

A Situational Analysis of Landlessness among the Santhal People in Morang District

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Abstract

This study examines the situation of landlessness among the Santhal community in Ward No. 2 of Rangeli Municipality, Morang District. Despite being an indigenous national group, the Santhal people continue to face systemic exclusion from land ownership in an agrarian society where land determines livelihood, dignity, and social inclusion. The research is guided by two key questions: (1) What are the underlying causes and current patterns of landlessness among the Santhal community in the study area? (2) How does landlessness affect their socio-economic conditions, rights, and access to basic services? Accordingly, the objectives are to examine the structural and historical causes of landlessness and to analyse its socio-economic impacts on the community. The study adopts a mixed-method case study approach, combining descriptive and exploratory designs. Primary data were collected through household surveys (63 respondents), two focus group discussions, and two case studies, while secondary data were obtained from government reports, academic literature, and NGO publications. The findings reveal that nearly 73% of respondents live on public (Ailani) land without secure tenure, and many depend on Adhiya (sharecropping) farming and daily wage labour. Major causes of landlessness include historical land dispossession, lack of education and legal awareness, poverty, weak documentation, and ethnic marginalization. The impacts are severe, including insecure housing, limited access to services, restricted educational opportunities, and exclusion from government schemes. The study concludes that landlessness among the Santhal is a multidimensional issue requiring urgent, inclusive, and rights-based policy intervention.

Keywords: Santhal, landlessness, discrimination, marginalization, development

Background

Land ownership in Nepal is not only a symbol of economic stability but also a determinant of social status, political power, and access to resources. In agrarian societies like Nepal, land continues to be a primary asset for livelihood, particularly for rural and indigenous communities. Despite several land reform efforts initiated since the 1950s, including the Land Reform Act of 1964, landlessness persists as a critical issue, especially among historically marginalized groups such as the Dalits, indigenous nationalities (Adivasi Janajatis), and other socio-economically disadvantaged populations (Dhakal, 2011). Among the indigenous communities affected by landlessness, the Santhal people, also referred to as Satar or Santal, occupy a particularly vulnerable position. The Santhal are a recognized Adivasi Janajati group in Nepal, primarily concentrated in the eastern Terai region, including Morang, Jhapa, and Sunsari districts. They have a rich cultural heritage, unique language, and livelihood practices deeply intertwined with the land. However, due to historical marginalization, exclusion from formal state structures, and lack of legal recognition of their traditional land use systems, a significant portion of Santhal families remain without land ownership (Gaige, 2009).

As the time passed on, the Santals (Santhal) in Nepal were becoming more and more marginalized- struggling for mere survival without having any proper direction to move forward or improve their life situation (Olee Siwakoti). In Ward No. 2 of Rangeli Municipality in Morang District, the issue of landlessness among the Santhal community is notably acute. Despite the area's agricultural potential and increasing urbanization, many Santhal households reside on unregistered public lands (Ailani) or live as informal tenants under insecure arrangements. These families often lack legal land titles, making them ineligible for state benefits such as housing grants, compensation for displacement due to infrastructure projects, and access to agricultural subsidies. The absence of land tenure security not only exacerbates their economic vulnerability but also limits intergenerational asset transfer and community empowerment.

The intersection of landlessness and not having citizenship among the Santhal people has profound implications for their struggles to lead dignified lives. Without secure land tenure and citizenship rights, Santhal communities face systemic barriers that limit their opportunities for socio-economic advancement and perpetuate cycles of poverty and exclusion. Moreover, the lack of recognition and protection from the state leaves the Santhal people vulnerable to exploitation, discrimination, and human rights violations (Khosieko Adhikar, CSRC).

This study seeks to explore the ongoing reality of landlessness among the Santhal people in this specific ward, analyzing both the structural causes and socio-economic impacts of land deprivation. By highlighting the voices, experiences, and coping mechanisms of the Santhal community, the research intends to provide evidence-based insights for inclusive land policy reform and support indigenous rights to equitable development.

