

The Asur: A Study in North Bengal Areas

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Abstract

Asur, primarily an ethnographic stock is said to be the descendant of the Vedic Asura. Evidence proves that the Vedic struggle drove the Asur from the Indus Valley. From the Indus Valley, the Asur moved towards the northwest and settled down at Chota Nagpur. They started residing Gumla, Latehar, Lohardaga, Ranchi and Palamau districts of Jharkhand. The Asur of the Indus Valley Civilisation were iron smelters and many ancient metal relics have been discovered from various Asur sites in Ranchi district. The implementation of the Forest Conservation Policy by the Government and the introduction of the latest metallurgy techniques have given death blows to the industry of iron smelting by the primitive Asur. They have shifted towards cultivation, hunting, collection of forest products, rearing of animals etc. For the purpose of establishing of tea estate in North Bengal, the East India Company brought the Asur people with other tribes to different areas of Alipurduar, Coochbehar and Jalpaiguri districts. Since then, they had to change their livelihood and become tea garden labourers. This nomadic group was much exploited during the colonial period and is still suffering in the post-colonial period. The Asur, who are facing the brunt of government neglect, are forced to live a life of poverty, illiteracy and backwardness. The Asur society in India is designated as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group in Bihar, but they are not granted the same status in West Bengal, putting their survival at risk. The study found that they are still lagging behind other tribal communities in respect of education, health and economy. Initiatives must be taken to preserve the ethnic culture of this legendary tribe at the administrative level as well as at the research level.

Keywords: Vedic Asura, ethnographic stock, iron-smelting, Forest Conservation Policy, Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group.

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Introduction

Tribes have ancient, very rich and divergent cultures inhabiting the forest and hilly areas and they are economically very backward. Names like *Vanavasi* (inhabitants of forests), *Girijan* (Hill people), *Adivasi* (original inhabitants), *Adimjati* (primitive tribes) etc. are used (Sastry and Rao, 2011). Singh (1998) writes: 'The tribe is a colonial concept, an Anglo-Saxon word, defined for the first time in the Census of 1901, in contra-distinction to caste. The notion of tribe has evolved over the censuses, from a hill and forest tribe to a primitive tribe, to a backward tribe, and finally, to the scheduled tribe'. Susana Devalle (1992) from her study of the Jharkhand tribes concluded that 'tribe is essentially a construct' and is a 'colonial category'. The characteristics attributed to tribes, such as egalitarianism, subsistence economy, little or no external control, autonomy, and isolation of such a unit, Devalle argued, are not found among Jharkhand people, known as Adivasi. There is no evidence found to prove that these characteristics existed in the past. According to her, there were no tribes in Jharkhand until the European understanding of the Indian reality constructed them. One such tribe which has been studied by various foreign ethnologists during the colonial period in Ranchi districts in Bihar, India is the Asur.

The Asur is the famous Proto-Austroloid tribe of Chota Nagpur. They were a Pre-Aryan people with magical powers and a practical knowledge of the working of metals. They are one of the 700 tribal groups in present India and have been declared as Specially Endangered Tribes (particularly in Behar). The Asur has been prescribed as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) in Behar (not in West Bengal) because of the following criteria they meet:

1. Dependence on forests for livelihood
2. Pre-agricultural society
3. Stable or declining population
4. Low level of literacy and
5. Subsistence economy.

At present, Asurs are found in five states of India, namely, Jharkhand, Orissa, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and West Bengal, but they originally started living at the inaccessible plateau of Netarhat at Chota Nagpur because of the unique feature of this region. Much before the colonial period in India, the Chota Nagpur plateau emerged as a dwelling place for many ethnic groups like Munda, Oraon, Asur etc. for several hundred centuries. Chota Nagpur plateau is the north-eastern extension of the peninsular land, situated between 22°0' - 25°30' N latitudes to 83°47' - 87°50' E longitudes covering an area of 86,239 km² and comprised of districts of Ranchi,

Hazaribagh, Singhbhum, Dhanbad, Palamau and Santhal Parganas of Bihar and Purulia district of West Bengal. The whole region is drained by many perennial and non-perennial ephemeral streams. The Subarnarekha, the North Koel, the South Koel, the Damodar and the Barakar rivers have developed extensive drainage basins, while the Ajai, the Mor, the Brahmani, the Gumani etc drain the Rajmahal highlands in parallel channels towards the West Bengal plain. The northern fringe of the plateau is drained by small tributaries of the Punpun, the Phalgu, the Sakri, and the Kiul rivers towards the South Bihar plain (Singh, 1971). Sarat Chandra Roy (1912) in Chapter VI of his book "*The Munda and their Country*", 1st Ed. gives a good description of the Chota Nagpur plateau: 'In its physical features, in its geological formation, in its botanical products and its mineral wealth, in its ethnological peculiarities, in its social and political history, Chota Nagpur presents a striking contrast to the rest of the province of which administratively it forms a part. Remarkably refreshing is the contrast it's blue hills and rugged ravines, green *Sal* jungles and terraced fields of yellow paddy, limpid hill-streams rushing down their narrow beds of rock and sand, and picturesque waterfalls leaping over abrupt precipices, present to the monotonous stretch upon a stretch of Bengal plains, broken here and thereby some muddy meandering creek or '*khal*' or by some mighty river tardily rolling down with its load of loam and silt into the sea.' Dalton (1872) described Chota Nagpur as the great living anthropological museum in India. Mr. Forbes about one-forty years ago, wrote about this plateau that: 'the jungle becomes forest and the hills put on almost a grand appearance. The roads and paths wind about now over the top of a lofty eminence, which enables you to look down upon the valley below and over to the blue hills beyond. On reaching the bottom of the ghat, the path sometimes follows the bank of a brook or watercourse which emerges from the fastnesses and gorges among the hill's winds in and out till it joins the stream that waters the valley below' (O'Malley, 1907). Chota Nagpur is composed mainly of Archaean granite and gneiss rocks with patches of Dharwar rocks (phyllite, mica-schists etc.) on the northern and southern margins. The deposit of iron ore is present in the Kolhan area of Singhbhum district. The iron occurring here is haematite having more than 60 per cent iron content (Singh, 1971). Hence, the place was suitable for the Asur to extract iron ore for iron smelting. Gupta and Dutta (1963) in their article, "*A Preliminary Note on the Asura*" talked about the Asur of the Netarhat plateau of Ranchi district. They both visited the Asura country in the Netarhat plateau (3,600 ft above sea level on average) of Ranchi district in April 1962 and described the somatic characteristics of the Asura in their article (Gupta, 1963). Also, their cultural characteristics and the indigenous process of iron-smelting have been described by Sarat Chandra Roy (1915, 1917, 1920, 1926), Ruben (1939) and others. Later, Gates (1962) published basic data on a few physical measurements

