, economic, political, and cultural marginalisation. Verrier Elwin initially advocated an isolationist approach, believing that contact with mainstream society would erode tribal solidarity and lead to exploitation. However, he later recommended a balanced policy between isolation and assimilation (Elwin, 2009). Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru embraced this middle path, promoting the integration of STs through the "Panchsheel" principles. These five principles emphasized: (i) development based on tribal communities' own traditions; (ii) protection of tribal land and forest rights; (iii) minimal outsider interference; (iv) culturally sensitive administration; and (v) evaluation based on quality of life rather than statistics (Vidyarthi & Rai, 1985). The study finds that urban integration has altered tribal lifestyles and diluted traditional customs through exposure to dominant city norms. While many tribes have adapted to urban life, benefiting from better facilities and opportunities, they maintain strong community ties and a growing sense of belonging through neighbourhood interactions and participation in local events. However, some elderly individuals, especially from minority subgroups, feel culturally disconnected and prefer returning to their native places. Overall, community interaction at the neighbourhood level fosters social cohesion, belonging, and quality of life, as shaped by shared networks and participation. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) by Diener et al. (1985) has been used to assess life satisfaction among urban tribal communities. Majority report high satisfaction, valuing independence and modern lifestyles, although they retain little of their traditional culture. They are optimistic, with a positive view of life despite some unmet goals. Some are satisfied due to better education, employment, and access to services, while others report moderate dissatisfaction stemming from poverty, limited education, and disrupted livelihoods. Still, many appreciate the opportunities urban life offers and continue practicing select cultural traditions, such as community celebrations. Individuals mostly express high satisfaction, having adapted well to urban settings and achieved personal goals. However, a few faces dissatisfaction due to financial strain or family burdens. Overall, the findings reveal that life satisfaction shaped by economic conditions, social integration, and cultural adaptation. While younger members are future-oriented and modernized, older generations reflect resilience and acceptance. Urban living, despite challenges, has improved well-being across tribal generations by providing better opportunities, access to services, and a sense of belonging.

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