Research Question

Despite being one of the indigenous nationalities of Nepal, the Santhal (Satar) community continues to face systemic exclusion and marginalization, particularly in terms of land ownership. In an agrarian society where land is a key resource for livelihood, dignity, and socio-economic development, the lack of secure land tenure has placed the Santhal people in a vulnerable position. This landlessness is not merely a matter of individual poverty but is rooted in historical injustice, policy negligence, and social discrimination. To address the core issues highlighted above, this study is guided by the following key research questions:

- What are the underlying causes and current patterns of landlessness among the Santhal people in Rangeli Municipality, Morang District?
- How does landlessness affect the socio-economic conditions, rights, and access to services of the Santhal community in this area?

Objectives

Understanding the structural and historical causes of landlessness, along with its practical consequences in the lives of the Santhal people, is crucial for designing effective interventions. This research, therefore, seeks to provide a grounded analysis by capturing both the systemic dimensions and the lived realities of landless Santhal families in the study area. Based on this general objective, the study has the following specific objectives:

- to examine the underlying causes and present patterns of landlessness among the Santhal community in study area,
- to analyze how landlessness affects the socio-economic conditions, rights, and access to basic services for the Santhal people in the study area.

Significance

Landlessness is not merely an economic issue but a deeply rooted social and structural problem that reflects historical exclusion, policy failure, and power imbalance. For

indigenous communities like the Santhals, land is not only a means of livelihood but also a source of cultural identity, social recognition, and intergenerational security. However, despite their long-standing presence in the Terai region, many Santhal families remain without formal land ownership, resulting in continued marginalization and limited access to state resources and opportunities. This study holds significance at multiple levels. First, it contributes to academic knowledge by focusing specifically on the Santhal community, a group that is often overlooked in national and regional discourses on land reform and indigenous rights in Nepal. By documenting the lived experiences of landless Santhal families in Rangeli Municipality, the study brings attention to an issue that is both urgent and under-researched.

Second, the findings of this research can serve as an evidence base for policymakers, local government officials, civil society organizations, and development practitioners working on land reform, indigenous rights, and inclusive development. By highlighting the root causes, present realities, and consequences of landlessness in a localized context, the study aims to inform more targeted and culturally sensitive interventions. Lastly, the study gives voice to the Santhal people themselves, whose struggles and perspectives are often unheard in decision-making spaces. By centering their narratives, this research not only contributes to knowledge production but also supports the broader goal of social justice and equity for indigenous and marginalized communities in Nepal.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and quantitative case study approach, which is appropriate for exploring the complex social issue of landlessness within a specific community context (Creswell, 2018). The case study method allows for an in-depth understanding of the Santhal people's lived experiences, social dynamics, and the structural factors contributing to their landlessness. This research adopts both descriptive and exploratory approaches to understand the situation of landlessness among the Santhal community in Ward No. 2 of Rangeli Municipality, Morang District. The descriptive aspect focuses on presenting the current status of land ownership, socio-economic conditions, and access to services among the Santhal households. It includes statistical data from household surveys, highlighting patterns, trends, and demographic characteristics of the respondents.

On the other hand, the exploratory aspect of the research aims to investigate the deeper, underlying causes of landlessness and the lived experiences of the Santhal people. Through focus group discussions and case studies, the study explores how historical,

social, and structural factors have contributed to their present condition. Since there is limited, formal research specifically targeting landlessness in this community, the exploratory design also helps in identifying new themes, issues, and perceptions that may not have been previously documented.

Both primary and secondary data were collected for this study.

- Primary data was gathered directly from the Santhal community members through HHs survey, FGDs, and observation.
- Secondary data was sourced from government records, academic publications, policy documents, and reports from NGOs working on land and indigenous rights.

Major Findings

The present study was conducted to assess the situation of landlessness among the Santhal people in Ward No. 2 of Rangeli Municipality, Morang District. The data presented in this chapter were collected from a total of 63 community members who were selected as respondents for this research. The sample comprises 44 males and 19 females, reflecting a predominantly male representation in the study population, which constitutes about 70% of the total sample, while the remaining 30% were females.

