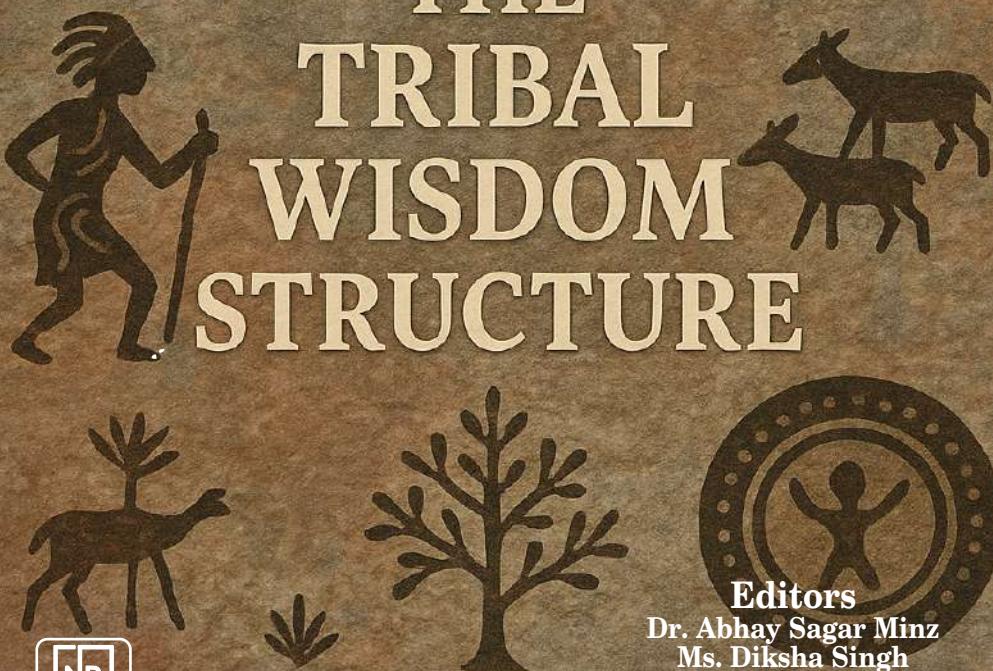




DECIPHERING THE TRIBAL WISDOM STRUCTURE



Editors

Dr. Abhay Sagar Minz
Ms. Diksha Singh
Mr. Anal Kishore Minz
Mr. Bimal Kacchap



DECIPHERING THE TRIBAL WISDOM STRUCTURE

Editors

Dr. Abhay Sagar Minz

Assistant Professor

Department of Anthropology

DSPM University, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India

Ms. Diksha Singh

PhD Research Scholar

Department of Anthropology

DSPM University, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India

Mr. Anal Kishore Minz

Assistant Professor

Department of Anthropology

S.S.J.S.N College, Garhwa, Jharkhand, India.

Mr. Bimal Kacchap

Assistant Professor

Department of Anthropology

S.S.J.S.N College, Garhwa, Jharkhand, India

Published By



Nature Light Publications, Pune

© Reserved by Editors

Deciphering the Tribal Wisdom Structure

Editors

Dr. Abhay Sagar Minz

Ms. Diksha Singh

Mr. Anal Kishore Minz

Mr. Bimal Kacchap

First Edition: August 9th, 2025

An International Edited Book

ISBN- 978-93-49938-28-1

Published by:

Nature Light Publications (An International Publisher)

309 West 11, Manjari VSI Road, Manjari Bk.,
Haveli, Pune- 412 307.

Website: www.naturelightpublications.com

Email: naturelightpublications@gmail.com

Contact No: +91 9822489040 / 9922489040



The editors/Associate editors/publisher shall not be responsible for originality and thought expressed in the book chapter/ article. The author shall be solely held responsible for the originality and thoughts expressed in their book chapter or article.

Preface

Throughout history, tribal societies have held a wealth of wisdom that's often overlooked. "Deciphering the Tribal Wisdom Structure" explores the complex systems of knowledge, values, and practices that have kept indigenous communities thriving for thousands of years. These systems, deeply connected to the land, community, and universe, offer timeless lessons for navigating the challenges of our modern world.

Historically labelled as the Savages, these indigenous communities were perceived as uncivilized with a chaotic social structure and lacking rationality. However, scientific evidence suggests that their behaviours and culture were rational and scientifically sound. Their way of life was often deemed inferior, and for centuries, it was considered the White Man's burden to civilize them. The present endeavour challenges this notion and uncovers the overlooked and undermined wisdom of tribal societies within the broader tapestry of human history.

This book recognizes that tribal wisdom is not a vestige of the past but a vibrant and evolving framework that will continue to guide and inspire further research work on tribal wisdom. It delves into how these ancestral systems of comprehension, interwoven through oral tradition in storytelling, ritual, and collective experience, offer profound insights into resilience, sustainability, and harmony with nature and others. Our intention is to approach this knowledge system with reverence, striving to

comprehend their structures and principles while acknowledging their diversity and context.

As we face global challenges such as environmental crises, cultural disconnection, and social fragmentation, the wisdom of tribal societies invites us to reevaluate our relationship with the world and each other. This book serves as an invitation to listen, reflect, and engage with these enduring systems of knowledge, not as mere artifacts, but as vital contributions to humanity's shared future.

In the subsequent chapters, we will dive into the philosophical underpinnings, practical strategies, and worldviews that underpin tribal wisdom. We will draw upon the perspectives of indigenous communities and scholars alike to illuminate these concepts.

With utmost respect and a keen interest, we venture forth on this endeavour to unravel the intricate tribal wisdom structure. We are confident that this profound knowledge will illuminate pathways toward a more harmonious and interdependent global community.

August 9th, 2025
International Day of the
World's Indigenous Peoples

Dr. Abhay Sagar Minz
Chief Editor

Deciphering the Tribal Wisdom Structure

Table of Content

Sl. No .	Title and Authors	Page No.
1	Unveiling the Silent Crisis: Language Loss and the Need to Preserve the Endangered Languages <i>A Comparative Study of the Lepcha and Asur Languages</i> <i>Ms. Diksha Singh.</i>	01 - 14
2	Not So Egalitarian! Insights into the Socio-Cultural Inequality Among the Tribals of Jharkhand <i>Dr. Abhay Sagar Minz</i>	15 - 28
3	The Traditional Political System of Tribals of Jharkhand: Wisdom in Consensus <i>Dr. Smita Kiran Toppo</i>	29 - 42
4	Exploring the Insights Behind Traditional Tribal Economic Practices <i>Dr. Nancy Tirkey</i>	43 - 58
5	The Rationality behind the Traditional Agricultural Practices of the Oraons of Jharkhand <i>Mr. Bimal Kachhap</i>	59 - 72
6	Traditional Developmental Mechanism and Institutions of the Tribals of Jharkhand <i>Mr. Anal Kishore Minz</i>	73 - 87
7	The Overlooked Role of Tribal Women in Shaping Society Exploring the Ignored wisdom <i>Dr. Binita Oraon</i>	88 -101
8	Understanding the Bottlenecks of Tribal Entrepreneurship vis-a-vis Tribal Wisdom <i>Dr. Shampu Tirkey</i>	102- 116

9	Rites De Passage and the Wisdom of The HO Tribe of Jharkhand <i>Dr. Jai Kishor Mangal, Dr. Saraswati Gagrai</i>	117-131
10	Exploring Tribal Philosophy in Mahasweta Devi's 'Jungle ke Davedar' <i>Dr. Dipak Paramanik</i>	132-144

Unveiling the Silent Crisis: Language Loss and the Need to Preserve the Endangered Languages

A Comparative Study of the Lepcha and Asur Languages

Ms. Diksha Singh

Ph.D. Research Scholar, University Department of Anthropology, DSPMU Ranchi, Jharkhand, India.

Email: dikshaa98576@gmail.com

Article DOI Link: <https://zenodo.org/uploads/17130968>

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.17130968](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17130968)

Abstract

Languages have been under increased threat for the last few decades. Many scholars believe that the European colonists caused great destruction to the native languages or mother tongue of all the countries where they established their dominance through formation of colonies. Under the influence of the West, we believed western languages to be the measure of our intellectual capacities and capabilities, and this is occurring at an even greater pace in the present times. Understanding the need to preserve the native or the indigenous languages under this pretext, the year 2019 was declared by the United Nations as the 'Year of International Indigenous Languages'. India is known for its linguistic plurality. Officially, India is home to 705 Scheduled Tribes, each having its own distinct language. Since the tribal communities are based on oral tradition and have no written record of their history, these indigenous languages serve as carriers of their distinct culture and unique traditions. However, recent years have witnessed erosion of many of

these native languages at an unprecedented level. This is alarming. In this context, the present chapter delves into understanding the status of mother tongue of two tribes, namely the Lepcha and the Asur tribes. Though both have only a few active speakers, on one hand Lepcha seems to be a dying language despite having its own script, while on the other hand current status of Asuri speakers is still promising. The present chapter tries to understand the factors responsible for loss of a language and those helping in preserving a language by presenting a comparative analysis of the difference in the attitude of the Lepcha and Asur tribe members regarding their respective mother tongue.

Keywords: Mother tongue, Endangered languages, Language loss, Language preservation, Lepcha language, Asur language

Introduction

Language is the medium of communication. The first process of our socialisation in society starts with language. Andre Martinet, the French linguist, once said that “Mother Tongue is the language through which one comes to know the world”. And so, mother tongue is the language of emotions. As a social being it is through our mother tongue that we are able to understand the behaviour and complex processes of that society through the process of socialisation.

Language and culture complement each other. The existence of one is not possible without the other. According to Anthropology, a society will not exist if there is no language. Language is the vehicle of culture, through which the cultural

heritage of the society is transferred from one generation to another.

In Anthropology, much emphasis is laid on the study of tribal communities. They have survived for ages without any interaction with the wider world, without the access of modern facilities or economic aid from the outside. Mother tongue becomes all the more important in the case of these tribal societies. This is mainly due to the reason that tribal societies lack written documents and texts about their culture. The rich knowledge about tribal history, their culture, customs and traditions has been transmitted from one generation to the next orally for thousands of years.

As a consequence, if a language dies, along with it the entire rich culture associated with that tribal society will also cease to exist. In the absence of any written form of that culture, the customs and traditions associated with that culture and the prosperous indigenous knowledge will never be transferred to the coming generations, as a result of which the entire tribe along with its culture will eventually become extinct. Such is the importance of a language or the mother tongue in the preservation and continuity of a culture.

Unfortunately, much of this linguistic diversity is under threat today. Statistics show that over the past century, nearly four hundred languages have become extinct, and most linguists estimate that fifty percent of the world's remaining 7,000 languages will be extinct by the end of this century. The UNESCO Map has listed 576 of the world's endangered languages as 'critically endangered' and thousands of the languages have been classified as 'highly threatened' or

‘specially protected’ globally. This calls for an urgent need to make conscious efforts to preserve the endangered languages and at the same time revive the lost languages.

In an attempt to get a fair understanding of the factors leading to language loss and those aiding in language preservation, the present chapter will look at the current status of mother tongue among the Lepchas and Asurs. It will compare the attitude of the members of these tribes regarding their native languages with an aim to understand why one is considered a dying language while the other is still promising, despite both having only a limited number of speakers.

Objectives

The present book chapter will deal with the following objectives-

- To take a look at the pace of language loss at the global level.
- To understand the importance of mother tongue in this context.
- To highlight the factors responsible for the loss of language.
- To ascertain factors that may help in preserving a language.
- To compare the attitude of members of Lepcha and Asur tribes regarding their respective mother tongue.

Data and Methodology

For the present chapter, data has been collected through intensive fieldwork conducted among the members of Lepcha tribe residing in Plungdung Basti of Sukhia Pokhari in

Darjeeling district of West Bengal state, and those of Asur tribe residing in the Polpolpaat village of Bishunpur block in Gumla district of Jharkhand state. The fieldwork has been conducted over a span of 3 years among the Lepchas and about 1 year among the Asurs.

After a pilot survey, informants and key informants were identified for the purpose of in-depth study. Identification of informants was done based on a purposive sampling method. Due care was taken that the selected sample included informants from all generations and both genders. Those families were focussed on which had at least one elderly member and school going children.

A schedule was first formulated, which was then followed by the observation method, both participant and non- participant. Both individual and group interviews were conducted with the identified sample. A camera and tape recorder were also employed for gathering relevant data. Apart from the primary method, secondary sources were also referred to for the present study.

Result and Discussions

The Lepcha is a Mongoloid tribe, members of which are found residing primarily in the Indian states of Sikkim and West Bengal, Nepal and Bhutan. In West Bengal, they are found mostly in Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts. As per Government of India Census 2011, the total population of Lepchas in India is roughly around 89,000. They speak the Lepcha language, which belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family, spoken mostly in the Himalayan regions

and North East India. The Lepcha language has its own script and some written documents of their history, culture and traditions yet their language is dying out fast. The official data shows around 47,000 active speakers of the language in India, while my field expedition shows that this number is even less.

The Asur is a Proto-Australoid tribe, members of which are found residing in the Indian states of Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha and Assam. In Jharkhand, they live primarily in Gumla, Lohardaga, Palamu and Latehar districts, and are included in the list of 8 PVTGs in the state. As per Government of India Census 2011, the total population of Asurs in India is roughly around 27,000. Among these, around 22,500 members of the tribe reside in Jharkhand. Traditionally, the Asurs are known for their iron smelting technique.

Asuri is the language spoken by the members of the Asur tribe. It belongs to the Munda branch of the Austroasiatic language family. This indigenous language has been included in the ‘UNESCO’s Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger’, with only 7,000–8,000 active speakers. As compared to the Lepcha tribe, Asur tribe is based entirely on oral tradition with no written records of their history, culture, script and traditions. They constitute one of the most vulnerable communities in India.

