

Reimagining the Munda Homeland: Tracing the Migration from Southeast Asia to the Sundarbans Coastline

Al Mahmud

School of Historical Studies, Nalanda University

Author's Email: almahmud.shs22@nalandauniv.edu.in

Abstract

This paper reimagines the historical trajectory of the Munda people, tracking their migration from Southeast Asia to the Sundarbans coastline of the Bay of Bengal over a span of 3500 years, from 2000 BCE to the present day. It seeks to reconstruct the socio-cultural dynamics, environmental adaptations, and the evolving identity of the Munda community during their journey and settlement in the Sundarbans region. Sixteen interviews were conducted in Munshiganj, Shyamnagar, documenting the lived experiences and oral histories of diverse participants related to migration, language, and culture. An intensive literature review, including the Bonbibi Johuranama, as well as archaeological evidence, linguistic analyses, institutional records, and historical sources, was conducted. Linguistic analyses focus on the evolution of Munda languages, establishing connections with Southeast Asian linguistic roots and discerning linguistic shifts over time. The paper argues that the Munda migration is not a linear narrative but a complex interplay of environmental factors, cultural exchanges, and internal developments. Reimagining the Munda homeland through a comprehensive temporal lens, it aims to contribute to an explicit understanding of migration patterns in the Bay of Bengal region and shed light on the resilience and adaptability of the Munda people in their continuous journey across centuries.

Keywords: Munda Tribe, migration, cultural narratives, settlement patterns, Sundarbans

Introduction

The Munda people, an indigenous community predominantly situated in India and parts of Southeast Asia, exhibit a unique cultural heritage intertwined with their Austroasiatic language family (Anderson, 2017). Their population spans areas such as Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, and Bangladesh (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2023).

Engaged primarily in agrarian pursuits alongside hunting and gathering, their traditional lifestyle forms the cornerstone of their societal fabric (Greaves & Kramer, 2014). Despite historical adversities and contemporary societal shifts, they tenaciously preserve their customs, rituals, and distinctive identity, showcasing remarkable cultural resilience. Its enduring commitment to heritage signifies a profound strength amidst challenges, embodying a rich tapestry of traditions that transcend time and change. Based on historical linguistic and geographic evidence, a recent idea suggests that the maritime passage brought their Austroasiatic forebears from Southeast Asia around 3,500 - 4,000 years ago, at which point the Munda languages originated on the east coast of India (Rau & Sidwell, 2019; Sidwell, 2014; Mahdi, 2017).

Linguistic evidence suggests that pre-Proto-Munda originated in Mainland Southeast Asia about 4,500 years ago, following the development of rice agriculture in the late Neolithic era (Fuller, 2011; Rau & Sidwell, 2019). A few groups of Austroasiatic then traveled across the Bay of Bengal by boat to bring pre-Proto-Munda to the Mahanadi Delta region, which was a significant hub for commerce in both the ancient and historic periods. Proto-Munda and the Munda branch of Austroasiatic emerged as a result of interactions with a neighboring South Asian community. This approach is further supported by the information that is currently available from archaeology and genetics, which points to the possibility that a small number of Austroasiatic speakers came from Southeast Asia to Odisha before the Iron Age Aryan invasion (Rau & Sidwell, 2019).

References such as linguistic analysis and genetic studies have indicated connections between the Munda and certain Austronesian-speaking communities in Southeast Asia, pointing to shared ancestral ties. Furthermore, cultural parallels between the Mundas and certain Southeast Asian groups, including aspects of their folklore, rituals, and agricultural practices, provide additional evidence supporting their migration narrative (Roy, 1912).

During the British period, Munda individuals initially served as '*Lathial*' or the Royal household's guards. As the cultivation of Indigo began in the region, planters recruited them to work in their fields. As the 18th century drew to a close and the 19th century began, the Zamindari system emerged, allowing landlords to lease extensive areas in the Forest of Sundarbans. After the forest was cleared, the Mundas were

brought in to start farming in these newly created regions. Poverty was a major driving force behind their migration as well (Paggi, 2003). According to Paggi, the term “Mundas” ironically signifies a person of prestige and wealth (Huda, 2021).

