

CHAPTER-III

A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE TRIBAL COMMUNITIES OF DAKSHIN DINAJPUR

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3.1 Introduction

India is the second most populous country in the world and a large part of its population consisted of tribal people. As per Census 2011, about 8.6% (10,42,81,034 persons) of its total population belongs to the Scheduled Tribes group. India is also very rich in terms of diversity of tribal communities where about 705 tribal communities with their varied culture, practices and beliefs are identified.

Out of all the states and union territories Madhya Pradesh ranks first as it accounts for about 14.7% of the total tribal population. It is followed by Maharashtra (10.1%), Orissa (9.2%), Rajasthan (8.9%), Gujarat (8.6%), Jharkhand (8.3%), Chhattisgarh (7.5%), Andhra Pradesh (5.7%), West Bengal (5.07%) etc. Punjab, Haryana, Bihar, Delhi and Puducherry have recorded no tribal population. On the other hand, in terms of percentage share of tribal population to the states total population Mizoram ranks first having 94.4%, followed by Nagaland (86.5%), Meghalaya (86.1%), Arunachal Pradesh (68.8%) etc.¹

West Bengal is not a tribal dominated state in India as only 5.80% of its total population belongs to the Scheduled Tribes group. Here, the tribal people are not concentrated in some pockets of the state. Rather they are found sparsely in all the districts at varying rate. The highest concentration of the Scheduled Tribe population is registered in Paschim Medinipur which accounts for 16.61% of the total Scheduled Tribe population. It is followed by Jalpaiguri (13.81%), Puruliya (10.21%), Bardhaman (9.20%), Darjiling (7.50%), Bankura (6.96%), Maldah (5.93%), Dakshin Dinajpur (5.20%), North 24 Pargana (5.00%), Birbhum (4.58%), Hugli (4.33%), Uttar Dinajpur (3.07%), Nadia (2.66%), South 24 Pargana (1.83%), Murshidabad (1.72%). Purba Medinipur, Koch Bihar, Haora, Kolkata— these four districts share a very negligible portion (less than 1% each) of the total Scheduled Tribe population.²

The district of West Bengal is categorised on the basis of percentage share of the Scheduled Tribe population to total population of the individual district into 3 groups. These are—

Areas with High Percentage Share (More than 15% of Scheduled Tribe to Total Population)

Darjiling, Jalpaiguri, Puruliya and Dakshin Dinajpur belong to the first category where the percentage share of tribal population is more than 15% to total population of the district.

Areas with Moderate Percentage Share (Between 5-15% of Scheduled Tribe to Total Population)

The districts which belong to this group has a moderate percentage share of Scheduled Tribe population to total population as here the percentage of Scheduled Tribe ranges between 5-15%. Majority of the districts falls in this category. These are— Paschim Medinipur (14.88%), Bankura (10.25%), Murshidabad (10.14%), Maldah (7.87%), Birbhum (6.92%), Bardhaman (6.34%) and Uttar Dinajpur (5.41%).

Areas with Low Percentage Share (Less than 5% of Scheduled Tribe to Total Population)

This category consists of those districts which share less than 5% Scheduled Tribe population of total population. Districts like Hugli (4.15%), Nadia (2.72%), North 24 Pargana (2.64%), South 24 Pargana (1.19%), Koch Bihar (0.64%), Purba Medinipur (0.55%), Haora (0.31%) and Kolkata (0.24%) are included in this category.³

The above classification shows that Dakshin Dinajpur belongs to the areas of high percentage share of tribal population. As per Census 2011, the total population of Dakshin Dinajpur is 1676276 persons of which 16.43% are Scheduled Tribe.⁴ As per the report of the Census 2011, the presence of 38 different tribal communities is recorded in the district of Dakshin Dinajpur. Obviously, the strength of all the tribal communities is not same. It is observed that the Santal, Oraon, Munda, Bedia, Mahali, Mal Pahariya and Lohara together account for around 94% of the total tribal population of the district.⁵ Hence, these seven groups can be considered as the major tribal groups of the district. The present research work aims to study the socio-economic condition of the tribal people of Dakshin Dinajpur along with the inter-tribal disparity, if any, based on these seven selected tribal communities.

Before focusing on the main objectives of the study, it should be discussed briefly about the seven major tribal groups of Dakshin Dinajpur. Each tribal community is unique in terms of their racial characteristics, language, religion, culture, belief and practices, totems and taboos etc. The impact of their tradition on their present lifestyle cannot be ignored. Hence,

to understand the present socio-economic condition of the tribal people, it is essential to have a brief knowledge about their unique characteristics. In this chapter, importance is given on the etymology of each tribal group, traditional homeland, racial characteristics, language, religion, social organization, marriage, inheritance of property and occupation.

3.2 Santal

Origin of the name of Tribe

The term 'Santal' is used by the non-tribal people to designate those people who recognised themselves as 'Hor' meaning 'man'⁶ or 'Manjhi' meaning 'headman'⁷. It is the non-tribal name of Hor community who are now widely popularised as 'Santal'. The term 'Santal' may trace its origin from Saontar or Samantawala which is related to their earlier place of residence, Saont, presently known as Silda Pargana in Midnapore district of West Bengal.⁸

Traditional Homeland

The Santals of this district is not autochthonous to the place. During 1850, the flow of Santals began to reclaim the vast waste land of this area under the initiation of the British from their traditional place of location, comprised of part of Bihar and West Bengal through the river Damodar and Kasai flow.⁹ Dalton has discussed about the traditional homeland of Santals. He has mentioned the place between the Damodar and Kasai river as the fatherland of the Santals.¹⁰