During my fieldwork, I found various differences in the attitude of Lepcha and Asur community members towards their respective mother tongue. Consequently, Lepcha language on one hand is even more vulnerable, while

speakers of the Asuri language as well as the setting of my Asur field area present a ray of hope for its survival and preservation in the future.

Historically, the Lepchas migrated away from their original homeland in Dzongu, Sikkim for various reasons. Upon migrating to new locations, they came in contact with non-native communities. Contact with other local communities opened the door for the youth to establish marital relationships with other societies. The entry of a non-native community woman into the community severely affected the carrying forward of mother tongue. A child spends the majority of his time with his mother during the initial years of socialisation. A non-Lepcha woman, who herself has little or no knowledge of their language and culture, will not be able to contribute much in carrying forward their cultural and linguistic legacy to the next generation. This is where the degradation of the mother tongue starts. In contrast, the mere remote location of the Asur villages has prevented their contact with other communities for a long time. These villages remained inaccessible for large parts of their history. This isolation protected them from the influence of foreign languages, thereby naturally preserving their language. In addition, the Asur community has strictly adhered to the social norms of tribe endogamy, further strengthening language and culture preservation efforts.

Migrating out of their geographical niche had consequent socio-cultural implications as well. Due to contact with other cultures upon shifting to a new location, the Lepchas have witnessed many changes in the process of their marriage,

birth and death rituals over successive generations. This acculturation resulted in the adoption of non-native languages over time. In comparison, since the Asur community remained more or less isolated for a long period the rituals and traditions associated with their socio-cultural processes have not been altered to a large extent. It is only over the last few decades that some contact with neighbouring communities has been established, but the community is aware enough to appreciate its own cultural heritage.

One of the major theories of preservation of endangered languages is the usage of native language in religious practices. This can be asserted from the examples of revival of Kaurna and Hebrew languages. The Kaurna language of Australia was almost not in use for a century, but today it is due to linguistics that it is getting back into use again. How this happened is also an interesting process. The community made conscious efforts to inculcate the language in folk songs, folk tales, religious ceremonies and social speech. Another example is the Hebrew language. At one time it was considered an almost dead language. But today it is spoken by about fifty lakh people. Several things were important in the preservation of Hebrew. First, it was in use in their religious texts from time immemorial. They have a strong literature dating back to more than sixteenth century. But only after the community made efforts to revive their mother tongue by inculcating it in their daily activities and also by performing religious activities in their native language, could the language be revived. Here, we get to see that the society also has to be alert, only then positive results can be

anticipated.

However, when it comes to the Lepcha community, it exhibits a steep decline in the use of its mother tongue in worship, rituals and festivals. Though they have their own script which has been used to translate their religious Buddhist scriptures into Lepcha, these remain largely on paper. Prayers are generally offered in the local language, which is Nepali in this case. As a result, even the religious sentiment attached with their mother tongue has been eroded away. Opposed to this, the Asurs carried out all their religious activities, such as performing religious rituals, offering prayers and sacrifices to the supreme power and their ancestors, all in Asuri. The mere inclusion of Asuri in their religious activities underscores their sentimental attachment with the language.

Communities that have economic ties with neighbouring non-tribal communities are often forced to adopt a lingua franca for economic transactions. There is a major economic shift among the Lepchas, away from their traditional one. Majority of the members today are employed as drivers, tea garden labourers, own a shop or are working in the service sector. All these professions urge the community members to adopt non-native languages, thereby leaving behind their mother tongue. Compared to this, the Asurs traditionally indulged in iron smelting. They smelted iron in mud furnaces and crafted iron objects such as agricultural tools and implements out of this, which were then either sold in the nearby bazaars or exchanged with the neighbouring communities as barter. Though this established their contacts with the neighbouring

communities, which were the Oraons in this case, it is important to note that such an exchange was not a daily affair. It occurred once in a while. It also mandated the use of non-native language, but again the entire community was not indulged in this process. Only a few members went out of the village to exchange their items or sell them in the bazaars. It is due to this reason that the Asurs have a fair understanding of Hindi and Kurukh, but this did not undermine the significance of Asuri.

Modern education serves as a major agent of erosion of indigenous languages today. In schools and colleges, education is imparted in non-indigenous languages. In the case of the Lepchas, children usually go to English medium schools outside their village. Even the primary and secondary schools present inside the village itself impart education in Nepali language and not Lepcha. As a result, children especially forgo the usage of their mother tongue and the initial important learning years become insignificant. However, not many members of the Asur community have had the opportunity to go out of their village to attain education. Children go to the primary school within the village boundaries, which imparts education in Asuri. This further complements the meaningfulness of their mother tongue. This can be compared to the example of Maori tribesmen of New Zealand, where compulsory inclusion of the native language in primary school has given positive results. Similar results have also been witnessed in the Hawaiian Islands of America. Compulsory bilingual education has been very effective among Canada's Mohawk

tribesmen.

The social mosaic and caste ridden communities in India have an undeclared social hierarchy. The tribals are made to feel derogative of their identity and language. Many of the native speakers either refrain from speaking their native language and also hide their identity. Knowledge of English and proficiency in the language is equated with a higher level of intellect. This is the case with the Lepcha tribe as well. Children going to English medium schools often think low of their mother tongue and their culture. This leads to erosion of their language, and consequently the rich culture embedded in it, at an even greater pace. Opposed to this, even in the present times, members of the Asur community take pride in their mother tongue as well as their culture.

Usually in the Indian context, a language is popular if it is amalgamated with job opportunities. Sadly, the indigenous and tribal languages are highly neglected and there are negligible job opportunities for the native speakers. Same is the case with the Lepcha language. Since there are no job opportunities demanding knowledge of the language, youth today is questioning its importance. This has resulted in the indifferent attitude of the speakers. However, when we look at the Asurs, members of the community are employed formally in government schools in villages. This gives a newfound importance to the mother tongue amongst the members.

When we look at the attitude of the members of the Lepcha community towards their mother tongue, we find that it is highly neglected. They are very indifferent towards their

mother tongue. From children to adults, it is almost completely abandoned now. The elders seem excited when they discuss the efforts to revive it, but no other generation is deeply concerned. Women and children have no particular regret over its loss. This is not the case with the Asur community. During my fieldwork, I witnessed that every single person in the village was conversing in Asuri. I was particularly surprised to see children confidently speaking in their mother tongue. This reflects the contrasting attitude of two indigenous communities regarding their language. Consequently, one seems to be in a vulnerable state and will soon succumb to external pressures while it appears that the other language, despite having a lesser number of active speakers, will continue to thrive in the time to come.

Conclusion

To conclude, preservation and promotion of language become extremely important in tribal society because tribal society is still dependent on oral tradition. Their timely documentation is essential, as the language itself has kept their rich culture alive in the past. This language will keep their identity alive in the times to come, both in the present and in the future.

We are at a stage today where we are getting the opportunity to meet the last generation of oral speakers of these languages. We might not get this opportunity again. We are lucky in this sense. This is an opportunity, a rare one. Society needs to be alert because there is still time. The feeling that is ingrained in the mother tongue, the love that it possesses is

amazing. The legacy created by our forefathers should not just be lost in vain, it is priceless.

However, it is essential to understand that mere preservation or documentation will not save these languages. The community needs to be willing and interested in preserving their cultural heritage. Continuous use of these languages is equally essential. This is vividly evident from the aforementioned comparison drawn between the Lepcha and the Asur communities.

References

1. Anderson, G. D. (2015). *The Munda languages*. Routledge.
2. Benedict, P. K. (1972). *Sino-Tibetan: A Conspectus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3. Biswas, D. (2024). *THE EXTINCTION OF TRIBAL LANGUAGES IN INDIA: A SOCIO-LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL LOSS*. *Social Science Review a Multidisciplinary Journal.*, 2(5). <https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.240205027>
4. Bodman, N. C. (1988). 'On the place of Lepcha in Sino-Tibetan. A lexical comparison'. *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area* 11 (1), 1-26.
5. Chakraborty, A. R. (1978). *An introduction to the Lepcha or Rong script and a self-instruction for reading the language*. New Delhi: C. Chakraborty.
6. Driem, G. L. v. (2001). *Languages of the Himalayas. An Ethnolinguistic Handbook of the Greater Himalayan Region*. Leiden: Brill.

7. Forrest, R.A.D. 1962. 'The linguistic position of Róng (Lepcha)', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 82, 331-335.
8. Leuva, K. K. (1963). *The Asur: A Study of Primitive Iron-smelters.*
9. Mainwaring, G. B. (1876). *A Grammar of the Rong (Lepcha) Language as it Exists in the Dorjeling and Sikim Hills*, Calcutta. Reprinted in 1985. New Delhi: Daya Publishing House.
10. Mohan, S. (2021). *Advances in Munda linguistics*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
11. Mufwene, S. S. (2025). *Ecological perspectives on language endangerment and loss*. Springer.
12. *The Handbook of Austroasiatic Languages* (2 vols). (2014). BRILL.

Not So Egalitarian!

Insights into the Socio-Cultural Inequality

Among the Tribals of Jharkhand

Dr. Abhay Sagar Minz

Assistant Professor, University Department of Anthropology,
DSPM University Ranchi, Jharkhand, India.

Email: minz.abhaysagar@gmail.com

Article DOI Link: <https://zenodo.org/uploads/17131093>

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.17131093](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17131093)

Abstract

Since the colonial era, ethnographic research has been conducted extensively on the tribes of Jharkhand. Post-colonial times witnessed an additional influx of ethnographic work, coupled with academic efforts to decolonize the century old anthropological constructs. Most of the cited work portrays tribal societies as egalitarian, with male and female members having almost equal status. There are ample examples where the females in the tribal society are not treated as par with the males. To the world it may seem, non-egalitarian, but from the tribal perspectives, this non-egalitarianism is justified through the cultural lenses. This chapter is dedicated to unravelling this discrimination with positive connotations. The sociocultural inequality has valid reasons that make the tribal female differ from the males. Tribal societies also emphasize gender equality, with the elderly playing a significant role in decision-making processes known as gerontocracy. However, despite these

claims, it has been observed that tribal societies have various socio-cultural differences and are not as egalitarian as they appear. When compared to non-tribal societies, tribal societies appear to be more egalitarian. In this chapter, we will explore the socio-cultural inequalities among tribal societies in Jharkhand and elsewhere, providing consolidated examples. We will also compare the socio-cultural inequalities of non-tribal societies and highlight how they differ from the caste societies.

Keywords: egalitarian, sociocultural inequality, tribal wisdom, gerontocracy

Introduction

Whenever discussions about women in tribal societies arise, anthropologists with egalitarian ideologies often place a strong emphasis on these societies in their works. In academic settings, tribal women are often depicted as having equal rights. However, does the actual reality of women in these egalitarian societies truly align with the perceptions and representations we hold? This book chapter dives deep into this very conflict.

The social structure of tribal societies places a significant emphasis on gender and age when it comes to the division of labour. While tribal societies are often perceived as highly egalitarian, as evidenced by extensive literature on this topic from the pre-colonial and post-colonial eras, a closer examination reveals nuanced differences. As an insider academician, I have observed that the so-called egalitarian tribal society, where males and females are considered to

have equal status, is not entirely accurate. A more accurate comparison with non-tribal societies, particularly those with caste hierarchies, reveals that tribal societies are generally more egalitarian. It is only when there is a comparison with non-tribal communities that one can say that the tribal society is egalitarian in nature. However, this concept is purely based on relativity.

In Jharkhand, tribal communities, often perceived as egalitarian due to their relatively non-hierarchical social structures compared to caste-based societies, exhibit gender disparities that challenge this notion. While these communities, such as the Santhal, Munda, Oraon, and Ho, traditionally grant women greater autonomy than many hierarchical societies, historical and sociocultural factors have led to significant gender disparities.

Women are God's unique creation, biologically endowed with the remarkable ability to carry a child in their womb, breastfeed after birth, and successfully raise the child. This biological distinction sets them apart. Beyond natural and biological disparities, when we analyze them socioculturally, the disparity becomes even more pronounced.

Objectives

This chapter deals with the following objectives:

- To discuss the theoretical notion of the egalitarian nature of tribal communities.
- To shed light on the patriarchal aspect of tribal communities.

- To highlight the restricted and limited economic and religious rights of tribal women.
- To discuss the internal logic of tribal communities regarding the socio-cultural disparities and provide an insider rationality to such disparities.

Data and Methodology

This chapter concludes years of intensive fieldwork conducted among various tribes in Jharkhand. Primarily, research was conducted among the Oraon and Munda tribes in Ranchi, Gumla, Lohardaga, and Latehar districts over the past 5-6 years. Anthropological research techniques, including observation, interviews, schedules, and the collection of case studies and life histories, were extensively employed to gather relevant data throughout the research period. Secondary sources were also utilized when necessary to comprehend the theoretical constructs of egalitarianism.

Economic Disparity Among Tribal Women and the Rationality of the Tribal Society

In pre-colonial times, various tribal communities in Jharkhand, such as the Munda, Santhal, Oraon, and Ho, exhibited relatively equitable gender relations. Women enjoyed economic rights, including access to communal land and forests, and social freedoms, such as the autonomy to select their partners. However, the introduction of colonial land policies, particularly the Zamindari system, resulted in the privatization of land ownership. This transformation undermined communal land systems and marginalized women's economic rights. Consequently, patriarchal norms

were reinforced as land titles were frequently granted to men. However, when we delve deeper into the economic lives of these tribes, it becomes evident that women contribute more significantly than men. Two key aspects of this observation emerge. Firstly, historically, men have established cultural norms that have made women dependent on them. Two such significant prohibitions exist within tribal communities: women are prohibited from using farming implements and secondly, they are barred from constructing the roof of a house. These are two serious taboos imposed upon them. This reliance on men for sustenance, shelter, and access to food underscores the patriarchal nature of these societies and renders them dependent. Despite considerable freedom, this factor underpins the underlying economic disparity among tribal women.