Over time, they adapted to the ecosystem, developing distinct cultural traditions and livelihood practices deeply intertwined with the Mangrove forests and waterways. Despite limited written records, the migration of the Munda stands as a testament to the complex and dynamic movements of indigenous communities across geographical boundaries. Their settlement along the Sundarbans coastline signifies a historical and cultural journey that continues to shape their identity.

The primary objective is to gain a comprehensive grasp of how the Munda tribe migrated, settled, and adapted culturally and environmentally, as they moved from Southeast Asia to the Sundarbans coastline along the Bay of Bengal.

1. To discover the nature and the pattern of Austroasiatic Migration over maritime routes;
2. To identify the journey, socio-cultural dynamics, environmental adaptations, and settlement in the Sundarbans region;
3. To find out the causes and consequences of Munda community migration;
4. To analyze the present-day Munda communities’ adaptation to the Bengali language.

Literature Review

The literature review will highlight various factors of the relationship between the migration and the origin of the Munda Tribe and there are adequate discussions and research on the various patterns of Austroasiatic migration and movement of the Mundas from the South-East Asia region to India and Bangladesh, with both arguments and debates about their origins, with Mullick (2020) have stated that the Munda and Munda-speaking peoples where the location was the lowest Gangetic plains. The author now challenges the results of past anthropological and linguistic studies, as well as certain current DNA experts, because recent genetic research has finally shed enough light on the topic. Rau and Sidwell (2019) have argued that the origins of the Munda language are Austronesian settlers in Madagascar, the Bantu people (from a county-

sized area on the Nigerian coast), and also the Chadic languages (from a county-sized area in modern Moldova).

Dutta and Rahman (2020) observed that the ancestral lifestyle of the Mundas, their traditional livelihood practices, and their house patterns make it a possible solution towards a resilient Munda community. Additionally, it can help preserve their ethnic identity and promote their indigenous heritage to other parts of the world.

On the other hand, Standing (2017) investigated and attempted to correlate religious and social changes, analyzed the Munda community's predictions, and provided context for searching for new explanations.

The Munda community, residing along the Bay of Bengal in the Sundarbans, has endured centuries grappling with the challenges posed by the region's natural landscape. In a study conducted by Huda (2021), their cultural practices and beliefs were examined, revealing a profound connection between their existence and their ancestral roots. The Mundas firmly believe that upon death, the soul returns to safeguard their home, shielding them from various perils (Standing, 1976).

This belief system serves as the foundation for their commitment to long-standing practices and traditions that demonstrate a distinctive blend of their Southeast Asian ancestry and the adaptive techniques they have evolved to flourish in the coastal environments of the Sundarbans. Their resilience and ability to transition between traditional practices and modern changes demonstrate the complex interplay between historic preservation and adaptation to their present ecological situation. Huda's research demonstrates the complicated cultural environment of the Munda people and the challenges they face interacting with the constantly changing Sundarbans coastal region.

Research Methods

A qualitative interpretative design study was developed via an in-depth literature review that critically examined the existing relevant scholarly literature (Cohen et al., 2013). Furthermore, to broaden the analysis, an ethno-historical methodology was applied to combine historical accounts with contemporary interpretations (Bernard, 2017). This research study used qualitative interpretative analysis to develop a rooted understanding of the cultural practices and historical trajectories within the Munda community living in ShyamnagarUpazila, Satkhira, located in the Sundarbans of

southwest Bangladesh. The research adopted an ethno-historical approach, employing semi-structured interviews, three FGDs, eight IDIs, and five KIIs with honey collectors (*mouals*), woodcutters, fishermen, religious leaders, oral storytellers, priests, women, and others engaged in ritual practices. A variety of other data sources were available as secondary materials, including archaeological findings, linguistic research, institutional documents, and historical publications. The sources were analyzed thematically and interpretively in accordance with qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Reflexivity, contextualization, and cultural sensitivity were brought out in the methodological framework, which was guided by ethnographic and interpretive research principles (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). This integrated approach ensured analytical depth and coherence, allowing the study to capture both micro-level cultural narratives and broader socio-historical dynamics shaping the lived experiences of the Munda community.