of 20 individuals, half of whom were of either sex. He argued that ‘*Asuras are not now Austroloid*’. They speak the Kherwarian language which belongs to the Munda family. From time immemorial, various myths have been associated with the Asur community and they have been inundated with the curse of poverty, illiteracy, and backwardness. Traditionally, the Asur was an iron-smelting tribe and later they took cultivation as their economy. In 1968, the British government enacted forest laws, which limited the access of the Asur to the forests and had a devastating effect on their traditional occupation. With the gradual influence of modernization, urbanization, globalization, environmental degradation and changes, international, national and regional politics and interests, ethnocracy etc. the tribals are facing several difficult challenges for their survival (Biswas, 2024) and the Asur is no exception in this challenging situation. Keeping all these views in mind, the present paper is an attempt to discuss the past and present situation of the Asur people along with a forward look towards their future.

Division and Distribution of the Asur in India

The Asur in India has three major divisions, namely, the *Bir Asur*, the *Birjia* and the *Agaria*. The Bir Asur are found in Ranchi and Palamau districts and are dispersed in the police stations of Bisnupur, Chainpur, Ghaghra, Lohardaga and Mahuadand. In Jharkhand, the Birjias have been classified as a distinct Scheduled Tribe while the Agaria is a Scheduled Tribe in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. The total population of Agaria-Asur is 22,459 in Jharkhand, 2,004 in Lohardaga, 2,096 in Latehar, and 109 in Ranchi as depicted in the Census Report of 2011. According to Census 2011, the total population of Asur in the state of Chhattisgarh is about 300. The Asur mainly live in the forested hills of Jashpur, Tehsil and Manora of Chhattisgarh. Donapat districts in Jashpur have the largest population of the Asur community. In West Bengal, Asur are mainly concentrated in Coochbehar, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Purulia districts with their small growth rate (Chaudhuri and Chaudhuri, 2005). In Purulia, many Kherwal community people, who are the descendants of the Asur community are regularly observing “Asur Utsab” on the occasion of Durga Puja, for the last few years, said Ajit Prasad Hembram, a member of the Asur (Kherwal) community in Purulia (Ali, 2016).

Studied Area and the Asur

Among 40 ethnic groups of Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal, the Asur is a small non-Aryan tribal community sparsely distributed in Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar and Alipurduar districts in North Bengal at present. North Bengal is an important place in West Bengal where a large number of scheduled tribes like Oraon, Munda, Rabha, Asur, Santhal,

Kharia, Mech, Mahali, Kora, Garo, Limbu, Toto, Sherpa, Bhumij etc., are living together. According to the Census 2011, 3864 population of the Asur tribe with 1909 males and 1955 females are present in West Bengal. Out of these, 3529 are sparsely distributed in different corners of Jalpaiguri, Coochbehar and Alipurduar districts. At present, they are found in Carron tea estate, Kurti tea garden, Jiti Garden, Kailashpur, Kilkat, Kumlai, Dalimkot, Kanthalguri, Dharanipur, Shimlabari, Rohini, Madarihat, Joypur, Anandapur (Jalpaiguri), Lohagar (Darjeeling), Indra Kuthi (Coochbehar) and Majherdabri, Kalkut, Satali Garambasti, Tulsipara (Alipurduar), (Nath, 2019).

Tarai and Duars are two famous regions of tea plantations in the plain land of North Bengal. These lands had been declared as “Non-Regulated Areas” by the British for the purpose of developing tea plantations and in 1874 the first tea garden was established at Gajoldoba in Duars by Sir Dr. Bruham. After that, many tea gardens like Fulbari, Dalimkot, Bagrakot, Damdim, Manabari, Wasabari, Manihope, Patabari, Ranichora etc. had been built in this region by 1879 and for this large-scale development, East India Company needed huge supply of labour to turn dreadful forests with wild animals into beautiful tea plantation area. Local tribes Meches, Rabhas, Garos and Chakmas were not interested and had declined to take part in this job. In that situation, East India Company planned to bring Munda, Oraon, Santhal, and Asur tribal people from Bihar, Santhal Parganas and Chota Nagpur plateau region in exchange for a bribe with *dalals*. In this way, the Asur people were compelled to leave their native place in Jharkhand and migrate to the forest areas around North Bengal. They had to leave their forefathers and continue to live there. This marked the beginning of the Asur people's permanent settlement in West Bengal.

Objectives of the Study

1. To review the origin of the Asur people in India.
2. To know the livelihood and culture of the Asur people in India.
3. To study the status of present Asur people in the studied area.

Research Methods

- I. Sample and Sampling area:** The sample for the study was selected from the Alipurduar district, with five villages each containing 20 Asur families chosen as the sample. The five villages are Kalkut Basti, Majherdabri Asur Line, Satali Basti, Carron Tea Estate and Lakhipara Village.
- II. Sampling Method and Materials for Data Collection:** Purposeful Random Sampling has been used for data collection. Both primary and

secondary sources of data have been used for the purpose of getting a comprehensive picture of the Asur people. Qualitative data have been collected using a semi-structured questionnaire, while quantitative data have been collected through a structured interview schedule for household surveys. Published books, journals, census reports, newspapers, internet archives etc. have been used as secondary sources of data for the present study.

- III. **Methods/Techniques of Data Collection:** The present study employed various methods to collect primary data, including observation, interviews, focus group discussions, and household surveys. In addition, the participant observation technique was utilized to study the culture in question. These methods were strategically selected to ensure comprehensive data collection and analysis. Through observation, the researcher was able to carefully document the behaviour and activities of the participants, while interviews and focus group discussions provided valuable insights into their attitudes and beliefs. Household surveys, on the other hand, allowed for the collection of quantitative data on specific issues of interest. By employing participant observation, the researcher was able to immerse themselves within the culture and gain a deeper understanding of its intricacies. Overall, these methods were critical to achieving the study's objectives and provided valuable insights into the culture under investigation.