Racial Characteristics

There is diverse opinion among the ethnologists regarding the racial origin of the Santal. Riskey has identified their racial similarity with the Dravidian stock where as Giuffrida and Haddon both classified them as Pre-Dravidian. Dr. B. S. Guha, the eminent Indian Anthropologist, has found the characteristics of Proto-Australoid people among the Santal.¹¹ It is probably the most accepted opinion regarding the racial type of Santal. The Santals are physically characterised by dark complexion, broad and flat nose, large mouth with thick lips, scanty beard, short to medium stature and wavy to curly hair.¹²

Language

Though the Santals are a Dravidian tribe, yet considering the linguistic characteristics, they are grouped as Kolarian tribe.¹³ The mother tongue of the Santal community is Santali

which belongs to the Munda sub-family of the Austric language family.¹⁴ They are the largest Munda speaking tribe who are still maintaining their ancestral language greatly. Earlier, this language had no script of its own. Because it was used only for the purpose of speaking. But, when they started to be literate, they adopted the different non-tribal scripts such as Roman, Bengali, Oriya, Nepali, etc.¹⁵ Presently, the Santal have adopted the OL Chiki script which was developed by the Raghunath Murmu of Orissa in 1940.¹⁶ However, this script is not adopted unanimously by the whole community. Still, there is a debate regarding the script of Santal community.¹⁷

Religion

The Santals have their own form of religion, quite different from Hinduism. Dalton mentions Sing Bonga as their supreme deity.¹⁸ Sometimes, Thakur is also mentioned as their supreme deity to whom they sacrifice the goat in hope of getting his blessings.¹⁹ Sing Bonga is the sun god, Sing means sun and Bonga means spirit i.e. spirit of the sun. The other Mundari speaking tribes also worship Sing Bonga.²⁰ Marang Buru (great mountain) is another highly worshiped god of Santals. Besides, Moreko, Jair Era, Gosain Era, Pargana etc. are venerated by the Santals at Jahirthan (sacred grove). All the gods are worshiped in public except Marang Buru, worshipped privately in individual family. It is observed that every family has two special god— Orak Bonga and Abge-Bonga. There are the secret gods of every family, the names of whom are disclosed to only the eldest son of the family.²¹ At present in district of the Dakshin Dinajpur, they mainly worship Marang Buru. The Santals strongly believe in spirits which are found in all places of the world. They also believe in the existence of soul of their ancestors whom they worship at *Majhiye Than*.²²

Social Structure

The Santal are divided into twelve exogamous clans. These are— Hasdak, Murmur, Kisku, Hembrom, Marandi, Saren, Tudu, Baske, Besra, Pauria, Chore and Bedea. Out of these twelve clans, the twelfth one i.e. Bedea is separated from the main community and disappeared long ago.²³ At present, the Santal society is comprised of eleven clans, each of which is further sub-divided into a number of sub-clans or *khunts*.²⁴ Each clan has its own totem. Clan exogamy is strictly maintained among the Santal and the breaching of this rule is considered as an incest by them.²⁵

Marriage

The Santal is an endogamous community where clan exogamy is strictly maintained. They are not allowed to marry within the same sept. Different types of marriage are practiced among them. These are— Bapla or bride-purchase, Ghardi jawae, Itut, Nir-Bolok, Sanga and Kiring jawae or husband purchase.²⁶ In this society, no priest is required to conduct the marriage. The men or women may select the life partner of their own choice though marriage arranged by the parents or guardians of the family owe more respect. The bride price is practiced among them, which is decided by the guardians of both the party before marriage.²⁷ Child marriage was not prevalent among them rather the girls got married when they became adult. The pre-marital sexual relationship is not tabooed in this society. Polygamy rarely occurs among them. Generally under special circumstances like the infertility of the wife or the death of his brother a man marry again, obviously after taking the consent of first wife.²⁸ Even after the second marriage, the first wife does not lose her authority and position in the family and the second wife has to always respect her.²⁹ Widow remarriage is common among them and to marry the deceased's brother is regarded as the most accepted solution to the problem. In this society, both men and women are allowed to get divorce from their unhappy marriage and if the women want divorce, she has to return the bride price along with a fine.³⁰

Occupation

Majumdar and Madan have described the Santal as the agricultural tribe which implies that agriculture is their traditional occupation.³¹ But, Singh has mentioned that hunting and food gathering is their traditional occupation³² though they have later shifted to settled agriculture which they are pursuing even now as their primary occupation.

Inheritance of Property

The Santals have their own rules regarding the inheritance of property. Being a patriarchal society, the property is inherited by the sons only; the daughter has no right over property. Even the widow has no right over her husband's property. She just takes care of the property until the sons grow up and if she gets married outside the family, the custody of the property will confine on the decease's brother until the sons grown up. Father's property is equally distributed among the sons and the daughter is given a cow only. It is observed that

if a person has no son, then the property will not be inherited by daughter. In such case, property will be inherited by his paternal male relatives.³³

3.3 Oraon

Origin of the name of Tribe

The Oraon is known as 'Dhangar' which means 'hillman' in many parts of India. The term is derived from the word 'dang' or 'dhang' meaning 'hill'. However, Dhangar is not considered as their community name as the same word is used among other tribes to indicate young boy and girl. The Oraon are also known as 'Kurukh'. There are various opinions regarding the origin of the term 'Kurukh'. Dalton opines that the term may originate from the word 'Konkan' which is supposed to be the ancestral place from where the Oraons migrated. On the other hand, the name 'Oraon', considered as their nick name, may be associated with their migratory nature as they migrated from one place to another.³⁴ The Oraon are called Kurukh which mean man in Kurukh language. The term 'Kurukh' may be originated from the name of their mythical king Karakh and his country Karukh-des, presently located at Sahabad district, which is considered as their ancestral place. The term may also be associated with the Sanskrit word 'Krs' which mean plough as the Oraon was more developed in agriculture compared to the other tribes of that area. They were proud of introducing more developed agricultural implements in the Chota Nagpur region.³⁵ However, elsewhere it is mentioned that the word Kurukh may originate from Croog where the Oraon lived once.³⁶