Results and Discussion

In 2000 BCE, there were many different ethnic groups living in Southeast Asia, each with its own social systems and cultural customs. Communities engaged in agriculture, including Rice cultivation, and some practiced early forms of metallurgy, crafting tools and ornaments from metals like bronze (Hung, 2017; Hutterer et al., 1976). Social structures were likely diverse, ranging from small-scale societies to more complex hierarchical systems in certain regions. Archaeological evidence from this era in Southeast Asia reveals the existence of early settlements, agricultural practices, and the use of bronze and other metals. However, direct archaeological evidence linking the Munda tribe to Southeast Asia during this period is challenging to pinpoint due to limited records and specific cultural artifacts (Changmai et al., 2022). More comprehensive archaeological excavations and studies could potentially provide further insights into the Munda tribe's presence in the region during 2000 BCE (Rau & Sidwell, 2019; Das, 2023).

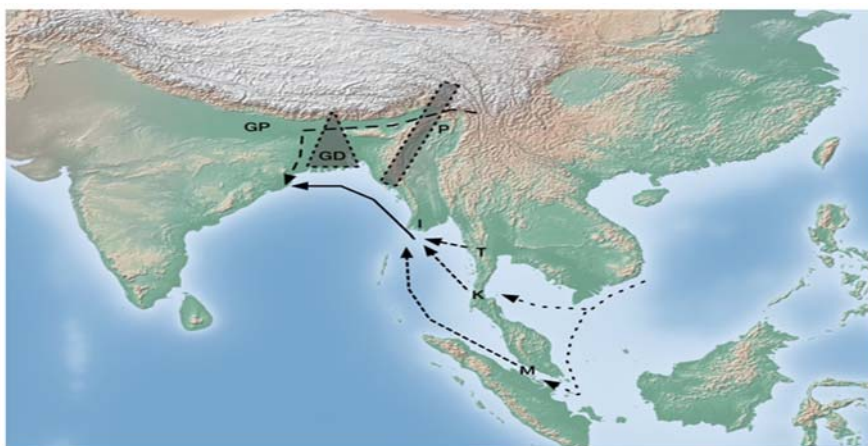
The Munda people are farmers, particularly those who live in the wider, more populous areas like Sora and Santal. The initial hypothesis suggested that this lifestyle closely resembled the original Munda pattern, with other groups later adopting agriculture from their Indo-Aryan neighbors. However, the reality contradicts this

notion. This is because a significant portion of India persisted up to a rather late stage in a foraging lifestyle (Zide & Zide, 1976).

Munda is an Austroasiatic language tribe that originated in Southeast Asia and moved into the Eastern Coastal Plains located through the Mahanadi Delta (Rau & Sidwell, 2019; Mullick, 2020). The prevailing theory attempts to explain the existence of Munda (potentially alongside Khasi) in South Asia by suggesting a migration that moved in a southerly direction along the Brahmaputra River.

Figure 1

BrahmaputraRoute



Source: Rau et al., 2019

The Brahmaputra route which crosses the Ganges Delta (GD) and the Patkai Range (P) but does not enter the Indo-Gangetic Plain (GP), is one of the migratory routes. Furthermore, the sea route entails passing across the Bay of Bengal, perhaps starting from the Tanintharyi area (T), the Isthmus of Kra (K), or the Strait of Malacca (M). The Irrawaddy Delta (I), or even further areas like the Red River Delta (Rau & Sidwell, 2019).

The Munda homeland migration's coastal location, as seen on the map, suggests that the marine route had a major effect on their voyage. Whereas prehistoric and early historical evidence along the Bay of Bengal's coastline suggests an alternate route: migration from Southeast Asia (Mainland). By taking into account the characteristics of the ocean currents and monsoon winds in the Bay of Bengal, one may readily determine

the position of the Munda homeland. Therefore, the road served as a travel route for farmers and foragers in addition to being used for commercial or cultural purposes.

The Munda tribe moved with rice and agriculture rather than as traders or merchants or as followers of any religion, including Buddhism or Hinduism. During the excavations of the Neolithic-Chalcolithic burial site at Sankarjang in the middle Brahmani River valley, it was found that one grave contained interesting evidence that this type of instrument originated in southern Vietnam: lithophones. These instruments have been dated to the second millennium BCE (Rau & Sidwell, 2009). Additionally, the Isthmus of Kra was a connecting point between the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea, serving as a major hub for trade and a vital link between South and Southeast Asia.

But another source argues that genetic evidence challenges the prevailing belief that the Munda people migrated to northern India by land. This is partly due to the traditional view of Austroasiatic people, like the Munda (whose most prominent language today is Vietnamese), as farmers focused on land, unlike the maritime-oriented Austronesians who originated from Taiwan and settled various islands across the Pacific, New Zealand, Southeast Asia, and Madagascar (Rajib, 2015).