Discussions

A. Origin of the Asur- A Controversy

The word 'Asur' has a resemblance with 'Ashur' in Assyria where it means 'Powerful People'. The word 'Asur' occurs in several places in the Rig Veda, Brahmanas, Aranyakas, Upanishads and Epics which comprise the Sacred Literature of the Hindus. Sayanacharya has interpreted the word 'Asur' as 'powerful' (*balavan*), 'highly intelligent' (*pragnavan*), 'destroyer of enemies' (*shatronam niratisah*), 'giver of life' (*pranasyadata*) and so on (Leuva, 1963). When the question raised if there is any relation between the Asura in the sacred literature of the Hindus in India and the Asur people of Ranchi district, traditionally known as primitive iron-smelters. To answer this question, we must trace back to the literature as described by Leuva in his book '*The Asur: A Study of Primitive Iron-Smelters* (1963).

- (i) The Vedic, Brahmanic and Epic Literature provide enough material to prove that the Asur people came from outside India. The Bhavisya Purana states that the Asur came from across the sea of salt water. They were '*Hiranya Hastaha Asuraha*' means 'men with golden hands' or say with brown complexion and *shubhbraha*, 'White'.
- (ii) '*Do not strike us, Varuna, with those weapons of thine that at thy instance smite down the sinner. May we not be away from light, please, rout our enemies that we may live.*' (Rig Veda II, 28, 7). Here, Varuna is addressed as Asura meaning 'destroyer of enemies' according to Sayanacharya.
- (iii) '*Let the golden-handed divine spirit, of good guidance, most gracious, aiding well, come hither, chasing away demons and sorcerers, the god being landed has arisen towards eventide*' (Rig Veda I, 35, 10). Here, Savitri, the Sun God is addressed as Asura meaning 'possessed of property'.
- (iv) '*Thou, O Agni, art Rudra, the Asura of High Heaven; thou being the host of the Maruts, rulest over nourishment. Thou goest along with the flame-coloured Winds, bringing happiness to our home. Thou being Pushan, protected thy worshippers by thy own might*' (Rig Veda II, 1, 6). Here, Agni in the form of Rudra is addressed as Asura meaning 'destroyer of enemies.'
- (v) '*The father of sacrifices, the miraculous lord of those who know prayers; Agni is the measure and rule of the sacrifices; he has entered the two manifold-shaped worlds; the sage beloved by many people is glorified in his foundation*' (Rig Veda III, 3,4). Here, Agni Vaishvanara is Asura meaning 'the miraculous lord' according to Prof. Max Muller, while Sayanacharya interprets the word as 'giver of power.'

In the above five references in the Rig Veda, the word 'Asura' has been used as a term for praise. But, in the older parts of the Rig Veda, there are 13 references where the above-glorified characteristics of Asura have turned into hostile figures. A few examples are cited below.

- (i) The Asura became wolfish as mentioned in Rig Veda II, 30.
- (ii) From being the epithets of Varuna or Mitra Varuna as gifted with Maya-occult power, the Asura becomes wicked (Rig Veda X, 124), hostile (Rig Veda X, 53) and godless creature (Rig Veda VII, 85) who must be vanquished.
- (iii) Patanjali called Asura '*Mridhravachah*' of 'unintelligible speech' and therefore '*Mlechehhah*' 'deficient in grammar' because in a fight between the Asura and the Aryans, the former shouted while retreating '*helayo helayah*' instead '*he, arayah*', '*he, arayah*' meaning 'Oh, ye enemies.'

We have a great interest in constructing various types of structures related to the Asur community, as described by numerous scholars and shastris.

- (i) During the Rig Vedic Age, a struggle took place between the Aryans and Asura for supremacy over the Indus Valley. The Asura were the worshippers of Lord Varuna as their principal deity. Purus, Turvasus, Yadus, Anus, Druhyus and Bhrigus were leading the Asura division and Vishwamitra was their commander-in-chief. It was difficult for Aryans to defeat the Asura who were assisted by Varuna. Varuna was a 'Mayavin' with Maya-occult power. Finally, by means of artifice, Aryans defeated Asura and with this massive defeat, Asura had lost their military prestige and industrial skill. They struggled for several centuries to recover their prestige but their tireless effort ended with the assimilation of two warriors after Varuna and Indra became each other's gods and both were worshipped in one form (Banerjee-Shastri, 1926).
- (ii) Against the above theory, Bhargava had given a different explanation. In the beginning, the Asura were a synonym of God which changed to the synonym of demon later and he argued that this transformation is not accidental. In the *Amarakosha*, the Asura were described as 'Poorvadevah' meaning one who was formerly God and a war took place between the two sections of the Aryans. But this theory has been challenged with the help of some clear evidence which indicates that the Asura were a distinct group who were earlier occupants of the Indus Valley from across the seas.
- (iii) Further, according to Haddon, the Asura were a primitive leucoderm people who absorbed an indigenous meloderms race (the *Nishada* of ancient Sanskrit literature) and developed a civilization of their own. Being finally defeated by the Aryans, a section of Asura retreated to Chota Nagpur and was finally absorbed by intrusive, short-statured Pre-Dravidian hordes coming from the south. This description clearly indicates that the Asura migrated from the Indus Valley to Chota Nagpur (Haddon, 1924).
- (iv) Sarat Chandra Roy during his field studies on the Asur of Ranchi in the twenties of the twentieth century had come across certain remains of the Asur. He found that the findings of urns, copper and metal ornaments and terracotta from excavations of the Asur graveyards in the Khunti subdivision resembled those of the Mohan-jo-daro findings. This proves that the present-day Asur of the Netarhat plateau has had some links with the Asura of Sanskrit literature (Roy, 1926).

B. Livelihood and Culture of Primitive Asur

I. Material Culture

(a) Villages and Houses: In the Netarhat plateau, the Asur villages locally known as 'Pat' stand on a flat-topped upland and their houses are scattered. Under the shade of trees on an elevated land situated at the centre of the Asur village, they built a dancing arena called *Akhara* and large stone slabs were placed surrounding the dancing arena for the audience. *Akhara* was also their meeting venue. Asur were great builders and constructed their houses which were well-built, durable, and quite spacious. The houses were built in three parts, viz. a sleeping apartment, a kitchen and a cattle shed. The average built-up area of a house was 30ft long and 2ft broad with a height of about 15ft. The house had only one door, but no windows and a covered *verandah* on three sides. They built walls with mud and placed heavy rafters on the roof which were thatched with earthen tiles. These tiles were prepared with an inherent art by using a half-round piece of wood about two and a half feet long having a smaller diameter at one end. The Asur lived at an altitude of more than 3,000 ft where the temperature lowered down almost to a freezing point in winter, thus, they needed to cover their houses with grass or straw to keep themselves warmer. The Asur people followed some ritualistic protocols in selecting the site for building their houses. They put down four small heaps of rice on the four corners of the proposed home site. If any heap was found reduced, they would try to find another site. The Asur had a strong belief that if a house was constructed on that site, the family would not be happy. A few mats woven from date palm leaves by women formed their beds. A bamboo was suspended on both ends from the roof horizontally inside the room close by the hearth on which sheaves of maize were kept. Two or three wooden pegs were driven in the walls on which they kept some articles along with a few cloths. At the corner, they placed one or two bundles (*moras*) made of paddy straw woven into ropes in which was preserved paddy which was used both for seeds as well as for consumption. Brass utensils such as *tharis* and *chipnis* (plates), *dubhas* (cups) and *lotas* (jugs) were also used by them (Leuva, 1963)