When viewed from an insider's perspective, tribal communities provide justification for this economic disparity. These restrictions serve as a form of social control, maintaining the social order within families and the community as a whole. The subjugation of women prevents friction that might have arisen if they had been granted the right to plow and build their own houses. These factors foster a sense of interdependence within families, reducing the risk of disintegration. Sociological analysis suggests that this dependence on women contributes to the stability and cohesion of tribal households.

Religious Disparity and the Rationality of the Tribal Society

Tribal women possess limited religious rights and property ownership. In tribal communities that deeply reverence nature, women are segregated. Until recently, their entry into the Sarnasthal, or Sacred Groove, was strictly prohibited. Women are also barred from participating in ancestor worship, which is an integral part of tribal faith. Ancestors play a pivotal role in maintaining the well-being of households, societies, and ensuring prosperity. The 'Goharane' process, or calling out for ancestors' blessings and well-being, is meticulously executed. In this process, the male head of the household prays individually to each ancestor, seeking their blessings for the family, fields, barns, animals, birds, forests, mountains, and rainfall.

Within the context of their sociocultural norms, the tribal society provides a rational justification for its practices. Given the male-dominated nature of their society and the prevailing social norms, women are prohibited from chanting the name of a senior male in-law. Furthermore, since women enter the household after marriage, there is a concern that they may inadvertently introduce errors in the order of naming ancestors during worship. Such errors could potentially anger the ancestors and lead to conflicts within the family. Consequently, women do not enjoy equal religious rights within tribal communities.

Disparity In the Land Rights and Rationale of Tribal Society

Following the Supreme Court's order, the rights of tribal women on ancestral property have been a subject of intense discussion and debate. In tribal societies, property is categorized into two types: movable and immovable. The Yako tribe of Nigeria and the Nuer tribe of Sudan, both cattle rearers, recognize the equal rights of women over movable property. However, the situation becomes intricate when it comes to immovable property, particularly land-based property.

Consider a hypothetical scenario. A person from the Oraon community, primarily known for settled agriculture, marries his sister or daughter in a village far from his native place. If the ancestral property, which is land-based, is divided equally, the daughter now has the right to the land. However, she has two options. She can either relocate back to her native village from her in-laws' residence, as the land requires agricultural activities and interventions, which seems impractical. Alternatively, she can sell the land. This scenario could lead to the collapse of not only her nuptial house but also the social and economic structure of the entire village. It's important to note that this discussion focuses solely on ancestral property and does not consider acquired property. Notably, among tribal societies, unmarried women and widows are fully entitled to permanently reside and have all rights on ancestral property.

Land rights granted to tribal women and ensuring equal share, which cannot be sold, hold negligible monetary value.

Conversely, the population dynamics of tribal families may be disrupted due to the amplified depletion of land resources. For tribal communities, land, rivers, forests, and mountains are not commodities that can be traded. These natural resources are an integral part of their livelihoods and cultural identity. Regrettably, many prominent scholars, public representatives, and policymakers fail to grasp this concept and fail to incorporate this profound sense of tribalism into their developmental strategies.

Disparity In Decision Making Processes and Muted Participation in Traditional Political System

The traditional political system of the tribals, particularly among the Oraons and Mundas of Jharkhand, presents a pseudo-equality, as women also participate in decision-making processes. However, their involvement is limited to mere spectatorship, allowing them to express their views, but ultimately, only the elderly males hold the final say. In contrast, the Parha system or the Munda Manki traditional political system operates at the level of traditional gram sabha, where all villagers can participate. Despite this, it has been observed that tribal women have only a muted participation in these traditional political systems. Even at the family level, women have a lesser say, and decisions are usually taken by male members.

The elderly males justify that married women are borrowed individuals from other villages. They are less familiar with the village members compared to the male members who have lived their entire lives there. This is because the village

has close-knit kinship ties, which provide them with a better and fair understanding of the nature and behavior of the villagers. Furthermore, if women are granted political rights, it could jeopardize the village's fabric and negatively affect the social order. However, if male dominance is understood correctly, it can be beneficial.

Educational Disparity and Thoughts of Tribal Community

Until the past decade, the education of tribal girls held little importance. The tribal economy and traditional knowledge necessary to sustain families didn't necessitate formal education. Since the tribal economy was self-sufficient, they had limited interaction with the wider world. However, as boundaries gradually opened up, the rural-urban divide began to erode and dissolve. Governmental schemes and literacy efforts introduced from outside had a significant impact.

Formerly, the same tribal society that deemed women's education futile, believing that even educated girls would be married and contribute to their in-laws, showed little interest in educating them. Moreover, even after education, girls and women were expected to participate in the agricultural economy, and formal education held no role in their lives. In contrast, male education gained momentum with the emergence of job opportunities and improved life chances for those educated.

Despite these changes, disparities still exist within the tribal society, which may gradually diminish in the coming decade.

Why Are Women Only Branded as Witches?

Jharkhand's tribal societies, particularly those of the Santhal and Munda communities, are predominantly patrilineal, where men hold control over land, property, and decision-making. Consequently, women, particularly widows, single women, or those without male protection, are perceived as socially vulnerable and susceptible to accusations of witchcraft. These cultural norms often associate women with supernatural powers or malevolent intentions, which are deeply rooted in traditional beliefs about women's roles in spiritual or domestic spheres. As a result, witchcraft-hunting is frequently intertwined with land and inheritance disputes. Women, particularly widows, who inherit or assert their rights to land in patrilineal systems challenge the male-dominated control over property. Consequently, accusing a woman of witchcraft serves as a justification for ostracism or violence, enabling families or communities to seize her assets.

Women who challenge traditional roles, such as their outspoken nature, their refusal to enter early marriage, and their independent living, are frequently labeled as witches as a means of enforcing conformity. This serves as a tool to preserve patriarchal social order. Misfortunes, including crop failures, illnesses, and deaths, are attributed to witchcraft, and women, due to their lower social status, are scapegoated. Cultural narratives rarely associate men with witchcraft because male roles, such as village leaders and healers, are perceived as authoritative rather than suspicious.

The tribal elders justify that for every misfortune in the

village; there must be a reason. Until a consensus-based reason is discovered, the psychological relief for the misfortune haunts the villagers and may impact their mental well-being. In anthropology, science was preceded by religion, and before that, it was magic. Therefore, we can observe that the earliest method of quenching the fear of the unknown and uncertainty was satisfied by magic. It continues to persist, even when religion and science fail to provide answers to misfortunes. In a male-dominated tribal society, women, particularly helpless widows, are easily labeled as witches.

Right Over Sexuality

It's a common sight in many tribal villages that women have multiple children after a few years of marriage. The age gap between the children often indicates that the woman had consecutively conceived. One child may be walking by her side, while another clings to her back, and at times, the protruding womb symbolizes another pregnancy. This raises a serious question for the tribal society: does the female have a say in her rights over sexuality? Does she have a choice in deciding whether to conceive and have a pregnancy? The answer is likely no.

Untouchability Within Tribal Communities and With the Non-Tribal Communities

Within the tribal community, particularly among women, untouchability is deeply ingrained in kinship practices. Women maintain avoidance relationships with the elder male members of their families. While this norm may appear to

show respect for the seniors, it is actually a form of social control and sexual restraint. Violating these rules results in severe punishments. For instance, newly married women are expected to refrain from physical contact and proximity with the senior male members of their families and the village. It's important to note that senior males often hold more power and authority over their husbands.

Postpartum, after the delivery of the baby, women are also considered untouchable, a practice that is also prevalent during their menstrual cycle. This norm serves to enable women to rest and recover from the pain and agony they experience during childbirth. Postpartum, this allows women to regain their physical and mental health.

When talked about the untouchability with the nearby non-tribal communities, the tribals usually do not practice culinary habits with them. The economy of the tribal communities of Jharkhand is largely agricultural. Agriculture is a multi-community dependent activity. The iron has to be procured from the nearby Lohar community or the Asurs who have been the iron smelters of the region for centuries. The kumhaar or the potter, gayar or mahra or the village herders, they all play an important role in the annual cycle of the agriculturists of Jharkhand. The tribal society usually observes untouchability with them. So how is this different from the caste communities?

The untouchability with non-tribals is not very rigid. While the physical distance is well-maintained, it has a negligible gap when compared to the emotional and mental proximity between the two groups. Despite this, there is still a high

degree of respect for each other, which is quite different from caste societies.

The justification for the tribal society's actions stems from its historical background. Initially, the settled agriculturalists were nomadic groups that moved from place to place. During their interactions with other communities, they engaged in barter exchanges and gradually came to understand the inherent dependability of settling permanently in a region. However, suspicion always lingered. The most convenient means of poisoning and killing a family and seizing their belongings was through food and access to the kitchen. Consequently, even today, tribals refuse to allow individuals from other communities to enter their kitchens. Similarly, they strictly prohibit access to the inner sacred space of their ancestral remains.

Conclusion

To conclude, though tribal communities appear to be egalitarian when viewed from outside, a closer analysis reveals how even the tribes are bound in the shackles of patriarchy. If we want to bring equality for women in tribal society, then we will have to make holistic efforts and support their physical health and mental strength. This can be amalgamated with good education and positive morale and ethics. The tribal society becoming sensitive towards them will be a big contribution in itself. An educated woman is strong in herself. Just as she has the divine ability to nurture and procreate a life within herself, in the same way she has

the ability to create and protect a family and society. This is impossible for a 'man' to execute.

References

1. DK, & Lipscomb, S. (2020). A history of magic, witchcraft, and the occult. DK Publishing.
2. Douglas, M. (1966). Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
3. Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1937). Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande. Oxford University Press.
4. Geertz, C. (1973). The interpretation of cultures. Basic Books.
5. Geller, P. L. (Ed.). (2024). The Routledge handbook of feminist anthropology. Routledge.
6. Kumar, S. (2012). Tribal women of India: Struggles and resilience. Oxford University Press.
7. Lewin, E., & Silverstein, L. M. (Eds.). (2016). Mapping feminist anthropology in the twenty-first century. Rutgers University Press.
8. Rosaldo, M. Z., & Lamphere, L. (Eds.). (1974). Woman, culture, and society. Stanford University Press.
9. Sahlins, M. (1976). Culture and practical reason. University of Chicago Press.
10. Singh, R. (Ed.). (2014). Voices of the marginalized: Tribal women in contemporary India. Sage Publications.
11. Willis, D. (2001). Malevolent natures: Witchcraft and spiritual conflict in early modern England. History Today, 51(8), 12

The Traditional Political System of Tribals of Jharkhand: Wisdom in Consensus

Dr. Smita Kiran Toppo

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Political Science, R.L.S.Y. College
Ranchi, Jharkhand, India.

Email: smitatoppo93@gmail.com

Article DOI Link: <https://zenodo.org/uploads/17131787>

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.17131787](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17131787)

Abstract

This chapter delves into the traditional political systems of the tribal communities in Jharkhand, highlighting their unique governance structures rooted in consensus-based decision-making. Drawing on political science, historical, anthropological, and ethnographic insights, it examines indigenous institutions such as the Munda-Manki system, Parha, and other community-based councils that have historically guided social, political, and economic life among tribes like the Munda, Kharia, Oraon, Ho, and Santhal. These systems embody a democratic ethos, prioritizing collective wisdom, participatory governance, and ecological harmony over hierarchical control. The chapter underscores how consensus building fosters social cohesion, resolves conflicts, and ensures equitable resource distribution, offering valuable lessons for modern governance. It also discusses the challenges posed by colonial interventions, modern state policies, and globalization, which have disrupted these traditional systems. While advocating for their recognition and integration into contemporary political frameworks to

preserve tribal autonomy and cultural heritage, the chapter emphasizes the need to acknowledge and preserve these traditional political systems. The Indian constitution also recognizes this traditional political system and grants it distinct powers. The chapter will explore the working mechanism of these traditional political institutions through examples and discuss their continued relevance in contemporary times.

Keywords: traditional political systems, Manki, Parha, participatory governance

Introduction

The villages of Supurgutu, Bhabhadih, Gadasai, Fulkam of Majhgaon Block of Chaibasa located in Jharkhand are unique case studies for the student of Political science and other social sciences. These villages are tribal dominated, especially the HO tribe. These villages have not registered any offence or case in any nearby police stations for almost a century. The traditional political system of the HOs is called Hatu Dunub. The elders of the council are called Munda or Moy Ho decide according to the traditional political structure. The village elders who form the consortium usually consult each other in the presence of entire villagers and then as per past traditional decisions, they resolve the disputes. This is one of the strongest examples that supplements the statement of Marang Gomke Jaipal Singh who said in one of the parliament sessions that, you cannot teach democracy to the tribals, you need to learn democracy from them.

Jaipal Singh Munda, also known as Marang Gomke (“The

Great Leader” in the Munda language), was a prominent Adivasi leader. He was an Olympic gold medalist in hockey, having captained India’s team in the 1928 Amsterdam games. Munda was also a key member of India’s Constituent Assembly. Born into a Munda tribal family in present day Jharkhand, he was a fierce advocate for tribal rights. He coined the term “Adivasi” (original inhabitants) and pushed for the creation of a separate Jharkhand state.

During the debate on Jawaharlal Nehru’s Objectives Resolution, which laid the foundation for India’s Constitution, Munda delivered a famous maiden speech on December 19, 1946. In this speech, he famously said, “You cannot teach tribals democracy; you need to learn from them (Singh, 2025).” Munda used the platform to represent the “millions of unknown hordes” of tribal people, whom he proudly called “Jungli.” So, what was so unique about the tribal political system that Jaipal Munda was so confident about? The unique characteristics of tribal political systems lies in the concept of collective decision-making process.