After moving around 220 years ago, from Ranchi, the capital of Jharkhand, to Bangladesh, the Munda tribe has lived there ever since. They mostly live in the ShyamnagarUpazila, which is roughly 350 kilometers from Dhaka, in places like Koyra, Debhata, and Tala, which are close to the Sundarbans. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the population of Munda in Bangladesh is 55000, and their main language is Mundari. The primary religion of the Munda tribes is Hinduism 48.36%, and Ethnic Religion is 45.34%. However, originating from Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, and Chhattisgarh in India, the Mundas' roots trace back to the region known as 'Chota Nagpur,' with Ranchi serving as its central hub (Huda, 2021).

Munda tribe was also involved in the revolt under the leadership of Birsa Bhagwan. Around 200 years ago, the Munda tribe lost their ancestral land rights and became landless as a result of the British Land Settlement Act. The Mundas attempted many uprisings against the landowners between 1790 and 1832, but none of them were successful (Paggi, 2003).

Munda again migrated to the Sundarbans from Ranchi and started resettlement in the eastern coastal part of Bengal near the Bay of Bengal. But with the increasing number of local Bengali people and the continuous migration from their neighboring places, the Mundas are losing their inhabitants. The reason behind coming from Bangladesh, from Ranchi, was *lathial* or the guards for the Zamindar or the Royal household in the British period, as well as Mundas, who were skilled in farming and cleaning the forest. When the Zamindari system was put in place at the beginning of the 19th century, landowners in the Sundarbans Forest area acquired large tracts of land. They thus required labor to clear the land and get it ready for farming, so Mundas were hired to do the tidying up.

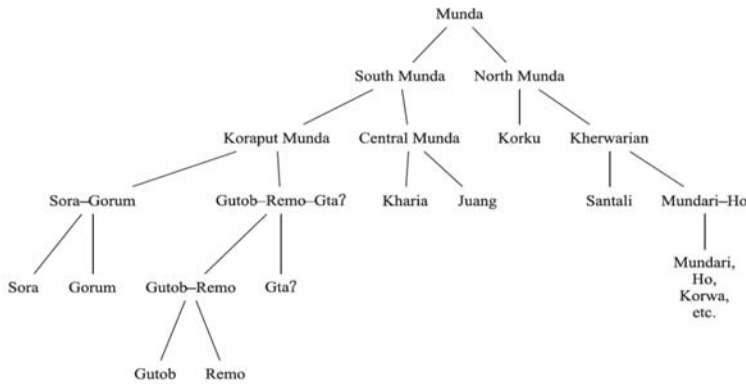
The Mundas are a people who live in the Sundarbans and other southern parts of Bangladesh. They worship deities called “Bonga”, which include Sing Bonga, Buru Bonga, and Ikir Bonga. Their religious practices involve rituals and festivals conducted in reverence to their ancestors. Following mentions of the Ranchi district and specific village names, Sing Bonga, representing the Sun, holds a prominent position as the primary deity (Kumari & Rahman, 2020). The Mundas’ original religion involves the worship of natural elements such as trees, stones, and animals. Furthermore, the Munda community praises Bonobibi, the forest guardian, for shielding them from bad spirits and the Royal Bengal Tiger.

The Munda languages represent the farthest western segment within the Austro-Asiatic language family, which extends from Central India to Vietnam. This figure offers a visual depiction of the wide geographical distribution of these languages and the principal branches comprising this linguistic family (Sidwell, 2015, p. 144). The “Mon-Khmer” etymological dictionary of languages, which finds many shared origins among the many branches, the Austroasiatic languages are the closest to the proto-Austroasiatic reconstructions.

Figure 2

The Munda languages, according to Zide (1969: 412)

Figure 2 illustrates the classification of Munda languages as outlined by Zide (1969). The Munda languages are a distinct branch within the Austroasiatic language family. While primarily spoken in parts of India, these languages suggest historical migrations and connections between Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent.



The subgroups that constitute the Munda family showcase the diversity of languages such as Santali, Mundari, and Ho, which are the most widely spoken Munda languages. Zide's classification of 1969 thus helps to gain an idea about their linguistic characteristics and their distribution according to their geographical locations.