(b) Dress: The Asur used a very simple and scanty dress, the men ordinarily wore lion cloth called *botoi* and used a piece of cloth as a wrapper for the upper portion of the body known as *pichouri*. The woman wore a long piece of cloth called *paria* around her waist allowing a portion of it to pass diagonally over the upper part of the body. Grown-up girls used blouses or choli when they visited the weekly market or a fair (*jatra*). Elderly Asur men put on a piece of cloth on the head that looked like a *pagri*. Asur youths used to decorate themselves beautifully. Boys wore round the waist a sort

of belt made of cocoon silk or plaited thread (*kardhani*) and their hair was oiled well. On festival days, they used strings of coral or china beads or silver four anna pieces around his neck and sometimes flowers were used to decorate hair. The Asur women usually washed their hair thoroughly with a fat kind of loam and oiled it to keep it clean. In the middle, they tied their hair together by a string made of either hair or cotton thread into a graceful chignon-like knot called *supid*. The Asur girls wore bracelets, anklets, earrings, and other ornaments made of silver, brass, or lac and coloured glass. Tar-Sakon made of a roll of palm leaf dyed red and set off with a tinsel or lac was used by poor Asur women. Women also wore five or six rings called *Kanaosis* by piercing the upper portion of their ears. Necklaces made of coral beads and small coins were used by some women for decoration. On the fingers of the feet, they also wore rings called *Dhela*. The Asur, unlike other tribes, had considered tattooing as a taboo. Community members believed that if anyone was tattooed, it would anger deities and ancestral spirits, who would then punish the wrongdoer by causing sickness or sending calamities etc. They believed that as they came to this world without any mark on their body at the time of birth, so they had the responsibility to restore it till their death. They had no right to spoil their bodies and if they did, they would be badly punished by any means. The Asur boys were subjected to the Spartan treatment of having their arms burnt with a burning wick made of a twisted rag and soaked in oil, this mark was regarded as a decoration (Leuva, 1963).

(c) Food and Drink: The Asur took cereals like rice, maize, millet, vegetables and meat as their basic diet. Their favourite foods included pumpkins, brinjals, onions and mushrooms and they used wide varieties of wild leafy vegetables, roots, tubers, and fruits to supplement the cultivated edibles. Leaves of *Koinar*, *Phutkal*, *Kalia*, *Zirhool* and *Kachnar* trees and plants and their flowers and *mahua* were added to every meal. Among the roots and tubers, *Daru*, *Pitharu*, *Gaithi* and *Kashya* were most common. They collected mangoes for seeds and these seeds were then put in a net and kept under water for a week when the seeds started decomposing, the inside kernel was washed in water, dried in the sun, and powdered into flour. Fruits like *Mahua*, *Bail*, *Amla*, *Karaunda*, *Pyar*, *Jamun*, *Gullar*, *Porho*, *Tend*, *Kend* and *Bhelwa* were eaten by them from time to time. The Asur collected milk from buffaloes and prepared curd for consumption. They never took milk from cows as they thought that taking milk would deprive calves of feeding. They were omnivores towards meat and fish. Snakes and reptiles except king cobra were their delicious dishes. Traditionally, they forbade animals or birds or fruits which were the totems of the various clans among them. Food was boiled to turn them into curries, though meat was sometimes roasted. Maize flour or millet was boiled with vegetables and flavoured with chillies and salt. A porridge of

rice or maize flour and a kind of rice bread were popular among them. Maize or millet was ground into a powder. The powder was then mixed with hot water to form a paste and then it was spread on a leaf covered with another leaf and finally baked over fire. In the festive month of *Phagun*, this paste was eaten by mixing it with jaggery. Rice beer and *mahua* liquor were the two most important drinks of the Asur. Rice beer was a life-giving juice by the Asur and at the same time, it also worked as a binding force among them. When an Asur was going to a house, all the co-villagers would come with a helping hand. Nobody even thought of any payment either in cash or in kind except the drink of rice beer. The villagers sat together before the work had started and enjoyed the drink. The Asur women either took a bath or changed the *sari* while preparing rice beer for offering to the dead ancestors on three occasions in a year. She at that time required to keep silent. They observed the taboo of not lending any beer to neighbours after dusk as it might be harmed by witches and sorcerers through the influence of beer (Leuva, 1963).

II. Kinship

An integrative bond of kinship was there in the Asur family. Kinship formed in two directions, first, from the direction of the father's family of origin and second, from the mother's family of origin. This kind of two-directional kinship was called a bilateral group related through common descent and became a clan which could be traced to a mythical ancestor who would be a human, a human-like animal, a plant or even inanimate. That clan was an exogamous division of the Asur tribe, the members of which were tied together by a belief in common descent, common possession of a totem or habitation of a common territory. The Asur society is divided into twelve clans named after some animal, plant, or material object. The most effective taboo regarding marriage was the rule of *Killi* exogamy and that was the principal feature of their marital organization. Any liaison between a man and a woman of the same clan was severely punished and the family was branded as an outcaste community. The twelve clan names of the Bir Asur were, *Aind* (Eel), *Dhan* (Rice), *Lila* (Deer), *Suar* (Pig), *Bharewa* (Wild dog), *Kerketta* (a kind of bird), *Munjani* (Arjun tree), *Titio* (a kind of bird), *Beng* (Frog), *Khusar* or *Khusro* (a kind of bird), *Non* (salt) and *Toppo* (Woodpecker). The Asur kinship terminology was characterized by (i). paternal and maternal kins (ii). paternal kins younger than the ego (iii). relatives in the husband's father's house and (iv). relatives in the wife's father's house. The Asur were patrilocal and patrilineal people. After marriage, the wife must come to live with the husband's residence. Women did not inherit and they had only the right to be maintained by the family of their birth or of adoption by marriage. They identified themselves with the

interests of the family so long as they lived with their parents and after marriage with the *Killis* of their husbands. The normal pattern of relationship between father and son was that of superordination and subordination. The father divided his share of responsibility in day-to-day work among his sons while the mother played the same role in the life of her daughter. She trained her daughter for tribal womanhood, while the father arranged a suitable match for his daughter. In Asur society, different *gotras* were found symbolizing their *totem* or symbol of religion. Boys and girls of the same *gotra* could not undergo marriage or intercourse. These *gotras* were represented by various animals which were not being hunted or killed as they believed that these animals were protecting their life. They did not use totem names for naming their children (Leuva,1963).