Traditional Homeland

The earlier history of the Oraon is not very clearly defined. Different views are put forward by different scholars. Dalton has stated that their ancestral place was in western coast of India from where they move out and came to the Kaimur hills and Rohtas plateau in Sahabad but not settled there permanently. They were driven out from Rohtas by the Muhamadans and divided into two groups. One group was led by the Oraon chief. They moved along the course of river Ganga and reached the Rajmahal hills. Other group was led by the chief's younger brother who first moved towards the Son river in Palamou and finally, following the Koel river, reached the north-western and western part of Chota Nagpur plateau. It is assumed by some people that the Mundas were the earlier inhabitants of this part of the Chota Nagpur, who were driven out by the Oraons and compelled to move

towards Lohardaga.³⁷ But, Roy has mentioned that the Oraon people previously settled in Croog in south India.³⁸ They consider the Vanaras of Ramayana as their ancestor and they took part in the Rama-Ravana Yuddha. Later, they migrated from south and finally came to Chota Nagpur plateau region.³⁹

Racial Characteristics

On the basis of physical characteristics, the Oraon belongs to the Proto-Australoid group of Guha's classification.⁴⁰ They are short in stature, dark in complexion and have dolichocephalic, narrow head with projected jaw, broad nose, thick lips and comparatively more hair than Mundas.⁴¹

Language

The mother tongue of the Oraon tribe is Kurukh which belongs to the North Dravidian group of Dravidian language family.⁴²

Religion

The Supreme God of the Oraon is Dharmi or Dharmesh who is believed to exist in the sun and he is the creator of man. However, they believe that their Dharmesh is not omnipotent as he cannot protect man from the evil spirit. Therefore, they think that it is needless to pray Dharmesh. Rather, the malevolent spirit should be propitiated so that those spirits may not obstruct in the working of the Dharmesh. The Oraon do not believe that their sufferings or misfortune is the result of their sin. It is the malevolence of some malignant spirits owing to which they suffer. They worship some minor deities like Darha, Sarna Burhi and several village Bhuts. In those areas where the Mundas are large in number, the Oraon also worship some Munda Deities like Marang Buru and all other Munda Bongas. Hence, the religious belief of the Oraon is expressed by Dalton as of mixed type.⁴³ Among the Oraons, the religious activities are performed by their religious headman, known as Pahan.⁴⁴

Social Structure

Risley has discussed about the internal structure of the Oraon. They are divided into five sub-tribes. These are— Berga-Oraon, Dhanka-Oraon, Kharia-Oraon, Khendro-Oraon and Munda-Oraon. They are further divided into a large number of septs or clans or gotras which are exogamous in nature. Each clan is associated with a totem which is tabooed to the

member of that particular clan. These totems may be beast, bird, fish and other aquatic living beings, reptiles, minerals etc.⁴⁵

Marriage

Dalton has observed that child marriage was not prevalent at that time among the Oraon. But, after few years Risley has noticed that the practice of child marriage was adopted by few Oraons those interacting closely with the Hindu people. The Oraon people enjoy the freedom of selecting their better half. They just need to be careful about their clan which should never be the same. The Oraons do not much bother with pre-marital sexual relationship.⁴⁶ The selection of the life partner may be done by the boy or the girl. But, the further arrangements are done by the parents. Previously bride price was steadily practiced among them which was decided by their parents. Several rituals are performed during the marriage ceremony among which *sindur-dan* is the most important. During the marriage ceremony, the bride is dressed in ordinary clothing and the groom wears long coat and turban, different than their casual wear. An Oraon can marry on any day or any month of the year. There is no restriction regarding the time of the marriage. They select a convenient time when they do not have work load so that their entire relative can attend the wedding.⁴⁷ Polygamy is prevalent among the Oraon though it depends on their economic condition. Only those capable of maintaining more wives, tie the knot with a number of females. They are also free to divorce his or her partner at any time without seeking the consent from *panchayet*. Widow marriage is also a common practice among them.⁴⁸

Occupation

The traditional occupation of the Oraons is cultivation. There is a mythological story regarding the adoption of agriculture as their occupation. They believe that the first parents of Oraon, the Bhiya-bhiyin, told them to accept agriculture as their occupation.⁴⁹ They claim that they are the first to introduce the plough cultivation in Chota Nagpur plateau replacing the *daha* method of cultivation which was a method of slash & burn cultivation where the agricultural land was prepared by burning the forest and then mixing the ashes with the soil.⁵⁰ Rice is the principal food of the Oraon. Hence, the majority of the agricultural land is attributed to paddy cultivation. Besides, some types of millet, oilseeds, pulses, vegetables, fruits are also grown. They are well developed in cultivation. Different agricultural equipments are used by them. These are plough, harrow or *patta*, leveler or *kanga*, earth-remover or *karha*, sickle or *hansua*, rice-pounder or *dhenki* etc. The cultivation

is done through two processes i.e. *buna* or broad-cast sowing and *ropa* or transplantation. They also use decomposed or burnt cow-dung as manure. Previously, the use of irrigation was little bit limited among them. Only the affluent families practiced well irrigation for cultivating potato, onion etc.⁵¹

Inheritance of property

The Oraons are not much different from the other tribes of Chota Nagpur Plateau regarding the inheritance of property. In Oraon society, the daughter has no right on father's property. Even the widow cannot inherit husband's property. They just claim their maintenance until the daughter gets married and the widow is willing to stay in the in-law's house. Among them, the father's property is inherited by the son only.⁵²

3.4 Munda

Origin of the name of Tribe

Another important tribe of central India is Munda. The term 'Munda' means 'head' in Sanskrit. It is stated about the origin of the name 'Munda' that when they first settled at Chota Nagpur, at that time, they did not have a Raja. The entire state of Munda was consisted of several small villages and each village had its own headman i.e. Munda. Many a time, it was observed that most of the villages comprised of single family and all the dwellers were recognised as Munda. Eventually, the whole community was labeled as Munda. This name was probably given by the Hindus to this tribal community. The Munda people called themselves 'Kokpat' or 'Konk Pat' Munda.⁵³ Risley says that the Mundari name of this tribe is *Horo-hon* as in Mundari language, the meaning of 'Horo' is 'man' and 'hon' is 'child'⁵⁴ while Roy mentions it as 'Horo-ko'⁵⁵.