Their linguistic presence could indicate earlier movements or interactions with other linguistic groups in Southeast Asia during 2000 BCE, though specific evidence of this period remains scarce. The branches of the language stretch from Central India to Vietnam. In addition, the languages spread in the two branches; South Munda and North Munda (Zide, 1969) travel from Ranchi to Sundarbans Coastal area, Bay of Bengal and their language Naguri - a dialect of the Mundari language - which is a mixture of Hindi and Persian merge with the local language (Bengali) because of adapting local culture, profession, and livelihood (Naveed, 2015).

The Munda community faces an acute risk of linguistic and cultural attrition due to the absence of a formalized indigenous educational infrastructure and the lack of a standardized orthography for the Munda language. Within the Bangladeshi context, the state-mandated primary and secondary pedagogical frameworks lack the systemic capacity to integrate or preserve minority linguistic identities. This institutional void facilitates a process of cultural hegemony, wherein the dominant Bengali language and

cultural norms increasingly marginalize and displace the ancestral heritage of the Munda people. One of the participants Anandini Munda, at Munshiganj village said:

We Mundas have our own language, which we speak among our community, but we do not have any written form of our language. Day by day our own language is disappearing, and the Bengali language is taking its place. We do not know how long our next generation will be able to keep this language alive.

As a result of ongoing migration brought on by natural disasters and climate change, the Munda population in the Sundarbans Coastline area is steadily declining. In contrast, the local Bengali population is increasing. The Munda tribal population faces threats to their cultural integrity and undue strain on their natural habitat as a result of Bengali settlers in the Sundarbans region. Men and women in the Munda community participate in a variety of activities and support the household economy. Although Mundas are known for being robust, fearless, hardworking, and loyal, they are typically taken advantage of for fair labor. Despite their many occupations, people nevertheless rely on the sea and the mangrove forest for their subsistence.

Figure 3

A Munda Family Fishing in the Coastal Area of Sundarbans



Source: Study Field

Presently, the Munda, dwelling along the western coast of the Sundarbans, heavily rely on wage-based activities for their livelihood. They earn their living by engaging in various tasks like collecting Fish, honey, and crabs from the Sundarbans, the rivers and canals that surround it; harvesting wood and nypafruticans (called “*Gool pata*”); labor in shrimp and crab farming; sharecropping; farming rice fields; or working in a brick kiln (Roy, 2019). Another fisherman respondent, Sombu at Gabura village shared:

Nature is the most important to us. This forest and sea have been protecting our livelihood for hundreds of years. Our ancestors came here from India in search of livelihood and learned to survive by clearing forests and adapting to this environment. Our journey was not smooth and it’s still difficult for us who are living here. We worship Bonobibi for protecting us from the Royal Bengal Tiger and as well as the evil spirit. Every day we fight and adapt to nature. But we never harm or destroy the Sundarbans.

The above remarks indicate the importance and the dependence of the forest on the indigenous Munda people and their culture of the Sundarbans. The loss of the Munda language reveals the loss of the indigenous culture and heritage. In addition, the forest is not only the means of their subsistence but also a space of everyday life that influences their beliefs and traditions. It is evident that their respect for Bonobibi and protection of the Sundarbans is an example of a sustainable relationship between humans and nature.

Conclusion and Implications

Drawing on the analysis, it can be concluded that the pre-Munda speakers’ migration to the Mahanadi Delta around the Bay of Bengal marked a pivotal moment in the dissemination of rice, agriculture, culture, and language in the region. Their journey via maritime routes suggests a profound historical interaction and exchange among diverse communities. Contrary to being merchants or sailors, these speakers likely identified as farmers or workers, hinting at a shift forced upon them by circumstances rather than choice. The Munda people, known for their agricultural practices, might not have willingly embarked on this migration; instead, it was likely driven by the pressures of time and situations beyond their control. Forced migrations often compel communities to adapt swiftly to new environments, cultures, and beliefs. The Mundas’ relocation likely necessitated an adjustment to unfamiliar terrains, climatic conditions,

and societal frameworks. This adaptation has catalyzed the fusion of their own traditions with those of the new lands they encountered.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest. This research was undertaken exclusively for academic and cultural purposes and was conducted independently of any financial, institutional, or personal interests that could compromise its scholarly integrity or impartiality.

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