III. Social life

(a) Daily Routine: Primitive Asur men got up early and finished their morning duties before going to the field. They did not use water for washing after evacuation. After working in the field till noon, they returned home taking a twig to brush their teeth. After that, they have a meal prepared at home. Thereafter, they either rest or gossip with others. Most of the time during gossiping they used to smoke *fica*, a rolled cigarette made with a sal leaf. But they never smoked much at a time. After a few pulls, they extinguished the cigarette by rubbing it against a stone or anything hard and stuck it behind the ear like a writer's pen, till they wanted another few pulls so that one cigarette would last them a long time. The cigarette was never taken between the teeth or the lips. It was held between the thumb and the hand. When the thumb closed on the cigarette, a little ring was formed. To this, the smoker applied his lips and pulled in the smoke without touching the cigarette at all with the lips. The Asur woman also got up very early and after washing her mouth, she swept the house and the courtyard and unleashed the cattle for grazing in the open. She then fetched water from a long distant natural spring in the depression of the Chota Nagpur plateau. After that, she prepared the meal for noon. If paddy was available, she took it out and husked in a *Dhenki*. If there was no rice, she took either maize or *gondali* and ground it to powder with the help of a mortar and pestle and prepared a meal. In the afternoon, she accompanied her husband to help in the fields if necessary; otherwise, she went to the nearby forest to collect leaves, roots and tubers (Leuva,1963).

(b) Life Cycle: The life cycle from conception to marriage among the Asur was most interesting that distinguished them from their neighbours. For the Asur women, pregnancy was a matter of pride. When a woman missed her period and some other

signs indicated conception, she took care of certain things, like she was prohibited from visiting at burial ground and from touching the dead body. She would not remain outside her house during lightning and thunder. While stepping out of her house, she had to cover herself completely with her sari, to protect her from lest enemies or persons with evil eyes. A simple diet was given to her, and she was always looked after well by her mother-in-law or any other elderly woman in the family. From the moment of delivery of the child, she would not be allowed to touch the hearth or cooking utensils. Even the father of a newborn baby was forbidden to touch. Generally, a woman, an acquaintance of the family assisted the mother in her needs and cooked for her. Social uncleanness started at the birth of a child and ended with the completion of the *Chati* rite. Purification took place eight days after birth. On the morning of the *Chati* day, the guests gathered in front of the house. Some hair was shaved off the baby's head. The baby was then anointed with oil and some women boiled with ashes the birth-soiled clothes which were taken by all the women to a nearby stream not used for drinking purposes. The clothes were washed, and they took their bath. On returning home, the mother sat on a little wooden stool and every woman one by one started washing her feet. This represented the congratulations of the mother for having passed safely through the dangers of childbirth. The naming of the child took place after either the name of the day on which he or she was born or after the time at which the birth had taken place. Thus, a child if born on Sunday, would be named *Etwa* for a boy child and *Etvari* for a girl child. If a child was born on Tuesday, the boy child would be named *Somra* and *Somri* in the case of the girl child. If a child was born on festival day, his or her name would be named after that festival (Leuva, 1963).

(c) Marriage: The Asur termed the married life as *Ide-Me* which meant to lead the girl from her parents' house to the boys for the purpose of cohabitation. There was a practice of *Ghar-Damad* among the Asur. It took place when the girl's parents had no male issue and liked to make their daughter as the heir of their property. When the Asur son had grown to a marriageable age, a suitable girl was searched for. The proper age for marriage was when the girl attained puberty and the boy became 18 or 19 years of age. When a young man desired to get a girl as his partner, he communicated his wish to his friends who informed his parents. When the son had made no definite choice, the parents engaged a go-between (*Agua*) to undertake the negotiations. But the most important thing to be considered for the settlement of the marriage was following omens. The Asur had a strong belief that the couple would not be happy if a marriage happened ignoring bad omens. Like, at the time of his visit to the intended village, if he saw a jackal crossing the road, a deer or a person carrying an empty water pot, he must give up his efforts, because these were bad omens, and the parents of the

girl were informed accordingly. On the contrary, if a go-between and his companions heard the crowing of a crow, or met a tiger or a snake, they became sure that these were considered as good omens. If the omens proved favourable and the marriage proposal was agreeable, the first ceremony of washing foot of visiting guests took place known as *Kata-abun*. The girl in the company of her friends served rice beer to the guests. There were several ceremonies both minor and important to be performed at the time of regular marriage. The first one was the ceremonial removal of a bridegroom's bachelorhood and the bride's maidenhood. In a regular marriage, the bridegroom went to the house of the bride with a marriage party. The principal marriage ceremony took place inside the house and not in the open *mandwa*. A new piece of cloth measuring about two yards was given by the bridegroom's father to the bride and also a couple of annas for her girlfriends. This amount was called '*Sang Chutauni*' which was the compensation for the separation of the bride from their company. After the principal ceremony, an important ceremony called *Chumaun* was performed. Moreover, marriage among the Asur was considered to be an indissoluble tie and the husband had to live with his wife by treating her as an honourable partner even if she remained sick or barren (Leuva, 1963).

(d) Family Life: In the patriarchal type of society, Asur women enjoyed a respectable position in their family. Whether the first issue would be a boy or a girl depended on God, and they strongly believed that "if the first issue was a boy, neither of the parents would live long to see his marriage. On the contrary, a daughter as the first issue could bring prosperity and a long life for the parents who would be able to see the marriages not only of their sons and daughters but also of their grandchildren" (Leuva, 1963).

(e) Mode of Disposal of Corpse: The Asur people never cremated their dead. When a person died, the dead body was washed and anointed with oil and wrapped up in a new piece of cloth. Taking the body to the graveyard, they buried it with their feet towards the south. Relatives at the graveyard contributed a coin or two tied at the end of the cloth covering the dead body in a knot and were kept under the head. Sometimes, the knot if it was big in size, and then was placed in a copper *lota* along with a few ornaments. Lastly, all those who were present there poured water into the mouth of the dead person as their last offering. After the grave was filled, some paddy and food grains were placed over it to provide food for the journey of the soul. In the case of a pregnant woman who died in labour, was buried separately from the others far away on the outskirts of the village so that her spirit would not trouble the village people. Two days after the death, a ceremony of *Chai Bhitari* took place, when they invited the spirit of the dead to the house (Leuva, 1963).

