

Transformation of Socio-Economic Condition of Tribal Community in frontier Bengal : Identity crisis and present scenario

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Abstract

Jungal Mahals, literally 'Jungale estate', was a district formed by the British possessions and some dependent chiefdoms lying between Birbhum, Bankura, Midnapore and the hilly area of country of Chhotanagpur in what is now the Indian state of West Bengal. The area of Jungal Mahals is mostly populated by the Santhal tribes. But not only the Santhals but also some microscopic tribal community resides in this region such as Sabar and Birhor from the very beginning. They maintain exclusively purity of tribal identity through the ages. They are the oldest inhabitants of Jungal Mahals and have their own separate identity in the social perspectives. We are very much familiar of their primitive culture. But at the same time we must say they have lost their cultural identity and this cultural purity is gradually going and going on to the back side due to the bad impact of cultural globalisation. Similarly, tribals community created their own village economy at the early periods. It was their original village oriented economy organised by the Headman. But with the advent of British power in this geographical area, the tribal society had lost their originality of economic system and faced various challenges of their socio-economic life. In spite of having separate religion of Santhals (Sari Dharam) has been converted to other religion by experience. Through this papers I will try to highlight some important changing profile of selected tribal communities in south west Bengal.

Keywords: Jungle, Mahals, Tribal, Identity, Society, Traditional, Economy, Religious crisis, Present status.

Introduction:

The "Jungle Mahal" is a vague term. It was applied in the 18th century to the British possessions and some dependent chiefdoms lying between Birbhum, Bankura, Midnapore and the hilly country of Chottanagpur. As the system of Government was not clear, inconvenience was occasioned by the vagueness of jurisdictions in these territories [1]. Eventually, in 1805 for the first time a new district named the Jungle Mahal was created by Regulation XVIII due to the violent disturbances in the area and the raids of the Chuars on settled tracts. But this Jungal Mahal district was again broken up by Regulations XIII of 1833 for the administrative interest of the British Government. [2] By Regulation XIII of 1833 the "JUNGLE MAHALS" district was broken up and a new district called MANBHUM was constituted with headquarters at Manbazar. The district was very large in size and included parts of BANKURA and BARDHAMAN districts of present West Bengal state and Dhanbad, Dhalbhum and Seraikela-Kharswan districts of present Jharkhand states. In 1838 the district headquarters was shifted from Manbazar to Purulia. The district was located in the area known as the Jungle Terry [3] a thickly forested region inhabited by tribal groups such as the Santhals and the Munda peoples. The vagueness of the jurisdiction caused inconvenience. In 1805 Regulation XVIII was passed whereby the areas known as Jungle Mahal was separated from the jurisdiction of the Magistrates of the districts of Burdwan, Birbhum, Bankura and Midnapore and placed under a Magistrate of Jungle Mahals. The district thus formed was composed of 23 parganas and Mahas. The estate of Senpahari, Sergarh, and Bishnupur were transferred to the district of Burdwan and the remainder constituted the district of Manbhum. [4] Jungle Terry or Jungleterry, from jangal tarāi, meaning 'jungle lowland', was a term applied in the 18th century to an area bordering Bengal and Bihar that included large tracts of Bhagalpur and Monghyr districts, as well as the Santal Parganas district. Although named as such, rather than an official district the Jungle Terry was a vague border area. The district named Jungle Mahals would be established later in 1805. [5]

History :