Table 1: No. of respondents from the study area

SN	Name of Village/Tole	No. of Respondents	Percentage
1	Bhaluwajhora	24	38%
2	Latamarang	8	13%
3	Jaliya	7	11%
4	Kathkholuwa	22	35%
5	Laxmipur	2	3%
	Total:	63	100%

Source: Field Study 2025

The data shows the distribution of respondents across different villages or toles within the study area. Among the total of 63 respondents, the highest number came from Bhaluwajhora (24), which constitutes 38% of the sample. Kathkholuwa follows closely with 22 respondents (35%), reflecting a significant representation from these

two villages. The rest of the respondents are distributed across Latamarang (13%), Jaliya (11%), and Laxmipur (3%), indicating a relatively small population from these areas. This distribution suggests that the majority of the data was collected from Bhaluwajhora and Kathkholuwa, which are the main settlements of the Santhal community in Ward 2 of Rangeli Municipality.

Table 2: Age group and gender ratio of respondents for household survey.

Age Group	Gender		Total	Percentage
	Male	Female		
18-24	3	3	6	10%
25-34	11	3	14	22%
35-44	11	6	17	27%
45-54	9	3	12	19%
55-64	8	0	8	13%
65+	2	4	6	10%
Total:	44	19	63	100%

Source: Field Study 2025

The age-wise distribution of the respondents shows a varied representation across different age groups. The 35-44 age group comprises the highest number of respondents with 17 people (about 27%), reflecting a dominant working-age population in the community. The 25-34 age group follows closely with 14 people (about 22%), while the 45-54 age group comprises 12 people (about 19%). Furthermore, the 55-64 age group consists of 8 people (about 13%), and the 18-24 age group and 65 and above age group both account for 6 people each (about 10%) of the total sample.

Table 3: No. of rooms in Santhal houses

Number of rooms in their house		
No. of room	No. of HHs	Percentage
Home with 1 room	11	19%
Home with 2 rooms	22	37%
Home with 3 rooms	15	25%
Home with 4 rooms	8	14%

Number of rooms in their house		
No. of room	No. of HHs	Percentage
Home with 5 rooms	2	3%
Home with 9 rooms	1	2%
Total Respondents:	59	100%

Source: Field Study 2025

The data reveals that the majority of Santhal families live in small houses with a limited number of rooms. Among the 59 respondents, 2-room houses are the most frequently reported, with about 37% of the families living in 2-room accommodations. This is followed by 3-room houses, which account for 25%, and 1-room houses, making up 19% of the total. The prevalence of small houses reflects the challenging living conditions of many Santhal families, where space is often scarce and not adequately divided for different household needs. Meanwhile, 14% of the families reside in houses with 4 rooms, 3% in 5-room houses, and 2% in a 9-room house, a small fraction that likely belongs to a relatively more well-off household in the community.

Table 4: Access of basic facilities by Santhal households.

Access on basic facilities		
Particular	No. of response	Percentage
Drinking Water	59	94%
Electricity	48	76%
Toilets	49	78%
Health Post	3	5%
Road	4	6%
School	7	11%
Communication	48	76%

Source: Field Study 2025

The data reveals that the majority of the Santhal community has access to certain essential facilities, although there are still significant gaps in many areas. Among the 63 respondents, drinking water stands out as the most accessible service, with about 94% of the community having reliable access. This suggests that drinking water is largely available, reflecting the progress made in this area.

Table 5: Perception on Land Rights by Santhal People

Perception on Land Rights		
Do you think the Santhal community is treated fairly in land ownership issues?	No. of respondents	Percentage
Yes	0	0%
No	60	95%
Not Sure	3	5%

Source: Field Study 2025

A question was asked in the online form with ‘Do you think the Santhal community is treated fairly in land ownership issues?’ and the received data reflects a deep-rooted perception of unfair treatment among the Santhal community when it comes to land ownership issues. Among 63 respondents, 60 (95%) stated that the Santhal community is not treated fairly in land ownership matters. This overwhelming majority underscores a strong feeling of injustice and inequality within the community. Furthermore, a small fraction about 5% (3 respondents) responded that they were not sure whether the community is treated fairly or not, reflecting some uncertainty or lack of knowledge about the legal procedures and policies related to land ownership. Importantly, none of the respondents believed that the Santhal community is treated fairly in this context, which highlights a universal perception of unfairness and a persistent violation of their land rights.