IV. Political Organization

The Asur village was a political unit. According to the traditional political system, every Asur village had a traditional Panchayat under a headman called Mahto. The office of the Mahto in the Asur village was hereditary. The Mahto did not enjoy any economic opportunities such as monopoly rights to fruit-bearing trees or to certain kinds of game or the right to command communal labour. His important function was to act as a spokesman for the village before outsiders and government officials. The village headman was usually assisted with other village elders in a Panchayat. The elders were regarded as guardians of law and order. They were both interpreters of the tribal code and adjudicators of disputes. Customary laws were well-known opinions of the community and the Asur had much fear of these laws. They obeyed them and violations of these laws would be regarded as sins which were to be dissolved by giving a feast and paying a fine. The *Panchayat* meant a meeting of at least five men to discuss some vital points of common interests. Persons presented there were counted amongst the *Panchas* and were asked for their opinions. No women were allowed to assist in the *Panchayat*. The most important common interest for discussion in *Panchayat* was the case of witchcraft. If there was sickness or cases of death which could not be explained in an ordinary manner, the case was ascribed to witchcraft. Before a member of a particular household was held responsible for witchcraft, it should be confirmed by the soothsayers. The *Panchayat* was called to secure a promise from every man in the village to defray the expenses necessary for sacrifice, to pay the fees of the soothsayer etc. but if anyone refused to make such a promise, he was at once suspected as a wizard. Thereafter they went to the soothsayer who would by divination point out a member of a particular household to be a witch or wizard. When they returned, again there would be a *Panchayat* in which the culprit revealed by divination was asked to make good his promise. If he refused, the *Panchas* from other villages, who were sometimes present on this occasion, tried to reason with him, but if he remained obstinate, they would not save him from thrashing. Moreover, there was no Supreme Panchayat among the Asur. The elders of the Asur society assembled at the initiative of some enlightened members for a discussion of some vital matter affecting the Asur society (Leuva, 1963).

V. Magical Power and Religious Belief

Beliefs in the supernatural play a large part in the life of the Asur people. They were celebrating an occasion of *Sansi-Kutasi Worship* wherein the hammer, the pair of pincers and the stone anvil are the instruments of a technical kind. The rite of killing

the fowl with the help of the hammer and the pair of pincers brought the magic and its object into contact. The formula uttered in the form of prayer was considered to be the source of magical power. This worship was aimed at securing good iron while smelting. These beliefs in the existence of supernatural powers and the ceremonies for their worship constituted the Asur religion. Religious practices aimed to please the deity and if the deity was one who delighted in hearing his own adulation and praises chanted by his worshippers, the Asur would spare no pains to please him. A deity called *Pat Deota* had a very high place in the Asur pantheon. Their great god *Mahadania* was worshipped with human sacrifice which was later represented by the effigies of human beings. The principal Asur religious festival was known as *Sarhul*. On this occasion, fowls were sacrificed to each Asur deity and spirit including the Supreme One. This festival was celebrated at the end of March and the beginning of April, when the Sal tree put forth its new leaves and became covered with bunches of small whitish flowers. The *Hariari* was an agricultural festival which was celebrated in the month of July-August after paddy and other seeds had been sown in the fields. Other pooja like *Naoakhani Pooja*, *Gobardhan Pooja*, *Shikari Pooja*, *Bangari Pooja* etc. were performed related to seasons of cultivation and hunting.

C. Present Situation of the Asur People

Family Life: In recent times, there has been a shift in the beliefs of many elderly individuals regarding the traditional conception that the birth of a son as a first issue would lead to the early death of either parent. According to this belief, a daughter as the first issue would bring prosperity and long life for the parents, who would not only be able to witness the marriages of their sons and daughters but also of their grandchildren. However, this belief is no longer widely held by the present and younger generations, who do not always subscribe to this notion. Even educated and aware individuals are now well-informed about the reasons behind the birth of sons and daughters. Despite the advice of modern doctors or health staff, many people still have great faith in the gods regarding childbirth and the survival of infants. Therefore, in addition to seeking medical advice, they may also perform religious ceremonies or rituals to ensure a safe and healthy delivery.

Life Cycle: The Asur society is known to have traditionally followed various rituals related to pregnancy and childbirth. However, due to modern awareness related to factors such as marriage age, pregnancy, childbirth, and more, certain changes have been introduced in their customs. Over time, many of their traditional beliefs and practices related to mate selection, marriage age, pregnancy, childbirth, and rituals

have undergone significant transformations. Today, the Asur community has started following the advice of medical professionals and health staff regarding pregnancy, childbirth, and child care. This is a significant shift from their earlier practices and taboos that were followed without question. The Asur society has become more aware of what practices are beneficial and which ones are harmful. This change has been brought about by modern education, health awareness programs, and cultural contact. Moreover, the Asur society has undergone significant changes in recent times regarding their customs and beliefs related to mate selection, marriage age, pregnancy, childbirth, and child care. They have embraced modern practices and are now more aware of what is good for them and their families.

Marriage: In recent times, there has been an interesting shift in the way traditional rituals and customs are being practised among the Asur community. While many still adhere to their traditional practices, some changes have been observed in areas such as mate selection, marriage age, and rituals and customs. One significant change is the rise of inter-community marriages and modern marriage receptions. It is now common to see members of different communities being invited to their marriage ceremonies, where both traditional food and drinks along with modern food and beverages are served to guests. Another notable change is in the attire worn by the bride and groom during marriage ceremonies. In contrast to the traditional attire that was previously worn, it is now common to see modern, market-based dresses and cosmetic ornaments being worn. These changes are particularly evident among the younger generation who are increasingly embracing a more contemporary way of life. Interestingly, the converted Christian community has also undergone significant changes in their religious practices. While they continue to follow the practices of the Christian religion, they have also incorporated some of their traditional rituals and customs into their ceremonies. These changes have resulted in a unique blend of traditional and modern practices that are now being observed in their religious ceremonies. Overall, these changes reflect a growing acceptance of modern practices and a willingness to adapt to changing societal norms.

Mode of Disposal of Corpse: The Asur people have a unique way of dealing with the disposal of corpses, which is deeply rooted in their traditional practices. However, as some members of the community have converted to Christianity, their approach to this matter has undergone some changes. While the traditional Asur people continue to adhere to the age-old practices, the converted Christian Asur people have adopted a few Christian death rituals in addition to their traditional ones. This has led to a hybrid approach to the mode of disposal of corpses among the Asur people, where some

follow the traditional practices while others follow the Christian ones or a combination of both.