Bankura has a glorious historical heritage. Its historical period is traceable to the sixth century BC, [6] when according to the last Jaina Tirthankara, Mahavira came to the Rarha country. Numerous architectural and sculptural evidence points to the 10th, 11th and 12th centuries AD. The Susunia hill inscription, palaeographical belonging to the 4th century AD, [7] refers to Maharaja Singhavarman and his son Chandravarman of Harisen's Allahabad Prasasti. Pushkarna has been identified with Pakhanna, a village of this district. The kingdom of Kotatavi, [8] referred to in Sandhyakar Nandi's "Ramacharita" has been identified with Koteswara of this district. With the rise of Mallas the history of the district entered into the most glorious phase. The Mallas

enjoyed the suzerainty under the Mughals and the Bengal Nawabs. Bir Hambir was the greatest ruler of the family. Abul Fazl in his 'Ain-i-Akbari' refers to him as a loyal Zamindar, who helped the Mughals in their expedition against Afghans of Orissa. During his reign Shrinivasa-charya preached Vaishnavism in Mallavbhum under the patronage of the Mallas Bishnupur became a center of temple building activities and classical music with distinctive feature of 'Vishnupur Gharana'. In the mediaeval period there flourished at Chatna, Badu Chandidasa the author of Shi Krishnakirtan. He is looked upon as the greatest humanist of the period. He is one of the great poets of Bengal. The territory of present Purulia district was a part of Banga, one of the 16 Mahajanapadas according to Jaina Bhagavati Sutra (c. 5th century CE) and was also a part of the country known as Vajra-bhumi in ancient period. During medieval period, this territory was regarded as part of Jharkhand region. Little is known about Purulia before the British East India Company acquired this territory by obtaining the grant of Diwani of the subahs of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa in 1765.

Pre- Independence:

By Regulation XVIII of 1805, a Jungle Mahals district composed of 23 parganas and mahals [9] including the present Purulia (known as 'Purulia' in those days) was formed. By Regulation XIII of 1833 the Jungle Mahals district was broken up and a new district called Manbhum was constituted with headquarters at Manbazar. The district was very large in size and included parts of Bankura and Bardhaman districts of present West Bengal state and Dhanbad, Dhalbhum and Seraikela-Kharswan districts of present Jharkhand states. In 1838 the district headquarters was transferred from Manbazar to Purulia. [10] Since the formation of the district it was withdrawn from regular administration and placed under an officer called Principal Assistant to the agent to the Governor-General for South-Western Frontier. The title of the officer Principal Agent was later changed to Deputy Commissioner by Act XX of 1854.

Post Independence:

Finally in 1956 Manbhum district was partitioned between Bihar and West Bengal under the States Reorganization Act and the Bihar and West Bengal (Transfer of Territories) Act 1956 and the present Purulia district was born on 1 November 1956. [11] The district is currently a part of the Red Corridor. A number of prehistoric sites of great interest are being excavated throughout the West Midnapore district. In ancient times the region seems to be highly influenced by Jainism and Buddhism. Coins issued by Samudragupta have been found in the near vicinity of the town. The kingdom of Shashanka and Harshavardhana also included part of undivided Midnapore in their kingdom. However, the most significant archaeological site in the region is the bustling port of Tamralipta near present-day Tamluk, a site noted in the travelogues of Faxian and Xuanzang. Later Chaitanya passed through the area on his way from Puri to Varanasi as documented in the Chaitanya Charitamrita. After the fall of last independent Hindu dynasty of Kalinga-Utkala, Gajapati Mukunda Deva in the 16th century, this region came under one of the five Sarkars of Mughalbandi Odisha i.e. Jaleswar Sarkar which was ruled by the Subehdar of Odisha. The north boundary of Jalshwar was Tamluk and south was Soro and Dhalbhumgarh in the west to the Bay of Bengal in the east. Bahadur Khan was the ruler of Jaleswar Sarkar or Hijli (including Midnapore) during the time of Shah Jehan. He was defeated by Shah Shuja, the second son of Shah Jehan, then the subshdar of Bengal. [12]

During the era of the Muslim rulers of Bengal nawab, Alivardi Khan's general Mir Jafar fought successfully against Mir Habib's lieutenant Sayyid Nur near Midnapore town in 1746. This was part of his campaign to regain Odisha and thwart the Maratha attacks on Bengal. Mir Habib came up from Balasore and was joined by the Marathas, but Mir Jafar fled to Burdwan, leaving Mir Habib to retake Midnapore with ease. Alivardi defeated Janoji Bhosle, a Maratha chieftain, in a severely contested battle near Burdwan in 1747 and Janoji fled to Midnapore. The Marathas held on to Odisha including Midnapore until 1749 when it was reconquered by Alivardi. The Marathas continued to raid Midnapore, which proved disastrous for the residents.