Findings from Case Study

To get a deeper understanding of the struggles faced by landless Santhal families, two case studies were documented from the study area. These cases reflect the real-life stories of community members who have been affected by unfair practices, illiteracy, and a lack of legal ownership of land. Through their experiences, we can observe the human dimensions of landlessness; its impact on daily life, income, education, and future prospects; and appreciate the urgency of addressing this issue in a fair and effective way.

Marangmay Mardi (Pseudo Name)

Marangmay Mardi, a 55-year-old woman, lives in Jaliya, Rangeli Municipality-2. She is married to Bagan Mardi. While Marangmay has her citizenship certificate, her husband, Bagan, does not. Due to this, the couple has not been able to register their marriage legally and obtain a marriage certificate.

The family lives on 1 Kattha of Ailani land that belongs to the government, and they cultivate an additional 12 Kattha of land under the Adhiya system. Adhiya means that the land is owned by someone else (the landlord), and in return for using it, the Mardi family must give the landlord 50% of whatever they produce. Naturally, this arrangement makes it hard for the family to grow enough food for the whole year. To make up for the shortage, the members of the family, including her children, sometimes travel to nearby cities and factories to find daily wage employment and help keep their household going.

Their home is small, just two rooms made of bamboo sticks and clay, with a tin sheet roof. The space is not enough to accommodate their whole family comfortably. Furthermore, due to their poor financial condition and lack of proper documents, the family cannot purchase additional land. Even if they were able to buy land, registering it under their name would be a challenge because her husband does not have citizenship papers.

The children of Marangmay and Bagan are attending school and have birth certificates, thanks to the help of their school authorities. However, their future is uncertain, particularly when it comes to obtaining citizenship and securing their legal rights. Without citizenship documents, their future opportunities; education, employment, marriage registration; may be affected.

Marangmay expresses her struggles honestly and directly: “Because of not having permanent land and residence, the family is deprived of electricity service and we have to rely on kerosene lamps during the night. I wish the local government would address our issues as soon as possible.”

Her story highlights not just the struggles of a single family, but also the ongoing hardships faced by many landless Santhal families in the area. It underscores the urgency for policy intervention and proper legal recognition to help people like Marangmay move toward a more stable and secure future.

Murmu (Pseudo Name)

Lilmuni Murmu, 36, is a woman living in Rangeli Municipality-2. She is married to Talai Murmu and together they have 3 children (2 sons and 1 daughter). Lilmuni came to this community from a nearby village called Daulatpur after her marriage. She is a daughter-in-law in a joint family; Talai is the second of 3 brothers in his household. The family lives in a temporary home constructed on a small piece of land, about 10 dhur; and they cultivate nearly 10 Kattha of land that belongs to the

public. None of this land is registered under their name; their living and agricultural practices are entirely dependent on land that they do not legally own. Lilmuni shared a painful story from her family's past; a story that has profoundly affected their present conditions. Many years back, her father-in-law owned 10 Kattha of land in nearby Betauna and 5 Kattha in Mangalbare. At the time, her father-in-law fell into financial trouble and borrowed some money from a merchant, a person who was rich and powerful in the community.

Her father-in-law kept paying the merchant the interest on the borrowed amount for years. However, the merchant insisted that the principal amount remained unpaid and demanded more and more. Eventually, under pressure and unfair conditions, her father-in-law was forced to transfer his land to the merchant's name to clear the supposed dues. With a heavy heart, the family handed over their land and fell into landlessness, a condition that has kept them vulnerable and struggling to this day. Lilmuni expresses deep sorrow over this incident. She says, *'This was a very unfair incident upon the family of my husband at that time. Due to a lack of education, the proper calculation of the loan and the interest couldn't be done by my father-in-law. That kind of injustice is still haunting our family and makes it hard for us to live a comfortable life.'*

Today, the family finds it challenging to make a living without permanent land. They rely on the small piece of public land for their home and agricultural activities, and the future of their children hangs in uncertainty. The story of Lilmuni and her family underscores the lingering effects of unfair practices and illiteracy; and highlights the struggles of landless communities to find stability and dignity in their lives.