Traditional Homeland

The earlier history of this tribe is quite vague as their folklore does not provide much information about them. Dalton has discussed about the different places of living of Munda tribe. There is not enough information regarding their ancestral place of location as they are not limited to a single place. They shifted from one place to another. Once they were located at Magadha also. Many years ago they entered in the Chota Nagpur region, more precisely, the Jharkhand which was also known as Kokera at that time. At present, the Munda people consider the Chota Nagpur region as their ancestral place.⁵⁶

Racial Characteristics

According to Dr. B.S. Guha's classification, the racial affinity of the Munda people traced its origin from Proto-Australoid. Hence, they are also short in height, dark in colour, having thick nose and lips and stout figure.⁵⁷

Language

The mother tongue of the Munda tribe is Munda and Mundari. Both the tribal languages belong to the Munda sub-family of the Austric language family but they are not same. Khubchandani mentions that in West Bengal, the Munda language is mainly spoken by the Munda tribe while in Bihar and Orissa, the use of Mundari is more common among them.⁵⁸ However, the Census 2011 has recorded both the Munda and Mundari speakers in West Bengal as well as in Dakshin Dinjpur.⁵⁹

Religion

The Mundas are also animist in terms of religion. Dalton has mentioned about the shamanistic character of their religion. Unlike the Hindus, they do not have any image or symbol of their god. God is invisible but reside in places like 'high place' and 'high grove' which are dedicated to them. Sing Bonga, the sun god is their supreme deity who is supposed to be the creator of the whole earth. They worship so many other deities e.g. Marang Buru, Desauli and his wife Jhar-Era, Naga-Era, Garha-Era etc. who are subordinate to Sing Bonga but also possess super natural power to relieve them in their distress.⁶⁰ Among the Mundas, the religious activities are performed by their religious headman, known as Pahan.⁶¹

Social Structure

The social structure of Munda shows the existence of several sub-tribes or clan or sept among them. Risley has mentioned that the Mundas are divided into thirteen sub-tribes and some of these sub-tribes are the result of the mixture of Munda with the neighbouring tribal communities like Kharia, Oraon, Mahili etc.⁶² The Mundas are further divided into several septs or killis which are exogamous in nature and marriage within the same killi is prohibited.⁶³ Some of the killis are Tuti-killi, Munda-killi, Seo-killi, Horo-killi and Kachchhua-killi. These sept or killis are totemistic and the totem is tabooed to all the members of that particular killi. For example, tortoise i.e. Kachchhua is the totem of Kachchhua-killi. Hence, the group members of that particular sept are not allowed to kill or

eat tortoise.⁶⁴ Choudhury has described the social structure of Munda in detail. They are divided into two sub-tribes i.e. Khangar Munda and Kompat Munda. The Khangar Munda is also known as Tamaria or Pator or Mahali or Marang Munda. The sub-tribes are further divided into some patrilineal, exogamous, totemic clan or killi. The larger clans are further sub-divided into several sub-clans. In the next order, there is lineage. The individual clan or sub-clan is further divided into two or three lineage or khunt.⁶⁵

Marriage

Among the Mundas, the boys and the girls are not allowed to select their life partner. Rather, it is arranged by their parents. Marriage within a same clan is strictly prohibited among them. In fact, it is considered as one of the most serious guilt.⁶⁶ In Munda marriage ceremony, different rituals are performed and many of them are similar to the Hindu rituals.⁶⁷ The bride-price is also practiced among them and it is decided by the parents of both the party. Divorce and widow remarriage, both are observed in the Munda society.

Occupation

The Mundas practice agriculture and cultivate several crops. The rice is grown three times a year. Besides, they cultivate corn, millets, wheat, gram, mustard seed, tobacco, cotton etc.⁶⁸ They use different equipments in agriculture such as plough, harrow, earth remover, hoe, sickle, husking instruments etc.⁶⁹

Inheritance of Property

The Mundas abide by certain rules regarding the inheritance of property. In Munda society, sons are the only inheritor of the parent's property while daughters are not entitled to have any share. Risley has mentioned that all the properties including the livestock are equally distributed among all the son.⁷⁰ But Choudhury in his 'Munda Social Structure' has said that the widow mother and the unmarried daughter also get a share. However, they do not get the permanent entitlement. The mother can possess the property for lifetime and the unmarried daughter until her marriage. After that, it is distributed among the son.⁷¹

3.5 Bedia

Origin of the Tribe

Bedia, Bediya is a small tribal group of Dakshin Dinajpur. Hunter has mentioned about the Bedia in his book Statistical Account of Dinajpur. At that time (1876), the total number of

Bedia in undivided Dinajpur district was 1704 persons. He describes Bedias as “**a wandering, gipsy-like tribe, half-Hindus half-Muhammadans, who live by the sale of petty trinkets, drum-beating, cattle-gelding, juggling, and fortune-telling, and also by theft when opportunity offers; the women are frequently employed as midwives**”.⁷²