Objectives

This chapter deals with the following objectives -

- To discuss the traditional political arrangement prevalent among the tribes of Jharkhand
- To understand the significance of these institutions in contemporary times
- To highlight the role of PESA Act in strengthening the traditional tribal political setup

Data and Methodology

The present work is a result of intensive fieldwork conducted among the Oraon and Munda tribes of Ranchi, Khunti, Gumla, Lohardaga and Latehar districts of Jharkhand. The fieldwork has been conducted roughly over a span of 3 years. Techniques such as observation, individual and group interviews, and in-depth case study methods were employed during the course of the research. Along with primary data collection methods, secondary sources have also been used as and when required.

Collective Wisdom

Jaipal's quote underscores the "wisdom in consensus" prevalent in systems like the Munda-Manki, Parha, and Santhal Pargana councils. These institutions prioritize collective decision making, conflict resolution through dialogue, and ecological equilibrium. Munda considered these practices superior to hierarchical governance. He cautioned that contemporary policies threatened to undermine these traditions, a concern that persists in the face of contemporary challenges such as land displacement and globalization.

About The Major Tribes of Jharkhand

Jharkhand, frequently referred to as the "Land of Forests," is home to a diverse range of indigenous tribal communities, collectively known as Adivasis or Scheduled Tribes. As per the 2011 Census, STs constitute approximately 26.2% of the state's population. The principal tribes in Jharkhand include the Santhal (the largest with 3.2 million), Oraon (1.5 million),

Munda (1.2 million), Ho (800,000), and Kharia (approximately 700,000).

Jharkhand's tribal communities have traditional political systems deeply rooted in communal harmony, consensus-based decision-making, and a strong connection to land and nature (Munda & Mullick, 2003). Unlike hierarchical caste-based systems prevalent in mainstream Indian society, tribal governance emphasizes egalitarianism, collective responsibility, and customary laws. These systems predate colonial intervention and continue to influence local governance, even as modern institutions like Panchayati Raj have been integrated into the system through laws such as the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA), 1996.

Chief Characteristics of Traditional Political System

A village is always the basic unit. Politics in the village (tola or para) is all about the village itself. It's like a little self-governing community. Villages are often grouped together in clusters or Parhas as among the Oraon people. These clusters come together to settle disputes between each other.

The Village council or traditional political head is either democratically elected or is hereditary. Leaders are chosen based on wisdom, age, or family ties, not just because they're born into a certain family. Decisions are made in village assemblies (like majhi than or Gitchi than), where all elderlies have a say. This type of decision-making power which is vested in the elders is called gerontocracy. This

democratic way of doing things makes sure that everyone is represented and helps keep things peaceful.

Customary institutions play a big role in the village. Sacred groves (sarna) are like spiritual and legal centers. Village priests like Pahan use old traditions and rituals to help people settle disputes. These institutions also make sure everyone follows social norms, takes care of land, forest and water resources. Marriages disputes, land disputes, economic disputes along with other petty issues are solved with consensus.

In addition, youth dormitories like Dhumkudiya, Gitiora etc play a significant role. Youth are also trained in these assemblies. They learn about how to run the community, be leaders, and follow social norms.

Tribal systems usually focus on making things right and getting everyone together, rather than punishing people. But colonial policies like land revenue systems and forest laws from the 18th and 19th centuries messed with these structures. They brought in zamindars (landlords) and moneylenders, which led to people losing their land and being exploited. This agitated people and led to historical revolts and modern movements for more freedom and self-governance.

Tribal governance is all about open discussions and consensus-building. They have assemblies like Manjhi Than for Santhals, Gitchi Than for Mundas, and Majlis for Oraons. All grown-ups, men and women, get to have a say. Egalitarian and Consensus-Based Decision Making is the hallmark of tribal political systems. Women are also a part of

this and are important. The village elders make sure everyone agrees before making a decision. This way, there are fewer disagreements and conflicts.

Restorative Justice is another important feature of the tribal political system. The focus is not on being punitive but to allow space for the culprits to improvise. Restitutive measures are more important than punitive actions. In many of the tribal societies there exists oaths and ordeals to rectify things and put a supposedly alleged person under trial.

Tribal political system witnesses' amalgamation of political head with religious head. Village priests, like Naik, Pahan, or Baiga, are like mediators between the community and the spiritual world. They call on gods like Singbonga (Ho) or nature spirits to make decisions fair and just. Since tribal society is majorly animistic in nature who believe in soul and ancestor worship, religion becomes an important factor in social control. The religious head at times also enjoys the political headship as well. The traditional system revolves around land and forest resources. Land and forests are super important to them, so their political systems are based on how they use these resources. They have rules to protect the land, stop people from borrowing money from each other, and keep the forests healthy. This way, they can take care of their land and way of life.

These traditions show that tribal governance is democratic, inclusive, and cares about the environment. It's different from the usual political systems that are all about power and control. But these systems still work well because they're adapted to the needs of the community and their culture.

Case study of Traditional Political system of the Oraons of Jharkhand: Parha

Bisu Sendra

This kind of traditional practices is also prevalent among the African tribes. Sendra is a Kurkuh term which means “to hunt”. Usually, just before the agricultural season, during the lean period around April and early June this hunting expedition is carried out. Bisu sendra is an annual expedition where the male Oraon leave the village and stay in the forest for a fortnight. This is a collective effort and many villages join together at times. The Oraons would reside in the forest, hunt, cook and sleep there itself. This is the time when the youths, adults and few elders would sit and talk over many issues of the village and also inter village issues. They would arrive at consensus and propose to place it before the elderly once they are back to the village.

After a fortnight, the Oraons would return to their village periphery. The village is already informed by the pattern of smoke they witness in the forest before their arrival. Each Oraon carries his bounty on his shoulder and would reach the village periphery or siman on the fixed day. Women, elders, additional youth and children would be there to welcome them traditionally. The bounty usually allows the village elders to elect the next headman of the village. An Oraon with a boar or bear is considered to be the strongest, mentally sharp and a quick decision maker. This assessment is based on the animal he has killed. The elders and women hand over the elected man a bamboo or traditional shaft which is

decorated. Once the shaft is handed over to the man, he is considered to be the headman for the coming year. He is now included in the village council and would assist the elders in making decisions over various disputes. Similar practices are carried out by the African counterparts thereby symbolising the age-old tradition.

The Traditional Gram Sabha of The Tribals and Collective Wisdom Vis-A-Vis PESA Act

The Panchayati Raj system was established as a form of governance at the local level by decentralizing powers from the centre. Under this, power and administrative powers were divided into different areas through which various development schemes could be implemented in every region of the country. The Panchayati Raj system was created by the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992. But the existing panchayat legislations in different states could not be applied to the scheduled areas unless special legislation was passed by Parliament. In 1996, Parliament enacted the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act ('PESA') to extend the Panchayati Raj system to the areas of the Fifth Schedule.

Sections 4(a) and 4(d) of PESA

It empowers the supremacy of customary law, traditional management practices for community resources and traditional methods of dispute resolution in scheduled areas. According to 4(a), when a state makes a law based on PESA, it should be in conformity with local traditional law, social and religious practices and traditional management practices of community resources. Whereas 4(d) enables every Gram

Sabha to protect and preserve the traditions and customs of the people, their cultural identity, community resources and customary method of dispute resolution. Most states have amended their Panchayati Raj legislations, but there are no further rules, guidelines or mechanisms to implement it. Existing laws specifically prohibit the implementation of tradition and customary laws.

Section 4(c) of PESA provides that every village will have a Gram Sabha, which will include all the persons whose names are included in the village level voter list. Under PESA, the Gram Sabha is the main decision-making body and hence it is necessary that it should be a collective and traditional unit. Perhaps the key provision of PESA is Section 4(b) which gives a special definition of “village”. It has been found that in non-scheduled areas, often more than one village is included in a Gram Panchayat. Apart from the fact that revenue villages may represent traditional customary relationships, the larger the demographic scope of such a Gram Panchayat, the less homogeneous it will be. This makes decision-making difficult in such large culturally and socio-economically divided groups.

With the advent of PESA, the role of the governing body changed completely. The state, which had been an unsuccessful guardian till now, was now the centre of governance, and the Gram Sabha became the main centre of governance. The Gram Sabha could ensure that the state could not usurp the land of the tribal community. The consent of the Gram Sabha became necessary for any kind of exploitation or excavation even for a private company. The

Fifth Schedule actually got real powers only after the advent of PESA. Now the people of the scheduled areas could connect directly with other government institutions.

The biggest change was that according to PESA, now only the Gram Sabha was empowered to grant permission to any industry for excavation or other types of use of natural resources. PESA took away this special power of the state and now this power was vested in the Gram Sabha. This was a very important provision for the protection of natural resources.

Contemporary Significance of Traditional Political System

Jharkhand's tribal communities continue to rely on traditional political systems that prioritize egalitarianism, consensus-building, and village centric governance. These systems, despite facing pressures from modernization, industrialization, and centralized governance, continue to shape social, political, and cultural dynamics within the villages and particularly in Scheduled Areas.

The traditional political systems of Jharkhand's tribes serve as a cornerstone of their resilience, providing a model of democratic, sustainable, and community-oriented governance. Their contemporary significance lies in their capacity to safeguard cultural identity, empower communities through legal frameworks such as PESA and Forest Right Act, and inspire resistance against exploitation. By harmonizing customary practices with contemporary

governance, these systems guarantee that the voices of tribal communities are not disregarded.

The tribals have been harassed for long when it comes to land disputes. For decades the cases have been pending in courts without any significant outcomes. The petty disputes that have reached police stations have yet again manifested agony and distress. The villages that still have a consolidated and functional traditional political system have seen quick decisions. Justice delayed is, justice denied and these traditional systems have proved to be amicable and immediate resolutions of issues and grievances. Especially in case of marriage disputes, these institutions have equivalent power to that of a family court. Traditional marriage disputes can be only sorted out with the intervention of these traditional institutions. Hence its significance still carries on.

Conclusion

Traditional political systems serve as a model for sustainable resource management and a sole authority in maintaining social order and social cohesion. They inspire modern movements for autonomy, resist displacement, and shape inclusive development policies that bridge customary practices with contemporary needs. The concept of gerontocracy provides an ethical value which is an integral element of Indian society. The strengthening of traditional political systems advocates the concept of governance by the grassroots. The dream of the Father of our Nation-Mahatma Gandhi. The tribal communities had been self-sufficient for ages; their way of life was simple with least interaction with

the wider world. Their cosmology, economy, social control mechanisms, adherence to environment and ecology is an example to the wider world. In totality, it was rightly said by Jaipal Singh that there is so much to learn from the tribal society and one should refrain from teaching them the principles of democracy.

References

1. Corbridge, S., Jewitt, S., & Kumar, S. (2004). *Jharkhand: Environment, Development, Ethnicity*. Oxford University Press.
2. Mair, L. P. (1957). The nature of African customary law. *African Affairs*, 56(225), 329. Munda, R. D., & Mullick, S. B. (Eds.). (2003). *The Jharkhand Movement: Indigenous*
3. Peoples' Struggle for Autonomy in India. IWGIA.
4. Prakash, A. (2001). *Jharkhand: Politics of Development and Identity*. Orient Blackswan. Shah, A. (2010). *In the Shadows of the State: Indigenous Politics, Environmentalism, and*
5. *Insurgency in Jharkhand, India*. Duke University Press.
6. Sharma, B.D. (1991). *Tribal Development: The Concept and the Frame*. Prachi Prakashan, New Delhi.
7. Singh, J. (2025). *Lo Bir Sendra: A Hunter in the Burning Forest*. Navayana.
8. Sisodia, Y. S. (2021). *Implementation of PESA and status of panchayat raj institutions in fifth scheduled areas of Indian states*. Routledge

9. Sundar, N. (2009). Legal Grounds: Natural Resources, Identity, and the Law in Jharkhand.
10. Oxford University Press
11. Wiseman, J. A., & Lewellen, T. C. (1985). Political Anthropology: An introduction. Oxford University Press

Exploring the Insights Behind Traditional Tribal Economic Practices

Dr. Nancy Tirkey

Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, R.L.S.Y. College, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India.

Email: nancytirkey00@gmail.com

Article DOI Link: <https://zenodo.org/uploads/17131906>

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.17131906](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17131906)

Abstract

Tribal communities have sustainable and resilient ways of managing resources and the economy is largely governed by kinship ties. By looking at the principles of sharing, taking care of the environment, and living in harmony, we can learn from tribal economies and make modern economies better. Using real-life examples and historical stories, we see how these traditional practices focus on social unity and environmental balance, challenging the idea that wealth and progress are the only things that matter. Tribal economy is deeply rooted in substantive approach, where inter-personal social bonding is more important than the economic gains. In contrast, market-oriented economies are based on the formalist approach, which has profit making at its core. This chapter shows how tribal economic knowledge can help us solve important global problems like sustainability and fair sharing of resources. The traditional tribal economic practices are a global debate since resources on the Earth are limited and contemporary society has been making an effort for sustainable development so that the resources can also be

made available for the generations to come. This chapter also explores the age-old wisdom sustaining the traditional tribal economies which are in congruence with the modern-day sustainable development efforts and sustainable development goals.

Keywords: Traditional Economic practices, formalist approach, substantive approach, sustainable development, tribal wisdom

Introduction

Marcel Mauss's seminal work, 'The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies' introduced a foundational framework in economic anthropology. This framework illuminates the social and cultural significance of gift-giving in tribal and traditional economies. Mauss argued that gift-giving in traditional societies is not a purely altruistic act but a complex social practice embedded in obligations that reinforce social bonds and maintain community structures. He identified three core obligations in the gift economy. The obligation to give, the obligation to receive and the obligation to reciprocate are core to his concept.