Kinship: During this research on the Asur people, it is observed that they primarily adhere to their traditional kinship pattern, which places equal importance on both maternal and paternal kin members. However, it was also observed a few changes in their customs as a result of inter-community marriages. In the past, Asur people strictly followed the practice of community endogamy, but over time, they appear to have relaxed this custom to some extent. This change is evident in the increase in inter-tribal marriages among them. Despite these cultural changes, the Asur community is currently experiencing significant economic challenges. Most Asur people are now agricultural landless and have to work as labourers to sustain their livelihoods. As a result of their poor economic status, they face difficulties in hosting traditional social occasions and community festivals that are integral to their social and kinship relationships. These events bring together family members and friends and enable the Asur people to maintain and strengthen their social bonds. However, due to their financial constraints, the Asur community is finding it increasingly challenging to organize and participate in these traditional events.

Daily Life: The social life of the Asur people adheres to traditional practices concerning totemic affiliations, which influence matters of marriage, hunting, and the naming of children. However, over time, the way of life for the Asurs has undergone significant changes, particularly in terms of their daily routine and economic activities. The traditional nature-based economy and agriculture practices have been replaced by largely labour-based work, primarily in tea gardens and other sectors. However, some members of the community rely on alternative forms of employment such as Toto riding etc. Despite these changes, the economic situation of the Asurs remains uncertain, as not everyone has access to work in tea gardens, and lockdowns have also impacted their ability to earn a livelihood. While they earn from various sources, it is often inadequate to meet their basic needs. Further, many members of the community have lost their agricultural land, and while there are jungles nearby, the resources available are limited and do not sufficiently fulfil their requirements. Although some Asur children attend school, poverty and lack of support make it challenging for them to receive a quality education. These changes have also affected various aspects of Asur's life, including social, cultural, economic, political, and religious sectors, further adding to the challenges they face.

Education: The study also revealed that Asur children have been admitted to government primary schools and private missionary schools, indicating a growing interest in education and a shift away from a traditional nomadic lifestyle. Despite these changes, the Asur people continue to maintain their unique cultural identity and traditions. According to this present study, only ten students have successfully completed their higher secondary education, which is a concerning figure. Out of these ten students, only four have been admitted to government-aided colleges. This indicates that there is a major gap in access to higher education in this region. Moreover, it has been observed that children are being taught Bengali, Hindi, and English languages at school, which is a positive step towards preparing them for the globalized world. However, despite being fluent in the Sadri language at their homes, they are not being taught this language formally. This is a cause for concern as it may lead to the loss of this language over time. Another worrying observation is that the ancestral language of the region, Asuri, is not being used at all. This is a significant loss as it is a vital aspect of the culture and heritage of the region. It is important to preserve and promote the use of this language to ensure that it is not lost to future generations.

Economic Life: In the studied area of Alipurduar district, four different types of economic activities have been observed: (i). forest-based, (ii) agriculture-based, (iii). tea garden based and (iv). daily wage labour-based social life. Members of the Asur community, including both men and women, as well as other neighbouring tribal groups, are seen frequently visiting the forests in the early hours of the day with the aim of collecting wood. These individuals usually return home between the hours of 2:00 pm and 3:00 pm. Subsequently, individuals engage in the collection and transportation of wood to the local market, either by carrying logs on their bicycles or shoulders for commercial purposes. Additionally, some of the collected wood is reserved for personal fuel usage. These activities often require these individuals to navigate through the forest, where they may encounter wild animals such as elephants, leopards, rhinoceros, and wild boars. Such encounters pose significant risks to their safety and well-being. Sometimes young girls and boys collect small fish, shells, snails, oysters etc. from nearby streams and gather green leafy vegetables and fruits from the forest for daily consumption. Individuals who are employed as hired labourers in agricultural fields on a seasonal basis are often required to work extended hours, commencing from dawn until dusk. Conversely, others are engaged in neighbouring tea gardens, where their responsibilities involve plucking tea leaves, providing water supply to tea garden labourers, and supporting tea factory workers. There is a notable population of individuals, both male and female, who are employed

as daily wage labourers across various occupations. These include pulling Totrickshaws, engaging in road and building construction work, and driving trucks within nearby urban areas. In certain villages under examination, indications of migratory labour have been observed.

Settlement: However, at present, the five studied villages of Alipurduar district are Kalkut Basti, Majherdabri Asur Line, Satali Basti, Carron Tea Estate and Lakhipara. Approximately a century or more ago, individuals migrated to this region with the intention of working as labourers in tea gardens. Since then, they have established themselves as permanent residents of the area. Over time, their traditional settlements and dwellings have undergone significant transformations.

House: The studied Asur people of the Alipurduar district of West Bengal have a unique way of building their houses. To construct the main frame of their houses, they use bamboo, which is a strong and flexible material that is readily available in their natural environment. For the walls, they use mud which is mixed with water and applied to the bamboo frame. This mixture is then allowed to dry and harden, creating a strong and stable wall. The roofs of all houses in Asur villages are covered with corrugated tin to protect them from the elements. The living quarters of the Asur families typically consist of two rooms: a drawing room and a bedroom. These rooms are adorned with various decorations and ornaments, reflecting the unique cultural heritage of the Asur people. In addition to the main building, each Asur house also has an external kitchen, where meals are prepared using traditional cooking methods. The kitchen is typically located at a safe distance from the main house to prevent fires. A toilet, bathroom, and cattle shed are also constructed outside the main house to maintain hygiene and cleanliness. Overall, the Asur people have developed a sustainable and practical approach to housing that reflects their deep connection to their natural environment and their unique cultural identity.

Furniture: Within the courtyard, vegetable and flower gardens are present. The inhabitants have embraced contemporary amenities, including fibre-based stools, chairs, and utensils. During a visit to the villages, an Asur family offered the investigator a glass of soft drink. The younger generation has adopted modern clothing, such as trousers, kurta, kurtis, salwar, and the like.

Dress and Ornaments: Over time, the Asur people residing in five villages of the Alipurduar district have undergone significant changes. While they previously wore traditional attire, they have now transitioned to modern, market-based clothing. Despite this shift, the Asur people continue to possess a limited number of clothes, which are not considered high-end or expensive. Further, traditional ornaments are

rarely observed among them but mainly the young girls are fond of chief ornaments and cosmetics which are purchased from the local market.