Risley has also presented an account of the Bedias. They are a small tribal community of Chota Nagpur region who are cultivator by occupation. There are various views regarding their origin. One view considers them as the maternal cousin of Kurmis while another considers them as the twelfth sept of the Santal, who were separated from the main branch long ago and presently have no connection with them. Risley has opined that the Bedias of this region have no relation with the Bedias of then Eastern Bengal, presently West Bengal.⁷³ However, Singh has mentioned that the Bedias of West Bengal has similarity with the Bedias of Bihar. He has stated that the Mohdipahar at Hazaribagh of Bihar was the earliest place of residence of the Bedias. According to him, the Bedias are originally the child of Vedbansi prince and Munda mother. Sometime, they are also regarded as the part of the Kurmis, who are outcasted and separated from the main tribe.⁷⁴

Traditional Homeland

Risley has describes the Bedias as a tribe of Chota Nagpur region. Another view has regarded Bedias as one of the sept of Santals separated from the main community at Champa. So, Champa may also be regarded as their traditional homeland.⁷⁵ Singh considers the Mohdipahar at Hazaribagh as the earliest place of settlement of the Bedias.⁷⁶

Language

The language spoken by the Bedias differ from one region to another. In Bihar, they speak in Panchpargania while in West Bengal they speak Kudmali (Kurmali in Dakshin Dinajpur). Both the languages belong to the Indo-Aryan language family. Generally, Devanagari script is used. In West Bengal, they use Bengali also.⁷⁷ Sometimes, the language of the Bedias of West Bengal is also recognised as a corrupt form of Bengali and referred as Manbhuiya Bengali.⁷⁸

Religion

Hunter has described the Bedias of Dakshin Dinajpur as ‘**half Hindus, half muslims**’.⁷⁹ However, the Bedias have their own traditional religious faith. They worship their village as

well as clan deities. The village deities are Jher-buri, Gawandeti, Mahadania, Durga, Chandi etc. while the clan deities are Mai, Mudkati, Kundri, Bansa, Darha etc. Their religious activities are performed by some sacred specialists, known as pahan, bhagat, ojha. Sometimes, these sacred specialists belong to other communities too.⁸⁰

Social Structure

The internal structure of the Bedias implies the existence of several septs. However, the entire community is not divided into sub-tribes, only the totemic septs are identified. These are Bar, Biha, Chindra, Dhechua, Dian, Kachua, Khopcha, Mahanadi, Mahua, Mahukal, Maina, Nag, Parewa, Pecha, Suia, Sulankhi, Sundi, Titipi and Turu. Mahato is used by them as their title.⁸¹

Marriage

Singh has observed the practice of early marriage among the Bedias. The girls are married off at the age of fourteen to fifteen while the boys marry at the age of sixteen to seventeen. The arrange marriage is prevalent among them though the consent of both the bride and groom is essential. The Bride-price is practiced among them. In Bedia society, men are allowed to have more than one wife though they prefer monogamy. Both men and women are free to divorce but it must be on some legitimate ground like adultery, barrenness, maladjustment, cruelty, laziness etc. considering which their village council gives the consent. The widow remarriage is practiced and the widows may marry their late husband's brother too.⁸²

Occupation

Traditionally, the Bedias are cultivators. Agriculture is their primary occupation and they possess agricultural land too. Besides, they collect different forest products and work as casual labourers.⁸³ Hunter has mentioned that the Bedias of Dinajpur earn their livelihood by selling trinkets, beating drum, gelding cattle, showing jugglery and fortune telling, even sometimes by theft while women work as midwives.⁸⁴

Inheritance of Property

In Bedia society, the parental property is inherited by the sons while the daughter has no right on father's property. Property is equally distributed among all the sons, only the father's authority passes to the eldest son.⁸⁵

3.6 Mahali

Origin of the Tribe

Mahili, Mahali is described as a Dravidian caste of Chota Nagpur and West Bengal by Risley.⁸⁶ He has discussed about the caste in detail and mentioned some types of caste as well as the processes through which different types of caste have been formed. These are— caste of tribal type, caste of functional type, sectarian type, caste formed by the cross breeding, caste of national type, caste formed by migration, caste formed by changes of custom etc. So, the crossbreeding is considered as an important process of formation of caste. The Mahalis are mentioned as caste by Risley may be due to the fact that they are evolved through the interbreeding of Munda and Santal.⁸⁷ The use of the term ‘caste’ for tribe might be for some another reasons. In eighteenth century, the use of the terms— tribe and caste by the British ethnographers was not much clear. Rather the two terms were used as synonym.⁸⁸

Traditional Homeland

The Mahalis are found in Chota Nagpur region and West Bengal. They are mainly concentrated in Ranchi and Manbhum of Chota Nagpur region which can be regarded as their traditional homeland.⁸⁹

Racial Characteristics

As the Mahalis are considered as a branch of Santal or evolved due to the union of the Mundas and the Santals, they are racially compatible with these two communities. According to Dr. B. S. Guha, both Santal and Munda belongs to the Proto-Australoid race. Hence, the Mahalis are also considered Proto-Australoid in terms of their racial origin. The physical characteristics of the Mahalis also support this view as they are also short stature, dark in colour, broad flat nose and thick lips.⁹⁰

Language

There is diverse opinion regarding the ancestral language of the Mahali tribe. Sengupta has studied the social profile of the Mahalis of Midnapore district. He has found that the language spoken by the Mahali tribe is a dialect of Santali language, which he has mentioned as Mahli or Mahali.⁹¹ It is quite probable that the dialect of Mahalis has similarity with Santali language. The Mahalis are actually a branch of Santal. They were out

casted by the Santal and later recognised as a separate community, known as Mahali.⁹² In the Census Report 2011, Mahali or Mahili is mentioned as a dialect of Santali.⁹³ Hence, its origin is from Austric family. Fusch stated that the mother tongue of Mahali differs in West Bengal from Bihar. They speak Mundari in Bihar while in West Bengal, they speak a corrupt form of Bengali,⁹⁴ which may be called ‘**Manbhuiya Bengali or border Bengali**’⁹⁵. The name Manbhuiya Bengali is originated from the name of the place Manbhum as their ancestral place was Ranchi and Manbhum of Chota Nagpur region.⁹⁶