Giving gifts serves as a powerful tool to establish or strengthen social relationships. It not only signifies generosity but also conveys status and alliance. In tribal economies, giving is often a public act, reinforcing the giver's role within the community (Mauss, 1990). Accepting a gift demonstrates recognition of the relationship and the giver's position, thereby establishing a reciprocal obligation.

Conversely, declining a gift may be interpreted as rejecting the relationship, potentially resulting in social discord. The recipient is anticipated to return a gift of comparable or superior value at a future date, establishing a cycle of exchange that maintains social connections. This reciprocity is not instantaneous or solely economic but is governed by cultural conventions and timeframes. Mauss emphasized that gifts are not just material objects but carry symbolic and spiritual significance.

Objectives

This chapter deals with the following objectives -

- To understand the difference between formalist and substantives approach in context of economics
- To study the key features of traditional tribal economies
- To understand the significance of gifts, barter system, reciprocity and redistribution in the context of traditional tribal economic organisation
- To throw light on the cultural significance of tribal haats and bazaars
- To highlight the learnings from traditional tribal economic practices
- To discuss how the modern economies can learn from these simple societies

Data and Methodology

The present work is a result of years of intensive research conducted among the major tribes of Jharkhand such as the Oraons and the Mundas. During the research period, special attention was given to the traditional subsistence patterns of

these tribes and the modernisation induced changes brought about in their respective modes of subsistence. Observation, interviews and collection of case studies were the primary research techniques employed. Secondary sources were referred to time and again to understand the basic tenets of economic anthropology and also to comprehend the formalist versus substantives debate in this context.

Theoretical Framework

The formalist approach is rooted in neoclassical economics which asserts that economic behavior is governed by rational and self-serving decision-making aimed at optimizing utility of scarce resources, regardless of cultural context. It is mainly based on two important principles- the principle of maximization and the principle of rationality (Nee & Swedberg, 2005). The principle of maximization states all human societies aim to multiply their resources, and as per the principle of rationality, humans aim at generating profit and minimising any kind of loss. In tribal economies, formalists analyze economic activities using universal economic principles such as supply and demand, opportunity costs, and individual choice.

The economic anthropologists, such as Karl Polanyi, pioneered a substantive approach that centers on the interconnectedness of economic systems within social, cultural, and environmental contexts. This approach emphasizes that tribal economies are not primarily driven by profit or individual gain, but rather by social relationships, cultural norms, and survival needs. It suggests that economic

activities serve as means to maintain community cohesion and fulfill collective needs.

Substantive approach emphasizes the profound connection between tribal economic practices, such as communal land management, reciprocal exchange, and resource redistribution. These are largely controlled and maintained by social structures, kinship relationships, and cultural values (Pena Lopez & Membiela-Pollan, 2024). For instance, in numerous tribal societies, resources like implements and tools for agriculture are shared to strengthen social bonds and guarantee group survival. Practices like collective farming or ceremonial exchange like that of the kula ring in the Trobriand Islands are embedded within social and spiritual frameworks rather than solely economic ones.

Tribal economies often blend both perspectives. For instance, a hunter-gatherer group's decision to share meat reinforces social bonds and ensures reciprocal support in times of scarcity. However, the substantive approach is more relevant as tribal economies prioritize collective well-being and cultural practices over individual profit.

Key Features of Traditional Tribal Economies

Tribal economies refer to the economic systems of small-scale simple societies, which are frequently kinship-based, that rely on customary practices for production, distribution, and consumption. These economies are typically non-industrial, community-centric, and profoundly intertwined with social and cultural structures. They generally worship nature and are based on simple technology.

Subsistence-based production, a primary focus of tribal economies, centers around meeting basic needs and not on generating surplus and earning profit. These economies often engage in activities like hunting, gathering, pastoralism, or small-scale agriculture. Production is typically labor-intensive, utilizing simple tools and technologies. Simple technology refers to using such techniques which are adapted to their specific environments and which do not require any kind of specialisation.

Reciprocity is the core principle of tribal economy. Exchange is governed by reciprocity, where goods and services are shared with an expectation of mutual obligation. This can include generalised reciprocity and balanced reciprocity (K. Polanyi, 1944). In generalised reciprocity, there is not much expectation of immediate return. The prominent anthropologist Levi Strauss categorises all kinds of marriage payments, except dowry, in the category of bride price. Whereas in balanced reciprocity, the goods and services are exchanged immediately. Toda, Kota, Badha and Kutumba tribes of Nilgiri hills exchange goods and services through balanced reciprocity. However, it is important to mention here that the value of the goods and services are not as important as social ties in both cases.

This notion that tribal economies attach greater importance to fostering social ties than the economic value of goods and services being exchanged can be exemplified from the practices of kula ring and potlatch. Malinowski in his book, 'Argonauts of the Western Pacific', has mentioned about the kula ring, a system of exchange, prevalent among Trobriand

islanders. It includes intra-island and inter-island exchange of garlands and amulets among kin members. Inter-island exchange involves undertaking long hazardous voyages. When viewed in purely economic terms, this system appears to be irrational. But according to Malinowski, it plays a pivotal role in strengthening kinship bonds, which is at the core of existence of the Trobriand islanders (Malinowski, 2002).

Similar to this, potlatch is a system of redistribution prevalent amongst British Columbians. It was first studied by the prominent American anthropologist, Franz Boas. It necessitates destruction of all material wealth by a person in order to earn social prestige and increase his social status (Piddock, 1965). A person organises a giant feast, where he spends all his earned wealth. Economically speaking, potlatch appears to be irrational but Franz Boas advocates that it is this very system of redistribution that maintains the social structure among the British Columbians. It determines the social status of the members of the tribe, and also provides them with an opportunity to earn social prestige. Greater the destruction of personal wealth by an individual, higher is his social status in the society.

Kinship-based economies organize economic activities around kinship groups, clans, or communities, with collective decision-making. Ropa and madait are two very common practices found in the tribes of Jharkhand. During the paddy cultivation season (ropa), women from a village form small groups and help each other in sowing the paddy saplings (madait). This practice helps in fostering kinship ties. In these

economies, individual accumulation is often secondary to the welfare of the group. Tribal economies typically lack formal markets or currency, opting instead for barter, gift-giving, or ceremonial exchanges. Within these societies, wealth is gauged in social terms, such as social status and relationships, rather than through monetary accumulation.

The tribal economy is highly inclusive. In contrast to modern market economies, inclusive economies recognize the profound interconnectedness of economic activities with social, cultural, and spiritual life. Decisions are shaped by cultural norms, rituals, and taboos, rather than solely driven by economic efficiency (Baddeley, 2017). Tribal economies are generally adapted to local environments, employing sustainable practices such as rotational farming, seasonal hunting, or controlled burning to preserve ecological equilibrium.

Surplus production is traditionally limited in these societies, and when it does occur, it is typically redistributed through feasts, ceremonies, or communal storage to prevent inequality. In this way, the social status of a tribal member is often determined by generosity rather than wealth hoarding. This is similar to the system of potlatch present in British Columbians, discussed before. Producing surplus to sell in the markets is only a recent phenomenon. Even today, only a few members from the tribal villages sell their produce in the markets, majority either consume the produce or distribute or exchange their produce as barter.

Unlike modern capitalist economies that prioritize profit, tribal economies prioritize social relationships and ecological

harmony. These systems are rational within their cultural and environmental contexts, challenging Western assumptions about “primitive” economies.

Significance of Tribal Haats and Bazaars

The tribal haats and bazaars refer to market places for the exchange of goods and services. Generally, these haats and bazaars are organised on a weekly basis. On a particular day of the week, haats and bazaars are organised in a particular village. People from that village and the nearby villages gather to buy items of basic utility such as cereals, oils, soaps, utensils, etc. These marketplaces serve as a source of recreation where people come, enjoy themselves and relieve themselves of all the stress. The most interesting fact about these marketplaces is that the social significance of these weekly bazaars is more important than their economic significance. These markets serve as the spots where people and relatives from different villages come, meet and discuss various personal issues. In many instances, important announcements such as wedding invitations, etc are made at these bazaars itself. Thus, these tribal haats and bazaars serve as grounds fostering social relationships and strengthening kinship ties.

Learnings from Traditional Tribal Economic Practices

Tribal economic concept aligns closely with the substantive perspective, which views economic activities deeply intertwined with social relationships and cultural norms. The obligations to give, receive, and reciprocate are not driven by rational maximization of resources, but rather by social

expectations. Economics in tribal societies prioritizes social solidarity over individual gain, challenging Western economic assumptions. On the other hand, formalists might interpret gift-giving as a rational strategy to maximize social capital or secure future resources. It may then undermine it as purely rational calculations which overlook its cultural and social depth.

The traditional economic practices of tribal communities showcase the wisdom of tribal economies by demonstrating how they seamlessly integrate economic transactions with social and cultural systems (Hann & Hart, 2011). It carries the core concepts of sustainability, resilience and cultural depth. Reciprocal exchanges within tribal communities ensure the circulation of resources, thereby reducing inequality and fostering collective well-being. The social bonds established through reciprocal exchanges serve as a security, providing individuals with a reliable source of support during times of scarcity. Mutual economic activities hold symbolic meanings that reinforce tribal identity and values, contrasting sharply with the impersonal nature of market economies.

Traditional tribal economic practices provide valuable insights into sustainable living, community collaboration, and resource management. These practices, deeply ingrained in centuries of adaptation, prioritize balance, reciprocity, and resilience.

Sustainable Resource Management: Tribal economies often rely on hunting, gathering, fishing, or small-scale rain

fed agriculture, avoiding overexploitation. Practices like rotational farming (growing different crops in the same piece of agricultural land in a planned sequence in order to improve soil health and ensure farm sustainability), multi-cropping (growing more than one variety of crops simultaneously to ensure balanced consumption of soil nutrients) and seasonal hunting allow ecosystems to regenerate. The contemporary economies can learn from these simple economies how to use resources judiciously, prioritize long term ecological balance, and try to integrate conservation into their economic activities.

Community Based Economics and Collective Ownership: Many indigenous communities operate on communal land and resource ownership, where wealth is shared rather than accumulated individually. For example, the Oraons of Jharkhand distribute resources such as bounty and fishes and tools equitably within their group. Even the villagers who are not able to participate in the fishing expedition are given some share from the catch. This is because of the belief that natural resources, which are the rivers in this case, are not the personal property of any individual or a group. They belong equally to all the members of the tribe. We can adopt cooperative systems that prioritize collective well-being, thereby reducing inequality and ensuring that no one is left behind.

Reciprocity and Barter Systems, which are basically non-monetary exchanges, are common in tribal communities. Goods and services are exchanged based on mutual need, not

currency (Vearncombe, 2010). For example, in the majority of the agriculture based tribal villages, service providers like lohars (blacksmiths) provide their services like making and repairing iron objects. In return, they do not get any cash, rather they receive agricultural produce from the members of the tribe. We can learn to build trust-based economic systems that prioritize relationships and mutual support over financial transactions.

Tribal Economy Adapts to Local Conditions: Tribal economies use indigenous knowledge to maximize resource efficiency in their environments. For example, the tribals of Jharkhand have numerous types of paddies that can sustain even drought and are climate resilient. We can see that it is inevitable to develop context specific solutions that use local resources and knowledge, in contrast to the one-size-fits-all approach.

Resilience through Diversification with Multiple Livelihoods: Tribes often diversify economic activities, such as hunting, gathering, farming, or crafting, to mitigate risk. For instance, the Oraons and Mundas of Jharkhand adopt a combination of foraging and hunting to ensure food security. Modern economies can hence learn to diversify income sources and skills to build resilience against economic or environmental shocks.

Sociocultural Integration with Economy: Economic activities in tribal societies are often deeply intertwined with cultural and spiritual values. For instance, the fishing

expeditions from common resources like rivers and ponds, the tribes of Jharkhand redistribute the catch among all, even with those who did not participate in the expedition. This signifies that the resources belong to all and this strengthens social bonds and status. This lesson emphasizes the importance of aligning economic practices with cultural values to foster enhanced community cohesion and purpose.

Low Waste and Resource Efficiency: Tribal economies demonstrate remarkable resource efficiency by minimizing waste through the practice of reuse of materials. For instance, the economic activities of the tribals are highly biodegradable and almost all the resources in use are utilized. This is evident from the example of plates and bowls prepared using sakhu leaves. Tribal women are often engaged in preparing plates (pattal) and bowls (dona) from the leaves of sakhu or sal trees for the community feasts during occasions like marriage, etc. Once used, these organic plates and bowls can be used as fodder for the cattle, thereby serving the needs of the society and simultaneously maintaining the ecological balance. The modern economy can learn to embrace circular economic models that are crucial in reducing waste and promoting the reuse and recycling of materials.

Governance with Consensus: Tribal economies often rely on collective decision making, like the Parha and Manki system that take decisions regarding managing resources. They use consensus-based governance to allocate land and labor. Inclusive decision making is crucial for equitable

resource distribution and community support even in modern economies.

What Modern Economies Can Learn

The above-mentioned principles guiding the traditional economic organisation of the simple or tribal communities can also play a pivotal role in guiding modern economic systems by promoting sustainability, reducing inequality, and enhancing resilience. Businesses can adopt zero waste practices inspired by tribal resource efficiency that will make a sustainable model. Community based models like worker cooperatives can draw from tribal collective ownership. Promoting local economies and emphasising local production and consumption can reduce environmental footprints, as exemplified by tribal self-reliance.