Food and Drink: During the course of the study, it was observed that the Asur people, under investigation, typically consume two meals per day, consisting primarily of rice with a small quantity of dal and vegetables; access to more nutrient-rich options, such as fish, eggs, and meat, is rare. The Asur people frequently consume rice beer (a form of country liquor) as a beverage, in addition to commercially available alcohol.

Socio-Political Life: The Asur people, who have been studied in-depth, are known for their simplistic way of life and their aversion to conflict and disputes of any kind. In their society, the elderly members of the family hold a very high level of respect and admiration, not only from their family members but also from the broader community. The Asur people place great value on the roles of women in their society and hold them in high regard. This respect for women is evident in their customs and practices, which emphasize the importance of treating women with dignity, respect, and equality. Overall, the Asur people's culture is characterized by its emphasis on peaceful coexistence, respect for family members and community elders, and the promotion of gender equality. Among the studied Asur people, there is no instance of divorce or domestic violence, rather the women enjoy a respectful status within their families. In this regard, it indicates that the Asur society has been successful in preserving its cultural heritage while simultaneously maintaining a peaceful and harmonious social order. However, in the Asur community, changes are gradually being observed in the functioning of their traditional village Panchayat. The traditional headman, known as Mahto, who played a substantial role in resolving various socio-economic and religious issues, has now seen a significant reduction in his responsibilities across all sectors. This is primarily due to the fact that the Asur community has become more diverse, with many migrants settling in the village, and a majority of them being agricultural landless. As a result, land-related disputes are now rare, and the traditional Mahto's role has been minimized. Moreover, the Asur community has also been exposed to many other communities, which has further led to a reduction in the role of the traditional village headman, Mahto. The modern statutory Panchayat has taken over the role and functions of the traditional village Panchayat, and it is now responsible for resolving not only political matters but also many social issues of the Asurs. It is worth noting that both males and females in the Asur community have equal voting rights, which is in contrast to their traditional village Panchayat, where only males were given voting rights. Although the elders in the Asur community continue to be respected and regarded as guardians of law and order, they now give

importance to the opinions of their educated children and relatives. A notable development in the Asur community is the emergence of women who were previously distant from socio-political issues but are now coming forward and gaining respect in their society. This marks a significant shift in the Asur community's traditional gender roles and highlights the community's growing acceptance of women's rights and empowerment.

Religious Belief and Worships: The Asur people, who have been studied extensively, are known for their vibrant and enthusiastic celebrations of various festivals. While they maintain their traditional worship and festivals, they have also adopted and incorporated some Hindu Gods and Goddesses into their religious practices. Among the many festivals they celebrate, both traditional and new, Karam Pooja, Sarna Pooja, Holi, Kali Pooja, Saraswati Pooja and Shiv Pooja (Shivratri), hold special significance. During these celebrations, the Asur people come together to offer prayers, perform rituals, and participate in various cultural activities, showcasing their rich heritage and traditions. However, the traditional practice of performing poojas related to agriculture has been abolished due to the declining availability of cultivable land. This has led to many Asur people working as landless agricultural labourers to make ends meet. According to this present study, the Asur people are facing a shortage of cultivable land, which has adversely affected their traditional way of life.

Moreover, the studied Asur people have undergone significant changes in their way of life over the past few decades. One of the most significant changes has been the adoption of Christianity by a significant number of the Asur people. In recent years, prayer gatherings have been taking place every Sunday at nearby churches, which are present in every village in all the studied areas. The influence of Christianity on the Asur people is remarkable and can be observed in various aspects of their lives. For instance, Christianity has influenced their marital customs, attire, decorations, dietary habits, language use, and education. The Asur people have started celebrating Christmas Day on a large scale, along with their traditional Sarna festival. This blending of traditions is a clear indication of the profound impact that Christianity has had on the Asur people's way of life. Overall, the Asur people's adoption of Christianity and the changes that have followed are interesting examples of cultural evolution and adaptation. These changes have not only affected the Asur people's practices but also their beliefs and values. Despite the changes, the Asur people have managed to maintain a distinct identity and continue to be proud of their heritage and traditions.

Limitations of the Study: The study of the primitive Asur people is based mainly on secondary sources recorded at the Netarhat plateau of Chota Nagpur in the Ranchi

district of Bihar. This study on the present Asur people is limited to two districts of West Bengal, Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri districts. The present status of the Asur people living in Jharkhand is not included in this study.

Conclusion

In modern times, development has emerged as a pivotal term associated with the economy, environment, and education. In essence, the concept of development is multifaceted, and its interpretation varies across individuals and groups. The Asur tribal people have been steadily embracing modern cultural practices and education in their pursuit of development. However, the notion of sustainability is intrinsically intertwined with the overarching theme of development. As such, it raises important questions pertaining to the long-term viability and stability of development initiatives. If a large number of young learners have stopped speaking their ancestral language due to the influence of colonial languages or shyness in using their traditional dialects in front of non-tribal learners, can we rely on our current education system to achieve sustainable development? Are we moving towards progress or regression in the name of development?

As a developing nation, it is imperative that India continues to progress and meet the needs of its citizens. However, it is equally important to preserve the rich cultural heritage of the country's diverse tribal communities. India, with its unique anthropological diversity, serves as both a museum and a laboratory of cultural exploration. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the present generation of learners from tribal communities to safeguard their ancestral legacy and actively pass it on to future generations. One such example of a non-Aryan tribe in India is the Asur, who are renowned as the primitive iron smelters of Asia, as evidenced by their remains. It is essential to recognize and appreciate the contributions of such tribes to India's cultural and scientific heritage and strive to preserve and promote their legacies for generations to come.

The proficiency of Asur's craftsmanship is well-established and evidenced by several notable artefacts. The Damascus swords, Tipu Sultan's Sword, and the Iron Pillars located at Delhi and Dhar, in addition to the iron beam of the Sun Temple at Konark, all showcase the expertise of Asur. One particular note is the anti-rust property of the iron smelted by them, a unique feature that talks about their skill and knowledge. These examples serve as a testament to Asur's ability to create exceptional works of art and engineering and to develop innovative solutions to practical challenges.

The advancement in engineering technology has led to the possibility of modifying iron smelting practices to create a more productive and environmentally friendly

process in the future. Historically, the Asur people were brought from Chota Nagpur to North Bengal by the East India Company to establish tea gardens. Unfortunately, the Asur's health, education, and economy are neglected leading to their present-day societal decline. The Asur community experiences poverty, illiteracy and underdevelopment while India is celebrating its 75th year of independence.

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