In 1756, Alivardi died and his successor was Siraj-ud-daulah. On 20 June 1757, he was betrayed by Mir Jafar to the East India Company under the command of Lord Robert Clive at Plassey. This consolidated the Company's hold on Bengal and Odisha (along with Midnapore). The district of Midnapore which included Dhalbhum or Ghatshila, now in Singhbhum, Jharkhand was annexed in 1760 along with Burdwan and Chittagong both handed over to the East India Company by Mir Qasim. The last free king of Dhalbhum was imprisoned in Midnapore town. [13]

Tribal Identity:

In the ethnographic map of India, West Bengal occupies an important place, for it is inhabited by substantial number of tribal communities as compared to the other States and Union Territories and it also has the largest concentration of tribal people next only to 5 other states. The tribal communities, in varying concentrations, are found almost in all the districts of the state. Each tribe has a cultural identity of its own. The distinctiveness of each tribe is manifested in its language, social organization, and rituals and festivals, and also in their dress pattern, adornments and art and craft. Tribes in general live in a close relationship with nature and depend on it for their survival. As the historical perspective every tribes have their separate language. Their distinctive status in sociological, cultural and economical background helps them to recognise separately from the others. Tribals are

profoundly identified by their own customs, tradition, law and order.[14] Here we will try to discuss about the two tribal community such as Santal and Birhor.

Birhor Community :

Birhor means jungle people - *bir* means jungle, *hos* mean men. Birhor people are a tribal/Adivasi forest people, traditionally nomadic, living primarily in the Indian state of Jharkhand. They speak the Birhor language, which belongs to the Munda group of languages of the Austroasiatic language family. The Birhors are of short stature, long head, wavy hair and broad nose. They claim they have descended from the Sun and believe that the Kharwars, who also trace their descent from the Sun, are their brothers. Ethnologically, they are akin to the Santals, Mundas, and Hos. Birhors are found mainly in the area covered by the old Hazaribagh, Ranchi and Singhbhum districts before these were broken down into numerous smaller units, in Jharkhand. Some of them are also found in Orissa, Chhattisgarh and West Bengal. They are one of the smaller of the thirty scheduled tribes inhabiting Jharkhand. Birhors number around 10,000. According to some sources, their numbers could be lesser than this.[15]

Language and Religion:

They speak the Birhor language, which belongs to the Munda group of languages of the Austro-Asiatic language family. Their language has similarities with Santali, Mundari and Ho languages. Birhors have a positive language attitude. They freely use the languages prevalent in the areas they move around and use Sadri, Santali, Ho, Mundari, Hindi and Oriya. Literacy rate in the first language was as low as 0.02 percent in 1971, but around 10 per cent were literate in Hindi. They follow Hinduism and traditional beliefs. Pentecostal is making significant inroads into their society.[16]

Socio-economic scenario:

The “primitive subsistence economy” of the Birhors has been based on nomadic gathering and hunting, particularly for monkeys. They also trap rabbits and titirs (a small bird), and collect and sell honey. They make ropes out of the fibres of a particular species of vine, which they sell in the markets of the nearby agricultural people. Partly forced by circumstances, partly encouraged by government officials, some of them have settled into stable agriculture, but others continue their nomadic life, but even when they settle down in a village, their tendency is to lead a nomadic life. According to the socio-economic standing the Birhors are classified into two groups. While the wandering Birhors are called Uthlus, the settled Birhors are called Janghis.[17]

Traditional religious beliefs:

The traditional magico-religious beliefs of Birhors are akin to those of the Hos. Mundari deities such as *Sing Bonga* (Sun God and *Hapram* (ancestral spirits) rank high in esteem. Though the *Hapram* are believed to live in the supernatural world along with the *Bonga*, the Birhors make a distinction between these two categories of supernatural spirits. *Hapram* are placed just below the *Bonga*. The Birhors think that the entire universe has been created and presided over by Sing Bonga and his wife Chandu Bonga. They are worshipped in the months of Pous and Magh. As a result of contact with Hindu neighbours some Hindu deities such as Debimai, Kalimai, and Mahadev have found a place in their pantheon.^[18]

Family and marriage:

The family is the smallest unit of Birhor society. Traditional inheritance follows the male line. The husband-wife relationship is very cordial. They dress in a manner similar to their settled neighbours, using mostly traditional Indian dress with some western influence. Women are fond of ornaments. They are divided into a number of totemic clans named after plants, birds, animals, rivers, etc. Birhors follow the rules of tribal and clan endogamy. A Birhor boy is supposed to get married with a Birhor girl, but the clan of the boy and the girl should not be same. *Tandas* or *bands* have families of different clans but they follow the rule of *tanda* exogamy. At the time of marriage, the blood relationship is explored. The marriage between a boy and a girl is possible only when they are not related up to three generations from the father's and the mother's side. Birhors follow the practice of bride price. When the child attains the marriageable age, it is responsibility of the father to get his son or daughter married. As per traditional custom the father of the boy approaches the father of the girl. When the latter agrees, the father of the boy settles the bride price with father of the girl and the marriage is fixed.^[19]

Division of labour:

In the Birhors society people of all age group contribute to their economy. The economic activities performed by men, women, children and old people is discussed below. The division of labour governed the task assignment in the resource gathering activities. The men were primarily concerned with hunting and occasionally fishing. While on hunt, they gathered variety of vegetable items for immediate consumption. They also collect other materials like firewood, honey and chop fibre and collection of most of the raw material for tool manufacturing. They make the tool they used such as bow and arrow (used by the Birhor in Purulia as mentioned by an informer), hunting net, fishing net, bamboo knives etc. they work as labourer. Women: are accompanied by children; gather a large share of their daily subsistence. They collect roots, tuber, seeds, fruit, chop, firewood and

also do the household work, look after the children, prepare rope and rope articles once a week they also go to the nearby market to sale their rope products in the Baghmundi town in exchange of various items. During the rainy season they work in the agricultural field. The children in the Birhor society help their parents in their activities. They assist the women in gathering medicinal herbs, reeds and other fibrous materials used to manufacture trade goods or to be directly exchanged for agricultural products. The boys also hunt small game like squirrel, birds. The girl helps her mother in the household works and also looks after the small children. Male & Female Both of them prepare various rope and rope products, also collect medicinal herbs, work as wage labour Old People look after the small children and take care of them when their parents are out for their They also look after the cattle and take them out for grazing. They also teach the children proverbs and riddle. [20]

Sathal or Santal :

The name of community is Santals or Shantals. According to Sreferud (1968) is a corruption of Saontar. This was adopted by the Santals when they lived in the area around Saont in Midnapur district of West Bengal. The word Santal is an English word adopted from Hindi which corresponds with Saontar used by Bengali speaking people. [21]

District	Tribal Population	Total populaion	% of Tribes
Purulia	540652	2930115	18.45
Bankura	368690	3596674	10.25
W.Midnapur	880015	5913457	14.88
Birbhum	242484	3502404	6.92

District Wise Tribal population: Census -2011

Physical form of the Santhal People :

Physically the Santhal people are characterized by dark to very dark brown in complexion with dolichocephalism and hypsicephalic head form with a high vault; narrow forehead. They have coarse black, straight and occasionally curly hair. Scanty beard and less hair on the body is another characteristic feature. Their eyes are black coloured and medium sized with usually straight or rarely oblique eye-slit. Their nose is straight and prominent with depression at the root, large mouth with thick projecting lips. Bodding (1994) observed that frizzy hair among some of the Santhal and the physical characteristics in general have doubted the existence of a Negroid element among them. Santhals people are practice Hinduism and believe in God. They worship numerous Gods, deities and spirits. Their religion is basically centered in this respect. High God among them is Thakur; he referred to a Singbonga and is regarded as the Sun. [22]