Religion

Risley has described the religion of the Mahalis as a mixture of Animism and Hinduism as they worship all the Hindu gods as well as pray to their tribal deities. Bar-pahari or mountain god and Manasa or snake god are the main tribal gods of Mahalis. To these gods, they made the offerings of rice, ghee, goats and fowls. Besides, they worship Hindu gods though worship is not done by Brahmin priest. Only the Patar-Mahalis have started to employ Brahmin priest to perform religious ceremonies.⁹⁷ The different religious festivals of Mahalis are Haripuja, Gram Thakur puja, karampuja, goal puja, Akhani puja. Besides, they celebrate Tushu, Sharhul, Doljatra festivals.⁹⁸

Social Structure

The Mahalis or Mahilis are divided into five sub-castes, elsewhere Risley mentioned as sub-tribe.⁹⁹ These are— Bansphor-Mahilis, Patar-Mahilis, Sulunkhi-Mahilis, Tanti-Mahilis and Munda-Mahilis. The Bansphor-Mahilis are associated with bamboo work. They make baskets and all other articles from bamboo. The Patar-Mahilis also make bamboo-baskets. Besides, agriculture is done by them. The Sulunkhi-Mahilis work as both cultivator and labourer. The Tanti-Mahilis work as palanquin-bearer. The main group of Mahalis which is comprised of Bansphor, Sulunkhi and Tanti Mahalis are considered as the off-shoot of Santal, who are separated from the Santals. They were probably out casted from the parent group because of their occupation. The occupation like basket- making and carrying palanquin is regarded by the Santal as menial. Hence, they broke off from Santal and gradually form a separate tribe, known as Mahali. These three sub-castes are distinguished from each other in terms of their occupation. The Patar-Mahilis are Hinduised section of this community. They have adopted different Hindu practices, like beef eating is restricted for them. Now-a-days, they employ Brahmins as the priest in their *Pujas*.¹⁰⁰ The Munda-

Mahilis are considered as the branch of the Munda who probably evolve due to the cross-breeding of Munda and Santal¹⁰¹ and they are confined to Lohardaga.

Marriage

Like the other tribal communities of Chota Nagpur plateau, the Mahalis are also divided into a number of totemistic sections or clans. These sections are exogamous i.e. marriage between the people of same section is restricted and this restriction is also imposed on mother's section. So, for a Mahali man, his bride should belong to the section other than his father's and mother's sections. Different rituals are practiced throughout the marriage ceremony, an important one is before the actual marriage, the bride has to marry a *mahua* tree and the groom to *mango* tree. The bride-price is practiced among the Mahalis, though the amount varies according to the economic status of the groom's parents. There is no restriction among the Mahalis regarding polygamy though it is practiced rarely only in case of the barrenness of the woman. Divorce is prevalent among them. Widows are also allowed to remarry.¹⁰²

Occupation

The ancestral occupation of the Mahalis as considered by them is basket making and bamboo work. However, it is not the occupation of all the sections of this tribe. The Bansphor-Mahilis and Patar Mahilis are associated with bamboo work where as Tanti-Mahili work as palanquin-bearer. The Sulunkhi and Patar Mahalis adopt agriculture as their occupation. Some Mahalis who are landless work as labourer also.¹⁰³ Those who accept bamboo crafting as their occupation, collect the raw material from the forest and all the family members get involved in bamboo work. Generally, the male members make the big baskets while the other articles like winnowing fan, mat etc. are prepared by female. They sale the bamboo articles in nearby markets.¹⁰⁴

Inheritance of Property

The Mahalis claim to follow the Hindu law of inheritance of property and succession. Although the reality differs slightly. They have their own caste-council which actively resolves the different civil disputes arisen among them. The decision of the council is unquestionable to them and they do not seek the interference of the regular court. However, they are indirectly influenced by the Hindu law as they follow their landlords in this regard, who obviously abide by the Hindu laws. Consequently, their traditional law of inheritance

of property seems to be changing as they no longer follow the law of *jeth-angs* (allotment of an extra share of property to the eldest son). Now, they are following the Hindu laws of inheritance of property and prefer the equal distribution of property among all the sons. The *Dayabhaga* scheme of division of property is followed among the Mahalis in Manbhumi where as the *Mitakshara* law in Lohardaga.¹⁰⁵ Sometime, a share of property is also given to the daughters among the Mahalis.

3.7 Mal Pahariya

Origin of the Name of Tribe

The origin of the name Mal Pahariya is related with the word 'Male'. 'Male' is the variant of the word 'Mal'. The word 'Male' means 'man' and 'Paharia' means 'mountain'. So, the Mal Pahariya may be described as the man of mountain or Hillman.¹⁰⁶