Conclusion

The study of traditional tribal economies illuminates a profound interplay between economic practices, social structures, and environmental stewardship. These economies, characterized by subsistence-based production, reciprocity-driven exchange, and deep integration with cultural and ecological contexts, challenge contemporary assumptions about wealth and progress. Unlike market-driven systems that prioritize individual accumulation, tribal economies prioritize collective well-being, sustainability, and social capital. Practices such as the potlatch of Northwest Coast tribes and the Kula exchange of the Trobriand Islanders exemplify this. Their localized and diverse approaches demonstrate adaptive ingenuity that aligns economic

activities with environmental constraints and cultural values. While these systems encounter challenges in the modern world, such as marginalization and globalization pressures, their principles of reciprocity, community cohesion, and ecological balance offer valuable insights for addressing contemporary issues like inequality and environmental degradation. By studying traditional tribal economies, we gain a deeper appreciation for human diversity and inspiration for constructing more equitable and sustainable economic models in the future.

References

1. Baddeley, M. (2017). *Behavioural Economics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.
2. Hann, C., & Hart, K. (2011). *Market and society: The Great Transformation Today*. Cambridge University Press.
3. Malinowski, B. (2002). *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. Routledge.
4. Mauss, M. (1990). *The gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Routledge.
5. Nee, V., & Swedberg, R. (2005). *The Economic Sociology of Capitalism*. Princeton University Press.
6. Pena-López, A., & Membiela-Pollán, M. (2024). *Economics of Social Relations: Critical Perspectives on Social Capital*. Taylor & Francis.

7. Piddock, S. (1965). The Potlatch system of the Southern Kwakiutl: a New perspective. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 21(3), 244–264.
8. Polanyi, K. (1944). The Great Transformation. Retrieved from <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA07821290>
9. Singh, K. S. (1982). *Economies of the tribes and their transformation*. New Delhi: Concept.
10. Vearncombe, E. (2010). Redistribution and Reciprocity: A Socio-Economic interpretation of the Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20.1-15). *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, 8(3), 199–236

The Rationality Behind the Traditional Agricultural Practices of the Oraons of Jharkhand

Mr. Bimal Kachhap

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Anthropology, S.S.J.S.N College, Garhwa, Jharkhand, India.

Email: adityakachhap9@gmail.com

Article DOI Link: <https://zenodo.org/uploads/17132018>

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.17132018](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17132018)

Abstract

Culturally, the tribal communities practice agriculture as a community activity and hence it has different socio-cultural importance as well as economic importance. In recent decades, when the whole world has shrunk to just 5-6 grains, tribal society alone has so much diversity. Today, there is a strong advocacy for preserving and promoting this rich knowledge of the tribals on many international forums. Another dimension is being added to this in which emphasis is being laid on advancing traditional farming methods, which are essentially based on the indigenous knowledge system or the traditional wisdom of tribal communities. Due to the shrinking of grain diversity, many types of nutritional deficiency-based diseases have been witnessed in the past few decades. Along with this, tribal communities, especially those that were once self-sufficient, are now becoming increasingly dependent on the outside world for money. In this context, this chapter makes an attempt to explore the

agriculture related traditional wisdom prevalent among the Oraons of Jharkhand. It also discusses the traditional wisdom of the Oraons regarding shifting cultivation practice, mixed cropping system, field preparation, organic manure preparation, traditional seed conservation techniques, paddy cultivation and traditional system of developing kitchen gardens.

Keywords: Traditional Wisdom, Traditional Agriculture, Shifting Cultivation, Oraon Tribe, Traditional Kitchen Garden

Introduction

In the primitive age, when nature existed in its pristine form, a group of families transformed the natural landscape by clearing the forest, turning it into agricultural land. This was the first step towards establishing a permanent settlement. Agriculture emerged in the Neolithic period, about ten millennia ago. As humanity recognized the importance of seeds and increased their population, they were forced to adopt a settled lifestyle. Clearing the forest was not a task that could be done by a single person or family. Instead, it became a collective effort in which several families worked together. As a result, a tribal village was formed.

The fields were carefully cultivated through tireless labor and since the work was shared, everyone had equal rights over this community land. A tribal village was built on the principles of collectivism and this strong foundation became the hallmark of this society, whether it was cultivating grains, hunting, or gathering tubers, all were distributed equally

among the families of the group. This practice continues even today in many tribal villages.

Traditional knowledge plays a vital role in agriculture, especially among the tribal communities. The Oraons, a tribal community living in central India, have a rich traditional knowledge system related to agriculture, which is rooted in their forest and hill environment. Their traditional practices demonstrate profound ecological understanding, adaptability, and cultural significance. This chapter discusses in depth the relationship between traditional knowledge and agricultural practices prevalent among the Oraon community.

Objectives

This chapter deals with the following objectives-

- To discuss the traditional knowledge associated with the practice of shifting cultivation
- To highlight the traditional knowledge about field and manure preparation
- To understand the traditional knowledge about seed conservation
- To discuss paddy cultivation and traditional knowledge
- To understand the traditional knowledge behind bari or kitchen gardens

Data and Methodology

This book chapter is a culmination of years of intensive research based on fieldwork methodology. Fieldwork has been conducted among the Oraons of Ranchi, Gumla, Lohardaga and Latehar districts of Jharkhand, over a span of

2-3 years. During the research period, anthropological tools like observation, interview, case study collection and schedule preparation were employed in order to collect primary data about the agriculture related traditional wisdom of the Oraons. Apart from primary data, secondary sources have also been used as and when required.

Shifting Cultivation or Jhum Cultivation and Traditional Knowledge

About eleven thousand years ago, with the Neolithic Revolution, man acquired the knowledge of agriculture and domestication of seeds. Consequently, humans now understood the importance of seeds. Archaeology reveals that initially, only wheat, rice and potatoes were domesticated. Nomadic humans continued hunting and gathering other consumables from the forests. Gradually the presence of seeds and its importance forced humans to live a semi-nomadic life and they adopted the practice of Jhum cultivation. In this method, a piece of forest was cleared, plants were uprooted, left to dry for some time and then burnt, so that they act as manure. Once the land was prepared, multiple crop seeds were sown in that area. This multi-cropping system is the main feature of traditional agricultural practices that still exists among many indigenous communities today. Although the pattern of shifting cultivation has changed to permanent agriculture, the main nuances of multiple cropping still exist. After cultivating the plot consecutively for four to five years, they would leave the plot fallow for some time. This fallow period allowed the

land to regenerate nutrients and regain its fertility. This aligns with the anthropological concept of cultural ecology, as this practice maintains soil fertility and biodiversity (Roy, 1915). Traditionally, the Oraons grew multiple crops simultaneously on this piece of land. Mixed cropping, i.e., combining crops such as maize, millets, pulses and vegetables, has always been effective for three reasons. Firstly, it ensures the availability of food. Even if one crop fails, the other supporting crops become a part of the diet. Secondly, multiple cropping or mixed cropping ensures a high level of nutrition in the society. For example, when the whole world has shrunk to only 5-6 grains, tribal society alone has so much diversity. Thirdly, it optimizes land use. For example, the Oraons grow legumes along with cereals to increase the amount of nitrogen in the soil. This is a practice that anthropologists consider ecologically sophisticated (Sachidananda, 1968).

History of Agricultural Land and Traditional Knowledge

Traditionally, land ownership in Oraon villages was community oriented. The introduction of settled agriculture established the concept of individual land ownership, but vestiges of community ownership still exist today. For example, rights to forest trees, forest produce, pastures and wastelands are still based on the principle of community ownership. The Oraon village traditionally formed the primary unit of their social organization. When they settled in the Chotanagpur Plateau, each family or group of related

families would select a suitable forest area for clearing and cultivation.

High lands were preferred for residence sites. The Oraon villages usually have different types of land based on elevation and water holding capacity. Elevated land called taand is less fertile and is mainly rain-fed. These areas are suitable for cultivation of madua, oilseeds and other crops as water logging is negligible, and the soil is friable. Lower land called doan is more fertile and is used for paddy cultivation due to its ability to retain moisture. Traditional knowledge related to paddy cultivation have been dealt with separately ahead in the chapter.

Situated in the Chotanagpur plateau, this community is still dependent on monsoon and natural rainfall. They have rich knowledge about annual climate and weather. Oraons carry out their agricultural activities in accordance with the weather cycle. In the early period of March or Jeth, when light rain brings some moisture to the dry fields, Oraons start ploughing the fields. According to traditional wisdom, ploughing at this time is done only to increase the fertility of the land. Sarhul is celebrated at the same time. Rice is their staple food, and they also grow other crops like madua, gondli, maize, pulses and oilseeds.

Traditional Knowledge about Field and Manure Preparation

Land is prepared differently for different crops i.e. seasonal and cash crops. Wet soil is dried and hard soil is softened. For this, ploughing of soil becomes necessary for the people

of the community. For ploughing the fields, the people of the community generally use ploughs and bullocks. A small number of fields are ploughed through tractors. The use of ploughs and tractors depends on the nature of the land and the crop. Majority members of the community necessarily use plough at the time of sowing seeds.

Before ploughing a big field, as a preparation, the wild plants are cut and the dry leaves are burnt in one corner of the field. Then after the first rain, the field is ploughed for the first time. After ploughing for the first time, the fields are left to dry for a few days so that the wild plants rot and act as fertilizers. Before sprinkling the seeds, the field is leveled with a leveller, thereafter the field is again ploughed and seeds of crops like kurthi, almond, maize, mustard, wheat, gram and linseed are sprinkled and then the field is again leveled with a leveller.

Before planting crops like potato, chilli, radish, gourd, cabbage, tomato, brinjal, the field is ploughed differently. The method of ploughing here is also very interesting. The plough is operated from two directions. If the entire field is ploughed once in the east-west direction, then it is ploughed a second time in the north-south direction. This unique process of ploughing the field bidirectionally is known by the Oraons as 'Do Chaas'. With this process, the entire field is ploughed properly. Then after leveling it, deep pits are dug and seeds are sown.

Thereafter, the fields are left unattended for a few days. Just before the onset of the monsoon, the Oraons transport manure from the traditional cow dung storage, called Gobari

Gaddi, from near their homes to the fields. Gobari Gaddi is a storage place where cow dung from domestic cattle is stored throughout the year in order to prepare manure. It is prepared by mixing leaves and other organic residues. This type of manure prepared from plant residues, cattle dung, bird droppings, etc. is high in potassium which is very important for paddy plants and cereals like madua.

When the crops are growing, the Oraons sprinkle kitchen ash in the fields as it is high in potassium and maintains the pH level of the soil. It treats acidic soil in a natural way. It also acts as a natural insect repellent. Kitchen ash is also an effective pesticide for plants as the potassium in it helps boost their immune system, making them more resistant to diseases. Other natural pesticides used by the Oraons are prepared from neem (*Azadirachta indica*), sindwair (*Vitex negundo*), bhelwa (*Semecarpus anacardium*), etc due to their anti-fungal and anti-bacterial properties. These natural pesticides are also stuffed in traditional granaries, made of grass, called morha.

During the month of Jeth, the ponds in the village often dry up. The Oraons also use the soil deposited at the bottom of the pond as manure. This loose soil is collected and used as a nutrient for the plants in the fields and backyards. Zoologists along with geologists and geographers believe that many microscopic parasites live in this soil, which are very beneficial for the farm soil and the new crop. By transplanting them, other organisms in the paddy field also get food.

During ploughing of the field in Baishakh and Jeth, the

remains of recently harvested paddy crops lying on the surface get buried in the soil and act as a rich organic manure. Along with this, the micro-parasites and organisms present in the soil also become active and increase the fertility of the soil.

Traditional Knowledge about Seed Conservation

Except for the last few decades, the tribals were completely self-sufficient in terms of seed conservation. From one generation to the next, seeds were preserved and stored in a traditional way. Paddy and other crops were tied in a morha and stored safely. The structure of the morha was such that the seeds did not have any kind of contact with air or moisture, thereby eliminating any possibility of the seed germination. This maintained the temperature and kept the seeds safe for two to three years. Traditionally, leaves of neem, Sindwair, etc. were tied with the seeds or grains in the morha to protect the seeds from insects and fungi.

It is also necessary to protect other types of seeds such as corn, gangai, millet, bodi, bean, cucumber, tomato, brinjal, okra, radish, etc. from insects. These seeds are taken out from their respective fruits and dried for some time. After this, a bundle of these seeds is made and hung at a safe distance above the traditional hearths. The smoke produced provides the seeds with the required temperature. At the same time, it also protects the seeds from moisture and any kind of bacterial or fungal growth, thus safely preserving the seeds for about a year.

In the same manner, some seeds such as corn, onion, garlic, etc. are dried and hung near the roof on a long bamboo stick. Leaves of a plant called Bhelva are also kept right next to them. Bhelva is a plant which has anti-fungal, anti-bacterial and religious properties.

Seeds like madua, linseed, jatangi, urad, etc. are stored in earthen pots, which are then stored in Patong. It refers to the traditional setup of an Oraon home, having a separate floor just above the main house or room. It is here that these grains are kept safe in these earthen pots.

A different method is adopted for storing ginger. It is kept in a safe corner of the house covered with river sand. At regular intervals of time, a little water is sprinkled to prevent their drying up.

Paddy Cultivation and Traditional Knowledge

After the harvest festival of Sarhul, the Oraon community traditionally sows paddy seeds in a small portion of their fields. This is symbolic of the approval of ancestors and God to commence agricultural activities. The small field symbolically represents the community's ability to predict the coming weather pattern and rainfall. Beedas (paddy samplings) are prepared for paddy plants. The Beedas are usually prepared near the paddy field or at a safe place like the backyard. After preparing the Beedas, they are taken to the field in groups and planting begins.

For transplanting paddy seedlings or Beedas, the field is made muddy. Doan land is divided into two parts, chavara doan and gadha doan. Chavara doan is the upper-level field

which has low water logging capacity. It is considered to be comparatively less fertile. The second part of land is called gadha doan. This is the low-lying piece of land, which has high water retention or water logging capacity, and is thus considered to be extremely fertile.