Social elements :

According to their belief witchcrafts can easily cause disease and death to a person. However, with the speared of education and under the growing influence of urbanization this belief is gradually fading away from the mind people. Language is a vocal identity of the society. Santali language is called Al-Chiki. It is their mother tongue. All Santhali people in this village speak in this language. However, they are used to make conversation in Bengali language with their Bengali neighbours. Knowledge about Santhali Language Since Santhali people live in this village in large numbers, a study was conducted about the knowledge of their own language AL-CHIKI. Interestingly it was noted that only 67.5% people can speak & understand this language and 22.5% people can speak, read & write their own language. Many of them get used to speaking & being educated in Bengali medium. Dress of Santhal People. Indian tribes are the heritage of traditional culture because most of the tribal people still lived under primitive belief. So, their cultural habits are very interesting and they are the identity of Indian tradition culture. Santhal people wearing of typical dresses that is totally different from modern culture and still they are strongly followed by their own traditional dresses-Normally male members are wearing with a medium piece of cloth wearing round his waist which is commonly known as Dhoti and during the time of working, they usually wear a small piece of cloth which is called kopni. Generally Santali women are dresses with a larger piece of cloth or saree, the white Saree with red border is of common use during the time of festival. But their traditional dress is Panchi Parhat. All these clothes are made of cotton. They have a fascination to decorate themselves with flowers, feathers and similar things. The Santali women like to wear various types of ornaments; these include necklace, ear ring, bangles, wristlets, ring, girdles etc. these are commonly made of (brass) silver nickel. Desire for Wearing Traditional Dresses. [23]

Festivals:

Santhals mainly celebrate the Karam festival which falls in the month of September and October. They celebrate this festival to plaes the God to increase their wealth and free them from all the enemies. It is the tradition among the Santhals to grow the Karam tree outside their house after the purification process. Other festivals of the Santhal community include Maghe, Baba Bonga, Sahrai, Ero, Asaria and Namah. They also celebrate haunting festival called Disum sendra on the eve of Baishakhi Purnima. [24] Santhals love dancing. It is in their blood. Dance is the important part of the Santhals fairs and festivals. After the long day hard work, Santhals relax themselves with the light music and dance. Santhal women dress in the red bordered white sari and dance in the line sequence. Apart from dance Santhals play great music using Tirio (bamboo flute with the seven holes), Dhodro banam (which consists of belly called lac covered with an animal skin on which rests the bridge (sadam, lit, horse), an

open chest(korom), a short neck(hotok)and a head(bohok), Phet banam (a fretless stringed instrument with three or four strings), Tumdak, Tamak, Junko and Singa.[25]

Religion:

Santhals have no temples of their own. They even do not worship any idols. Santhals follow the Sarna religion. The God and Goddess of Santhal are Marangburu, Jaheraera, and Manjhi. Santhals pay respect to the ghosts and spirits like Kal Sing, Lakchera, Beudarang etc. They have village priests known as the Naiki and shaman Ujha. Animal sacrifices to the Gods is the common practice common practice among the Santhals to appease the Gods and Goddess.Their own religion is Sarna ,or Sari Dharam.[26]

Traditional Economic practice :