Traditional Homeland

Mal Paharia or Mal Pahariya is a Dravidian tribe of north-eastern edge of Chota Nagpur Plateau region. Knowledge about the origin of this tribal community is vague. Dalton has given an account of the Malers or Paharias or the Hillmans, inhabiting a vast tract of Rajmahal hill which extends from river Ganges to Brahmani river. He has mentioned that the south of the Brahmani river is the extension of the Rajmahal hill which known as the Ramgarh hill. The inhabitants of the Rajmahal hill are the Malers or the Asal Paharias where as the inhabitants of Ramgarh hill are the Mals or Mars who are almost Hinduised tribe and they claimed to come from Malwa.¹⁰⁷ These Mals or Mars must resemble the Mal Pahariyas. Risley considers the Mals or Mars as Mal Pahariyas.¹⁰⁸ There is no relation between the Malers and Mal Paharias of the northern and southern hills. Elsewhere he has mentioned that the Paharia or Hillman of Rajmahal actually comprised of three different tribes— Souria Paharia or Maler, Mal Paharia and Kumarbhag Paharia. These three endogamous communities are distinct in terms of language and culture.¹⁰⁹ Dr. Buchanan has a different opinion. He has considered them as an offshoot of the Maler tribe of northern Rajmahal hill. Risley gives an explanation in this regards. Actually, the Mal Paharias have adopted the Hindu customs widely while the Malers are continuing their old tradition rigidly which makes huge difference between these two communities.¹¹⁰

Racial Characteristics

Risley has described the Mal Pahariyas as a Dravidian tribe.¹¹¹ Hence, the racial characteristics of Mal Pahariyas show similarity with Risley's Dravidian type. Physically, the Mal Pahariyas are short in height, dark in colour, with broad nose depressed at root, long head, dark eyes, flat face and thick hair.¹¹² Singh describes the Mal Pahariyas are short in stature with long and narrow head, round face and short but broad nose.¹¹³

Language

Information about the language of the Mal Pahariyas is also very limited. Dalton has reported that the language of Mal Pahariya is neither a Dravidian language nor it is similar to Kol language. Risley finds very little similarity between Malto language and the dialect spoken by Mal Pahariyas. Buchanan states that they speak a very corrupt form of Bengali.¹¹⁴ Later, Majumder considers Malto which belongs to the Dravidian family as the mother tongue of Mal Pahariya.¹¹⁵ Khubchandani mentions that in West Bengal, they claim Malpaharia as their mother tongue. It is a tribal vernacular of the major regional language Bengali which belongs to the Indo-Aryan branch of Indo-European language family.¹¹⁶

Religion

The Sun god is the supreme deity of the Mal Pahariya. The worship of the Sun god is done by the head of the family on some special Sundays by performing several religious rituals. He worships the rising sun in the early morning on that day with lots of offerings and prays to the god to save him and his family from danger. Dharti Mai or mother earth, Garami, Singhabahini are the other important deities of Mal Pahariyas. Singhabahini, the Goddess of tiger, snake, scorpions and all other poisonous animals are worshiped three times a year i.e. Ashar, Magh and at the time of Hindu Durga Puja. Goddess Dharti Mai is worshiped at the month of Magh. Besides, they worship some animistic powers, malevolent spirits and ancestor's spirits. As the Mal Pahariyas have adopted different Hindu customs, they worship some Hindu deities like Kali, Laxmi too.¹¹⁷

Social Structure

There are varied opinions regarding the internal structure of the Mal Pahariya. Buchanan has mentioned that the inhabitants of the northern part of Ramgarh hills are the Maler while the inhabitants of the southern part are the Mal or Mar and as they are Hillman (hill means

Pahar), they probably known as Mal Paharyia. This Mal is divided into three tribes. These are Kumarpali, Dangrapali and Marpali. He has also mentioned that this division is just a local division and they are same in terms of language, customs and rituals of marriage. But, they have hereditary division too. Those who are at the highest order among the Mal Pahariyas are the *Rajas* or chiefs and his descendents are known as Singhas or Lions. In the next order is the Grihi who gave loan to the poor people. Manjhis are village headman; they are at the third order. The fourth class is the Ahritis who are hunter and Naiyas or the priests are considered as the fifth class. Later, the position of Ahritis is changed and they are considered as the lowest class. These divisions are not exogamous division. On the other hand, Risley says that the Mal Pahariyas are divided into two sub-tribes— Mal Pahariya proper and Kumar or Komar-Bhag which are further divided into several septs. These are Ahriti, Dehriti, Grihi, Manjhi, Patra, Pujor and Sikdar. This division has been done on the basis of their occupations as the name of the septs is associated with a particular occupation. The members of the Ahriti sept are hunters, Dehritis are priests, Grihis are householders, Pujhors are priest, Manjhis are village headman.¹¹⁸

Marriage

Child marriage is practiced among the Mal Pahariyas though adult marriage is more prevalent. Marriage is arranged through a professional match-maker, known as *sithu*. It is observed that, if a Mal Pahariya girl conceives as a result of pre-marital sexual relationship, then her sexual partner has to compulsorily marry her. Bride-price is practiced among them and it is decided through discussion between the parents of both the parties. They have a custom that the amount of bride-price should range between rupees five to twenty five and it must be an odd number. The payment should be made either at a time or in installment but must be completed before marriage. At the time of marriage, both bride and groom wear turmeric dyed yellow cotton dress. The marriage is completed through the ritual of *sindur-dan*. First, the groom put the red lead or *sindur* on bride's forehead and then bride marks seven spots with *sindur* on groom's forehead. Polygamy is allowed though it seems a luxury to have more than one wife owing to their poor economic condition. Hence, they restrict themselves to single wife except when the first wife is sterile. Widow marriage and divorce, both are practiced in Mal Pahariya society. Divorce is performed at their village council by the mutual consent of both the parties.¹¹⁹

Occupation

The ancestral occupation of the Mal Pahariya is hunting and shifting cultivation. Even they are found to follow such primitive methods of cultivation in recent times. They collected the fresh agricultural land by cutting the trees and clearing the forest on the hills. They cultivated at a place for about three years. After that, they shifted to a new patch of land which is collected following the same process. However, they did not prepare the land by either ploughing or hoeing, just spread the seeds on the unploughed land. They have grown maize, different millets (kheri and kangni) and pulses (bora orkalai). But, presently, they are engaged in settled cultivation.¹²⁰