Chavara doan land is ploughed only after the rains, whereas in gadha doan, light moisture remains locked throughout the year. The boundaries of the chavara doan land are made by peeling them from all sides and thereafter the waste grass is left in the field. This grass roots and decays in a few days. In case water and seed saplings are ready, the field is ploughed and levelled with the help of a harrow before transplantation. Transplantation of the paddy saplings is done on the same day.

When the gadha doan is ploughed for the first time, it is called 'bedna' in the local language. Bedna means to tear or to rip apart. When a sufficient amount of water accumulates in these fields, the field is ploughed again and the wild weeds around the field are cleaned. After ploughing, the land is levelled using a harrow due to which the weeds get buried in the soil, thereby softening the soil. The weeds buried in the soil rot over time and act as manure. As the crops grow in this field, chances of weeds re-growing in it are reduced. The prepared seedlings are then planted in the leveled field.

Interestingly, right after the celebration of the Karam festival, a twig or branch of bhelva is traditionally buried in the middle of the field. Bhelva is such a plant that it is extremely pest resistant and prevents the crop from various types of infections. Many times, birds find a place to sit on the

branches of bhelva, in the middle of the field, and from there they eat the insects infesting paddy crop. Along with bhelva, sindwair leaves are also used due to their insecticidal properties.

Bari and Traditional Knowledge

Apart from the staple food of Oraons, various vegetables also form a part of their daily diet. Every Oraon household uses the land near their house, often adjacent to their house, as bari. This can be understood as the traditional setup of modern-day kitchen gardens. The Oraons always build their residence on a high place, so this bari is also a form of a taand and is constructed on a highland. Thin flat ranches of sakhua, putus and other plants are cut and brought from the nearby forest by the females of the house. After drying them, the bari is surrounded with these sticks, in order to provide protection from cattle.

Constructed on a highland, the bari taand always needs water for irrigation. Hence, most Oraons construct wells inside the bari. Construction of wells in the field fulfills the water needs of the house along with farming. The soil of the field is friable and is considered best for the cultivation of vegetables. Farming is done in the bari throughout the year based on the availability of water.

The Oraon community fulfills their daily needs from the field. Many times, in the absence of nutritious food and during drought, the bari fulfills their needs. The main vegetables grown in the bari are potato, brinjal, cucumber, peas, radish, tomato, chilli, ginger, pumpkin, bitter gourd,

etc. Greens include laal saag, paalak, bathua, mooli saag, bhaji saag, sarson saag, methi, thepa saag, chana saag, sanai phool, cabbage, cauliflower, etc.

The diversity in the Oraon bari fulfills their nutritional needs. Botanical analysis shows that the vegetables grown in the bari provide the members of the community with essential vitamins, proteins and fiber in abundance. However, in recent decades, this diversity has decreased and hence now many researchers are classifying tribal women as malnourished.

Conclusion

To conclude, there needs to be a balance between environment and humans for the sustenance of the earth. The traditional agricultural practices of tribal community's help strike a balance between need and greed. It also incorporates centuries-old knowledge systems advocating extracting only the essential resources from nature. Use of organic fertilizers, multiple cropping methods, traditional soil fertility management, maintaining a rich variety of food sources, etc. are some of the essential features of the traditional agricultural methods of the tribes. It is now high time that regional, national and international institutions take keen interest in preserving and reviving these traditional practices. If combined efforts are made to preserve and revive these, it can have a great impact on the health of the world population.

References

1. Chakraborty, U. K., Vinamrta, & Narayan, B. (2024). Social dimension of faith and beliefs of the Oraon. In

The Routledge handbook of contemporary readings on tribes and religions in India (pp. 1–15). Routledge.

2. Ghosh, A. (2006). The world of the Oraon: Their symbols in time and space. Manohar Publishers & Distributors.
3. Grignard, A. (2017). Hahn's Oraon folk-lore in the original: A critical text with translations and notes. Gyan Publishing House. (Original work published ca. 1906)
4. Roy, S. C. (1915). The Oraons of Chota Nagpur: Their history, economic life, and social organisation. Ranchi: Man in India Office.
5. Sachchidananda. (1968). The tribal village in Bihar: A study in unity and extension. Delhi: Bhartiya Adimjati Sevak Sangh.
6. Tirkey, A. B. (2002). Oraon indigenous knowledge and practices: A study of ethnobotany and sustainable development. Ranchi: Tribal Research Institute.

Traditional Developmental Mechanism and Institutions of the Tribals of Jharkhand

Mr. Anal Kishore Minz

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Anthropology, S.S.J.S.N College, Garhwa, Jharkhand, India.

Email: ani_hansraj@yahoo.co.in

Article DOI Link: <https://zenodo.org/uploads/17132079>

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.17132079](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17132079)

Abstract

Tribals have been concerned about development since independence. The government has made efforts to improve their lives through various external schemes and programs in multiple sectors like health, education, employment, and agriculture. However, these programs have not yielded the desired results for decades. In the 1980s, the government adopted a new approach and involved anthropologists in developing tribal communities. Anthropologists studied the ground realities and engaged the affected populations in drafting and implementing development schemes. They recognized the significance of tribal society and its traditional way of life, which had inherent democratic mechanisms and social structures that supported the village way of life and overall community development. This chapter explores the traditional way of life of tribes and how their self-dependent democratic systems contributed to their overall development and maintenance of the village. It will also compare the traditional development approach of tribes with externally imposed developmental schemes in tribal areas.

Keywords: Endogenous development, Indigenous Knowledge system, Traditional development, Sustainable development, Cultural relativism

Introduction

In anthropology, development refers to the changes that occur in societies, encompassing social, cultural, economic, and political aspects. It is frequently associated with modernization, globalization, and efforts to enhance the well-being of individuals. Anthropologists study development as a multifaceted and historical phenomenon influenced by power, culture, and local circumstances. They examine development through diverse lenses, such as colonialism, inequality, and cultural disruption. Their focus lies in understanding how local communities respond to, resist, or adapt when external forces or plans are imposed or planned. The term often highlights the conflicts between external entities, including governments or NGOs, and traditional ways of life or knowledge systems.

The anthropological concept of “development” within tribal or indigenous communities, when viewed through a traditional lens, refers to the organic, community-driven processes of social, cultural, and economic transformation that occur within their unique cultural and environmental contexts (Harris, 1987). In contrast to contemporary development paradigms, which are often externally imposed through state or non-governmental organization interventions, traditional development methods among tribal groups are rooted in their indigenous knowledge systems,

cultural practices, and adaptive strategies. Prior to the arrival of external agencies that sought to shape the development initiatives of tribes, these communities were self-sufficient, independent, and possessed their own intricate social systems that fulfilled their needs.

Objectives

The present chapter has the following objectives:

- To understand the anthropological concept of development
- To explore the traditional agencies of development, such as parha system, dhumkudia and madait, in tribal communities of Jharkhand
- To take a look at the role of indigenous knowledge system in development of tribes
- To understand the impact of forcing external models of development on these communities
- To highlight the role of anthropologists in formulating development plans for indigenous communities

Data and Methodology

Data has been collected based on intensive fieldwork methods. Fieldwork has been conducted primarily among the members of the Oraon tribe of Ranchi, Gumla, Lohardaga and Latehar districts of Jharkhand and also in the border regions of Chattisgarh, over a span of around 2-2.5 years. Information was gathered mostly through observation and interview techniques. Apart from primary methods of data collection, various secondary sources were also referred to.

Theoretical Framework

Indigenous Knowledge Systems: Tribal communities thrive by transmitting and adapting traditional ecological knowledge, which encompasses sustainable practices for agriculture, hunting, gathering, and resource management. For instance, the shifting cultivation method, exemplified by practices like jhum in Northeast India, embodies a cyclical and sustainable approach to land use. This approach maintains ecological balance while ensuring food security. This highlights the community mechanism of land usage and the multi-cropping pattern. Indigenous knowledge systems are age-old accumulated knowledge and ways of life that have sustained them for centuries. The knowledge possessed by the tribes was sufficient to manage their internal needs and sustenance. However, it was only after the concept of the “white man’s burden” emerged that tribal communities were perceived as savage and devoid of civilization.

Community-based resource management involves collective management of natural resources such as forests, water, and land, governed by customary laws and communal decision-making (Bennett, 1995). For instance, the Van Panchayats (forest councils) among tribal groups in Jharkhand lead community-led forest conservation and equitable resource distribution. Tribal communities collectively own and manage their resources, and internal development agencies among them are effective in managing these resources. Customary practices and unwritten laws that have consensus have proven competent in managing these resources. In the contemporary world, these mechanisms are gaining

significant attention, and the globe is eager to understand the ways of life that can play a crucial role in sustaining the remaining natural resources of the Earth.

Cultural and ritual practices are integral to development. These practices, including rituals, festivals, and oral traditions, foster social cohesion and identity, ensuring the preservation of knowledge and values. For example, the Oraon, Munda, and Santhal tribes in India celebrate festivals like Sohrai to mark harvests and strengthen community bonds. These festivals indirectly support agricultural cycles and animals that assist in economic activities, thereby contributing to social stability.

Kinship and social organization play a pivotal role in the development of tribes. These networks and clan-based systems facilitate labor sharing, conflict resolution, and mutual support, which are crucial for sustaining economic and social structures. For instance, the tribes of Jharkhand leverage kinship ties to establish trade networks, enabling them to share resources across villages and adapt to the challenging environmental conditions.

Traditional development often emerges as a response to environmental challenges. Tribes have developed diverse practices to ensure their survival, including pastoralism, terrace farming, and multi-cropping.

Throughout history, bartering and local economies have been key drivers of economic growth. In these systems, goods like crops, animals, or handmade crafts are traded based on what each community needs. For instance, the Oraons of Jharkhand used to trade with the Asur iron smelter

community for iron tools. In return, they would give them extra food like millet or pottery to help them out.

Oral education and skill sharing are super important for how we grow up. Through stories and learning from family or clan members, we pick up skills like weaving, making tools, and even medicine. For example, in India, the Oraon tribe has this traditional medicine men called Baigas who pass down their knowledge from generation to generation. This not only keeps their culture alive but also helps them understand and protect the environment.

Why Are Anthropological Perspectives Important to Understand the Internal Dynamics of Traditional Development?

Cultural relativism, a crucial tool in anthropology, aids us in comprehending diverse cultures more effectively. It emphasizes the importance of examining beliefs, values, and practices from their respective cultural perspectives rather than comparing them to our own. What may be deemed right or acceptable in one culture might differ in another, and it's essential to recognize that no culture is inherently superior or inferior to the others (Boas, 2021).

Traditional tribal development, a holistic approach, integrates social, cultural, economic, and ecological dimensions, contrasting with fragmented modern development models (Haviland, 1999). Anthropologists observe that tribal communities resist or selectively adopt external development interventions, driven by a desire to protect their autonomy and cultural identity. Traditional methods, inherently

sustainable, prioritize long-term ecological and social balance over short-term gains. Development within tribal contexts is shaped by internal power structures, such as elders, and external pressures, including colonial legacies and state policies, which anthropologists critically analyze.

The Traditional Development, Its Agencies and Methodology

Tribal communities are characterized by the collective ownership of resources. This can be understood via the example of fishing and the system of totems. During fishing expeditions, the entire catch is equally divided among the villagers who went for fishing. Some share, though quantitatively lesser, is also given to people, who for some reason could not accompany the rest to the fishing event, owing to the belief that even these people had equal right over the river waters and the fishes found in it. The clan system among the tribes of Jharkhand is known as totems. Totem can be any plant, tree, animal or bird, etc, with which a group of people associate their origin. Members of a clan are responsible for preserving their totem symbol and hence consumption of totem symbol by members of the same clan is tabooed. Here it is interesting to note that no clan has mountains, rivers or sun, etc as their totem symbol. This can be primarily attributed to community ownership of these natural entities.

This unique feature has consistently prevented the excessive hoarding of resources for personal gain. When resources are collectively owned, the development of the village or the

community itself becomes the collective responsibility of all its members. Until the advent of the cash economy in the last century, land, forests, and water resources were diligently managed and executed by the community as a whole. This system prevailed until the cash economy gradually replaced the barter system.

This collective ownership and the absence of the concept of private property always kept the tribal society away from 'unlimited, endless greed'. Production was done as much as was necessary. And this was sufficient for survival. Currency did not exist in tribal society till the last century. Immovable property included land and movable property included animals, jewellery, stone tools etc. The social value of jewellery among the tribals was more than its economic value.

In tribal societies, politics is guided by their traditional laws and customs. The village elders hold the power to make important decisions about development, a system known as gerontocracy. They decide how to use forest resources, organize hunting and fishing expeditions, and establish a well-ordered village. These traditional political organizations have different names in different tribes. For instance, the Oraons call it the Parha, and the Mundas call it the Manki System. The Santhals have their own system called the Manjhi System. These political leaders also decide the days and times for cultural activities, rituals, and festivals. So, in a way, these traditional political systems were the strongest internal development mechanisms among the tribes of Jharkhand.

Dhumkudia, or Youth Dormitory, was a traditional organization for unmarried tribal youth that provided socio-cultural, economic, traditional, political, and religious training. It was prevalent until the middle of the last century and served as a training ground for adulthood among many tribes. These youth dormitories played a crucial role in shaping and sharing the collective wisdom of being a tribal of a specific community or village. Renowned anthropologists like Haimendorf, Verrier Elwin, Sarat Chandra Roy, Grigson, and Honigman conducted in-depth studies on these youth dormitories.