The Santhal were the mere tillers of the land by they lived in a traditional way of life based on the working of the Mandali system.The Santhals had always tried to maintain a distance from ordinary population of the country. [27]The Santhals lived in the Tolas separate from the ordinary Bangalee whom by they avoided as much as their avocation permit but they live side by side with occasional Kamaras,Muchis,Marwars,Dhangars,Kodas,Doms and Bhuinya,The Santhals were deeply related to the root of the Mandali system.They regarded themselves as a special people and with this was related the concept of Hor hapan ,the true people close to this was associated the term of Hor disam(the country)or two important concept that bids the Santhal land with the story sense of ethnicity.In order to understand the importance of Mandali system one need to realize the importance of the Santhal communal system. When the parental village is over crowded with Santhal they used to go and relation to the outsider .The Santhal followed the traditional mode of cultivation.When the Santhal settled in the land the negotiation took place between Manjhi or village headman on the behalf of the community.The latter was responsible for the collection of rent on the behalf of the community.Tradition was that each family was allotted one share of plough that race could cultivate.Usally the tract was cleared by the community and the land was invariably distributed by the Manjhi to his fellowmen. The whole area was divided in 2 or 16 rekh which one plough could take in one day.[28]However Majhi's own profit consists of human land and the rent of cultivation from his waste land.Thus this communal system was part and parcel of the Santhal national life.The jungal Muhals during the introduction of permanent settlement witnessed an era of confusion an chaos that created a turbulence in the economy.the Jungal Muhals comprising large area of Birbhum,Manbhum,and the areas of Midnapore and Purulia consisted of extensive tracts of forests that probably was inaccessible to the local people.The introduction of permanent settlement in it's wake destroyed the communal ownership of land with individual ownership.[29]

Identity Crisis :

Globalization shows its immense influence on society, culture, economy and policy; even up to regional level.The contemporary global trend exhibits that globalization catalysts the popular culture and discouraging the folk art and culture. The retardation of folk culture results into multi-dimensional consequences like loss of cultural identity, fragmentation of social cohesiveness and after all the negative impact on rural economy. The present discussion tries to explore the impact of globalization on the Tribal society in Purulia district in the state of West Bengal, India.

Jungal mahals and Development packages:

From the historical points of view jungalmahal region were neglected.From the medieval period to British colonial period. The western part of the Bengal were totally deprived from very beginning .India government had been taken many development packages for the interest of the jungal Mahals peoples.But it is doesn't fulfilled. The left front government took some development scheme in this region,but it failed. Present West Bengal Govt. has taken initiative for development of Jungal Mahals.West Bengal Chief Minister said "I am declaring all the tribals living in the jungalmahals will be treated as BPL families." [30]Her focus is on improving basic services such as health,education,drinking water,and sanitation.[31]The Government gave priority for teaching in Alchiki language in 900 schools.[32] Mamata Banerjee raised the issue of Integrated Action Plan(IAP)for the development of Jungal area. West Midnapore already got special assistance from the centre under the IAP.[33]It is remarkable that the Uninion govt. in 2010 started the scheme under which it has provided Rs.25 crore and Rs.3o crore per district for 2010-11 and 2011-12,respectively.[34]The development scheme proposals are,such as public infrastructure and services such as schools, anganwadi centres, primary health centre drinking water supply,village roads and lighting in public places.[35]After taking this scheme many of the opportunity got the jungal mahals people not only tribes but also none-tribal community. It is the success of the new Government.

Conclusion and remarks:

Scheduled tribes,who constitute the tribal population 8% of the total population of the country,of of these 1.8 million belong to the primitive tribal groups(PTG).They are enriched from the cultural points of view.In the western part of the West Bengal towards the hilly area of Jharkhand are the tribal populated zone.This geographical area mostly familiar as backward and under developed region.During the colonial rule tribals of this area were totally deprived.They protested against the British colonial power. Jungalmahals hve aglorious historical past of the history of Anti-British movements.Due to the agrarian discontent the peoples of jungalmahal took part directly or indirectly against the white ruller.In this contemporary periods the socio - economic and cultural status have changed.Tribals can take education,collect forest resources etc.They wants peace. Primitives tribal community received the opportunity of govt.scheme.Santhals and Birhor community got returned back their racial right.But this is not enough.The state power and intellectual society can play important role for the development of tribal society in the jungalmahal area.

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