Inheritance of property

Singh discusses about the law of inheritance of property among the Mal Pahariyas. Generally, father's property is equally distributed among the sons. However, father's authority goes to the elder son. In case of Mal Pahariyas of West Bengal, he mentions that daughters also inherit father's property though it is not equally distributed between son and daughter. The sons receive large share of property and eldest son receive some extra share of father's property.¹²¹

3.8 Lohara

Origin of the name of the Tribe

Lohara is an important tribe of Chota Nagpur, Bihar and West Bengal. The name 'Lohara' is derived from the word 'Loha' meaning iron. Risley has considered them as an aggregate of heterogeneous caste group. This community is comprised of the people from different tribes and castes, who are associated with iron work or smelting in different parts of the country. It is observed that a sub-tribe of Agaria and a sub-tribe of Asura of Chota Nagpur who are associated with iron-works are referred as Lohar-Agaria and Lohra-Asur respectively. Likewise, a sept of Munda is called Lohara because of doing iron smelting. In Midnapur, a sub-caste of Kamar is called Lohar-Kamar though in West Bengal, they are identified as a distinct tribe and included in the list of Schedule Tribe. As per the Census 1881, the total population of Loharas in the undivided Dinajpur District is 101 persons¹²² where as in 2011, the total strength of this community in only Dakshin Dinajpur district is

2136 persons.¹²³ Apart from their other characteristics, they are treated as a single community only because of their profession and named as Lohara.

Traditional Homeland

Risley has described the Loharas as a distinct community of Bihar, Chota Nagpur and West Bengal. So, these areas may be described as traditional place of residence of this tribe. It is observed that their ancestral place of residence is associated with the sub-castes of this tribe. For example, three sub-castes of Lohara in Santal Pargana are Birbhumia, Govindpuria and Shergarhia who belongs to Birbhum of West Bengal, Govindapur of north Manbhum and Burdwan of West Bengal. Besides, the Kamia Lohar of Champaran have come from Nepal while Mahur or Mahulia have come from North Western province.¹²⁴ Singh considers the Loharas of Chota Nagpur as an early inhabitant of this place.¹²⁵

Language

The mother tongue of the Loharas in Bihar is Ho which belongs to the Munda sub-family of the Austric family.¹²⁶ In Dakshin Dinajpur, the claim of Lohara people about their mother tongue differs widely. Very few respondents consider Ho as their ancestral language while some respondents mention Lohara as their mother tongue. According to Census 2011, the Lohara language is recorded as a dialect of Ho language.¹²⁷ So, the Lohara language is also originated from Munda sub-family of Austric language family.

Religion

The traditional deities of Loharas are Manasa, Ram Thakur, Baranda Thakur, Phulai Gosain, Dalli Gorai, Bhadu and Mohan Giri. The Mohan Giri is actually the mountain god or Marang Buru who worshiped in the month of Ashar, Agrahayan and Magh. They have their own community priest i.e. Pahan. However, many of the Loharas have now adopted the Hindu religion and worship the Hindu deities. In fact, they have started to employ the Hindu priest which may be regarded as a step towards Hinduism leaving their own tradition behind.¹²⁸

Social Structure

The internal structure of the Lohara shows the presence of several sub-castes which may vary with the change of region. In Bihar, they are divided into seven sub-castes— Kanaujia, Kokas, Maghaya, Kamar-Kalla, Mathur or Mahuliya, Mathuriya and Kamia. Among these

seven, Kanaujia is at the highest order, which is further divided into several exogamous sections. They consider them as the descendant of Viswamitra who is worshiped as the god of Iron works (though according to the Hindu mythology, Viswakarma is worshipped as the god of iron works). On the other hand, the Kokas Loharas are the sub-caste of Barhis in Bihar and the Kamar-Kalla is the sub-caste of Sonar. The indigenous Lohar group is the Maghaiya who came from North-West province. The Mahulia also claims the same place as their ancestral place. The other section found in Champaran is the Kamia Lohar who came from Nepal. In Santal Pargana, they are divided into three sub-castes i.e. Birbhumia, Govindapuria and Shergarhia, the name of these sub-castes is associated with their place of living. In Lohardaga, the presence of Manjhal-Turiya, Munda-Lohar, Sad-Lohar and Sisutbansi Loharia is observed. In Bankura, they are divided into Angaria, Gobra, Jhetia and Pansili and in Manbhum, they are divided into Lohar-Manjhi, Danda-Manjhi and Bagdi-Lohar. The Loharas are further divided into a large number of totemistic septs.¹²⁹

Marriage

The customs related to marriage of the Lohara community differ in West Bengal and Chota Nagpur from Bihar. In Bihar, child marriage is a common practice while the adult marriage occurs rarely. But in West Bengal and Chota Nagpur, both the type of marriages is prevalent. Bride-price is also practiced here. Besides, men are allowed to marry more than one wife and there is no restriction regarding it. They are also free to divorce their spouses. In Bihar, practice of Bridegroom-price is observed and they follow some restriction regarding polygamy. In fact, divorce is not a very common practice here. Among the Kanaujias, divorce is completely restricted where as the other sub-caste may divorce after taking the permission from panchayet. Widow-marriage is also practiced among the Loharas though they do not approve the marriage of a divorcee woman.¹³⁰

Occupation

It is already stated that the Lohara is a community comprised of people from different tribes and castes who works as blacksmith. So, their traditional occupation is definitely iron works. Many of them have now engaged in agriculture and some works as carpenter too.¹³¹

Inheritance of Property

Like the other tribes, in the case of Loharas too, the father's property is inherited by the sons only. Though property is not equally distributed among all the sons, the eldest son

always receives some extra share of father's property. Moreover, the father's authority goes to the eldest son who performs the ritual of ancestor worship.¹³²

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