Conclusion

The research was primarily based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The household survey was conducted with 63 respondents from Santhal community, using a structured questionnaire. Additionally, 2 Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were organized; one in Jaliya and another in Kathkholuwa; to generate qualitative information through communal perspectives. Furthermore, 2 case studies, featuring Lilmuni Murmu and Marangmay Mardi, were documented to provide a deep, human-centric view of landlessness and its impacts on daily life.

The findings of the study show a high prevalence of landlessness in the Santhal community, with nearly 73% of the people living on public land and a small fraction having their own land with proper documents. A significant number of landless

families were found to be engaged in Adhiya (half-crop) farming, lease hold farming, and daily wage labor. The main factors contributing to landlessness include lack of education and awareness about land policies, historical unfair practices by landlords, poverty, political powerlessness, and weak legal documents of land ownership. Furthermore, the study reveals that caste and ethnic dimensions have compounded their landlessness, adding a layer of structural injustice to their situation.

The consequences of landlessness are profoundly visible in the daily struggles of the Santhal community; insecure housing, poor sanitary conditions, limited education opportunities for children, vulnerability to flood and natural disasters, and persistent poverty. Importantly, the lack of land ownership has kept the community from accessing financial services, agricultural programs, and other government schemes, further perpetuating their poor living conditions.

The qualitative data from FGD and case studies underscore the human dimensions of this problem. Participants described the unfair practices through which their ancestors lost land, the persistent struggles to maintain their livelihoods, and their deep-rooted feeling of injustice and neglect. The stories of Marangmay Mardi and Lilmuni Murmu reflect the daily struggles of landlessness; their vulnerability, their hard choices, and their strong wish to resolve their land issues.

The community perceives land ownership as key to improving their future, securing their children's education, strengthening their financial stability, and participating more fully in society. Nevertheless, the people remain discouraged by their lack of awareness about land-related policies, poor implementation by authorities, and political disinterest in addressing their issues.

The present study on landlessness among the Santhal community in Ward No. 2 of Rangeli Municipality, Morang District reveals the deeply rooted and multi-dimensional nature of landlessness and its pervasive impacts on this Indigenous group. The findings clearly demonstrate that landlessness is not merely an economic condition, but a complex issue intertwined with historical injustices, structural inequalities, poverty, political marginalization, and systemic exclusion.

It is evident that the majority of the Santhal people continue to reside on public (Ailani) land without secure ownership, leaving them vulnerable to eviction, natural disasters, and exclusion from basic services. The study found that while a small number of households possess landownership documents, the overwhelming majority are engaged in partial farming (*Adhiya* system) or work as daily wage laborers,

highlighting their fragile livelihoods and dependency on others' land.

The historical loss of ancestral land, often through unfair practices, lack of awareness about legal procedures, and the absence of political backing, remains a key factor that has shaped their current situation. The Santhal community's limited access to education, information, and legal services has further deepened their landlessness over generations. Structural factors like caste and ethnic marginalization have exacerbated their exclusion from land rights and government schemes intended to address such issues.

This condition of landlessness has profound social and economic consequences: insecure housing, lack of electricity and safe drinking water for many, difficulties in sending children for higher education, inability to access formal credit, and poor resilience against disasters. The emotional toll is also high, with people expressing feelings of discrimination, insecurity, and hopelessness about the future.

What emerges clearly from this study is the community's strong aspiration for secure land ownership, not only as a means to improve their economic conditions but also as a foundation for dignity, stability, and inclusion in society. However, the lack of effective government intervention, weak policy implementation, and political neglect continue to hinder the realization of these aspirations.

In conclusion, addressing the landlessness of the Santhal community requires urgent, coordinated, and sustained action that recognizes land as both an economic resource and a fundamental human right, particularly for marginalized Indigenous communities. Solutions to the problem of landlessness in the Santhal community.

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