The youth dormitory, a strong structure of socialization among the tribals, served as a place where tribal young men and women engaged in systematic learning of creative work after daily chores. It was also their night resting place. In the Oraon tribe, it was known as Dhumkudia, where the youth listened and learned about their culture, indigenous knowledge, religious traditions, songs, dances, folk tales, and folk songs. These stories of ancestors prepared them for a future life filled with difficulties and challenges. They also received sex education and the opportunity to choose the right life partner. Here, they developed an understanding of social responsibilities, a collective spirit, and decision-making abilities. Dhumkudia was divided based on gender and age. While in many tribes, men and women had separate residences, in some tribal communities, they lived together in the same youth dormitory. Membership in the youth dormitory was almost compulsory, and it was the

responsibility of senior members to impart social responsibility education to junior members.

The institution of youth dormitory prevailed in almost every tribe, though the traditional name associated with it differs from one tribe to another. It is known as 'Kichuki' among the Naga tribals of India, 'Rangbang' among Bhotiyas, 'Gitioda' among Munda and Ho, 'Jonkhedpa' or 'Dhumkudia' among Oraon, 'Ghotul' among Gond, 'Kodada' among Maler, 'Dhangar Basa' among Bhuiyan, etc. Unfortunately, in the second half of the 20th century, their traditional existence got blurred in the race of progress.

The youth, under traditional training with the dormitory, jointly fulfilled the needs of the village. This included cleaning the village, supporting agricultural activities for the village families, collecting and selling minor forest produce, preparing traditional dancing grounds, participating in village decision-making councils, and assisting families during marriages, deaths, and other rituals. This was one of the most powerful developmental agencies in any tribal village. The youths were full of energy and carried out these developmental activities while learning them collectively.

The paddy plantation system, also known as the paddy system, involved the entire village contributing its labor to a single family to complete the plantation within a day. This cycle of assistance, locally referred to as 'madait', was then passed on to the next family in the village. Unlike cash remuneration, the family that sought help would host a community feast in the evening, which was extended to the rest of the families as well. This system demonstrated a

remarkable ability to simultaneously cater to the economic needs of the community while also strengthening the bonds between its members. Even in the present times, this traditional system of madait is functional. During the season of paddy plantation, women from a village collectively sowing paddy saplings in the fields, is a common observation in the Chota Nagpur region.

Tribal Indigenous Knowledge System

Indigenous knowledge systems reflect the art and style of living of indigenous communities. These systems are the stories of human struggle and success against the challenges presented by their environment over centuries. They are the stories of local communities' resilience and survival in their environments for millennia, accumulating knowledge over thousands of years and passing it down through generations. Despite our boastful embrace of high-tech life, it would be a grave mistake to disregard the knowledge gained through thousands of years of experience. Regrettably, there is no one willing to accept this invaluable knowledge. The most disheartening aspect is that society as a whole refuse to take or preserve it.

Indigenous knowledge, a local form of knowledge, emerges from the interaction between a specific culture and society with its environment. Developed over generations through collective efforts, it is a priceless resource. In anthropology, we emphasize the importance of in-depth studies to understand this knowledge. A holistic study of a village or community involves examining it from various angles,

including its relationship with animals, land, water, forests, and natural events. Tribal communities have managed these natural resources efficiently for thousands of years. They have learned within their communities how to treat different animals, trees, and plants, ensuring their inclusion in the food chain. Land, water, and forest management have also been mastered. Sustainable resource use has been practiced for years, with cultural rules and prohibitions created to limit the exploitation of naturally available resources.

Collectivity holds immense significance in these indigenous communities. They possess numerous profound observation methods enabling them to predict the weather for the coming year. In this indigenous society, collectively, resources are allocated based on their availability, determining the quantity of each resource to be utilized and which ones require protection. This society operates on the principle of need rather than greed. This indigenous knowledge system is once again governed by the collective conscience and decision. This area has gained significant attention in international academia.

The development and related activities in a village are closely intertwined with its kinship ties. In a village, the primary relationship with others often serves as the foundation of social bonding. This bonding and cooperation extend beyond the village, fostering connections with neighboring villages through matrimonial ties. The assistance and cooperation are evident in various aspects of sociocultural, economic, and even conflict resolution. Notably, kinship ties reduce the need for cash transactions, strengthening social bonding over

economic ones. All the developmental efforts undertaken by villagers are endogenous changes deeply rooted in their kinship ties.

The developmental efforts undertaken in villages and across other villages are primarily based on barter exchange. Barter exchange is often characterized by the existence of economic activities that are disguised as important social ties. This exchange of goods and services without cash inflow makes the activity flexible and fluid.

Cultural activities also contribute to strengthening community bonds and amplifying developmental efforts. Many rituals already designate the division of labor, fostering the involvement of all. This strengthening of ties enhances cooperation among villagers and with neighboring villages.

Challenges in Modern Context

Traditional development methods are resilient, but they encounter challenges from modern interventions like industrialization, land encroachment, and forced assimilation policies. Many of the government schemes and policies apply the mainstream model of development, as it is, on the tribal communities. Here it becomes important to understand that ‘one size fits all’ notion is not the practical approach in case of development. This is the exact reason why multiple schemes fail to meet the expected outcomes.

In this context, anthropologists argue that these external pressures disrupt traditional systems, resulting in cultural erosion or economic marginalization. However, many tribes adapt by integrating traditional practices with selective

modern inputs, such as utilizing mobile phones for trade coordination while preserving barter systems.

Conclusion

The indigenous knowledge system, kinship ties, social bonding, and other aspects of tribal society, when viewed holistically, are centuries-old traditions. These time-tested practices are highly sustainable in nature. The same community has effectively managed its endogenous development for ages, leaving ample resources for future generations. This is the hallmark of sustainable development in tribal societies. Consequently, the international community is now focused on studying these sustainable methods prevalent among tribal communities. These methods may be effective in conserving the Earth and its resources for future generations.

References

1. Bennett, J. W. (1995). *Human Ecology as Human Behavior: Essays in Environmental and Developmental Anthropology*.
2. Bernard, H. R. (2011). *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*.
3. Boas, F. (2021). *Anthropology and modern life*. Routledge, London
4. Elwin, V. (1979). *The Baiga*. Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi
5. Ember, C. R., & Ember, M. (1999). *Cultural Anthropology*. Prentice Hall.
6. Harris, M. (1987). *Cultural Anthropology*. Sage

Publication

7. Haviland, W. A. (1999). Cultural Anthropology, Thompson learning,

The Overlooked Role of Tribal Women in Shaping Society: Exploring the Ignored Wisdom

Dr. Binita Oraon

Assistant Professor. Dept. of Philosophy, Kashi Sahu College
Seraikella, Nisakpur, Jharkhand, India.

Email: binitaoraon@gmail.com

Article DOI Link: <https://zenodo.org/uploads/17132221>

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.17132221](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17132221)

Abstract

The recent decades have witnessed an increase in the instances of debates over significant contribution of women in maintaining the essence of any community. Tribal societies are generally described as inherently egalitarian, yet the role played by the women in these societies is often overlooked. The present chapter, titled “The Overlooked Role of Tribal Women in Shaping Society”, explores the significant yet often unacknowledged contributions of tribal women in building social, cultural, and economic resilience within their communities. Through historical and contemporary case studies, the chapter explores how tribal women have served as guardians of indigenous knowledge, mediators of cultural practices, and catalysts for sustainable development. Despite facing systemic marginalization these women have played pivotal roles in maintaining ecological balance, preserving oral traditions, and fostering community cohesion. The chapter emphasizes their agency in navigating challenges such as modernization, displacement, and gender-

based discrimination, while advocating for greater recognition of their contributions in shaping inclusive and sustainable societies. By centering their voices, this work underscores the urgent need for policies and frameworks that empower tribal women, ensuring their roles should no longer be overlooked and celebrated as integral to societal progress.

Keywords: indigenous knowledge, sustainable development, oral traditions, inclusive development

Introduction

The world has always remained ignorant towards women. Since the inception of society, women have been considered a burden. In the band stage, when man was basically a hunter gatherer or even in the later stages of evolution, where shifting cultivation emerged, women were considered a weak sex and hence a burden for the group. Women were often engaged in collecting fruits, nuts and roots for the group, while physically taxing tasks like the big game hunting were the prerogative of the males. Physical disabilities associated with pregnancy and childbirth, and the need for special care postpartum further exacerbated the above-mentioned notion. It is only in the recent decades that the world is experiencing increased women's' rights activism. Women themselves have become aware and turned vocal about their rights, and demand equal status and equal respect as their counterparts. In this context, the present chapter explores the, often unacknowledged, role of women in shaping society, with a special focus on the tribal or the indigenous society.

Tribes are found all over the world, but Indian tribal society and culture are distinct in many ways, including religion, economy, and culture. Tribes live in the natural environment surrounding rivers, forests, and mountains. They learn to adapt to any situation, no matter how challenging. From rivers, they learn to overcome obstacles. The waterfalls from the mountains teach them to sing about life's challenges. Animals, birds, and nature serve as natural teachers for tribes. Tribes are people who have lived in dense forests for generations, passing down their traditions from one generation to the next. They are known as origin or tribe people. Due to these factors, they are incredibly brave, hardworking, and simple in their behavior. However, they possess remarkable willpower and can achieve anything they set their minds to with their hard work.

Women are an integral part of tribal communities. They play a vital role in preserving their rich cultural heritage and managing natural resources. Unlike many non-tribal communities, women in tribal communities make significant economic contributions to the society. They are the primary caregivers, passing down their legacy from one generation to the next.

There are many amazing tribal women like Singi Dai, Kalgi Dai, Champu Dai, and Phulo Jhano. They fought for their rights, self-respect, and land, forests, and tribal women. Just like men, they have their own unique way of life. In Rohatasgarh, for instance, tribal women defeated outsiders three times, saving their people and fort.

Objectives

The chapter deals with the following objectives:

- To reflect on the importance of women in general
- To discuss the pivotal role played by women in maintaining tribal communities
- To observe the role of women in passing down the cultural legacy to next generations
- To understand the economic contributions of tribal women
- To highlight the special traditions like Jani shikar and Budhi karam, prevalent among tribes

Data and Methodology

The present work is a culmination of years of field experience among various tribes of Jharkhand, particularly the Oraon tribe. Techniques such as observation, individual and group interviews, cross interviews, case study method and collection of life histories of tribal women were employed during the course of the research. Apart from the fieldwork, certain secondary sources highlighting the significant contribution made by tribal women were also used to get a hold of the topic.

Daily Life of Tribal Women

Tribal women play an integral part in the functioning of their society. Early morning, they wake up to the sound of a unique bird called the Chunchuiya. Their day starts with threshing rice using a dhekee, a tool they run by foot. After that, they cook food for their family to take care of the

children. Meanwhile, the men go ploughing the fields. After cooking and completing their morning tasks, the women pack food for the men and take food for herself and her children who are also working on the field. They themselves also work in the fields. During the paddy cultivation season, women working in the fields in groups, sowing paddy saplings, is a common sight in Jharkhand. At 8, they return to the fire for the whole family. After a long day of work, they come home tired and prepare food for the family, arrange grass for the cattle, and finally have dinner. After dinner, they go to sleep. Tribal women play a crucial role in their families.

Women Contributing to Tribal Way of Life

Tribal communities, till date, are based on oral traditions and lack written documents of their past. This necessitates passing down their culture, customs and traditions from one generation to the next, orally. Women play a pivotal part in this. During the early years of socialization, a child learns the most from his mother. Thus, it is the women of these communities who play the major part in passing down the cultural heritage over successive generations, thereby maintaining their identity.

The daily routines of the tribal population are quite hectic. They engage in various physical tasks, such as farming, household chores, and other activities. There's a popular proverb that says, "When tribals walk, it appears as if they are dancing, and when they speak, it sounds like they are singing a song." Women play a key role in the agricultural activities of the community. From preparing the seeds and

the agricultural land, to actually sowing the seeds in the field and harvesting the crop, tribal women contribute in all these activities. While cultivating, the Adivasis sing their unique songs. After a day's hard work, they gather in the village center to relax in the evening. They use "Mandar" and "Nagda" instruments during their dances. Due to their physical labor, their bodies remain healthy and fit. The women also collect fodder for cattle and firewood for the kitchens.

During rainy days when paddy is planted, tribal women collect snails. These small, unique types of snails are an integral part of their diet. On the other hand, these special snails are known for their medicinal properties and are often used to treat night blindness. Individuals who incorporate these snails into their diet tend to avoid experiencing night blindness. In tribal communities, these snails are particularly revered and are often given to pregnant women.

During the same season, tribal women construct baskets using bamboo and a specific type of grass. These baskets serve as fish catchers, as the paddy-planted fields are abundant with fish during this time. While using these fish catchers, various fish species are caught, each rich in calcium. Tribal women then roast these fish using a unique method and store them in a potong.

Tribal women have their own philosophy for preservation of food items which they keep to be consumed for a year. They make bags made up with sal leaves with the help of very small and thin bamboo sticks. Women keep the food items inside the bag and hang it above the chulha (traditional

hearth) at a vertical height of 6-7. feet where the smoke produced by the hearth prevents growth of bacteria and fungus in these items. This technique also protects the food items from coming in contact with moisture, thereby increasing the shelf life of these edible items. Thus, tribal women play an important role in the preservation of food. Sal leaf bags are utilised in tribal homes to preserve foos items like dried small fishes, dried vegetables, etc. The same technique is also used to traditionally store seeds, which can be then used for sowing in the next agricultural cycle.

The other preservation methods for paddy, cereals and millets include chataka, morra, and tommba. Chataka is made from thin bamboo strips, commonly used to store rice. Morra is made from straws, used to store dal, millets, and rice. Tummba is made from the hard outer corner of a bottle guard or pumpkin and is used to store various dried food items. It was also used to store water, which could be easily carried for long distances and served as a traditional flask. During travel, tribes would wet chana or rice in the water stored in the tummba. After the chana or rice was soaked, the tribes would eat it and drink the water. The water tasted more delicious and refreshing.

Tribals use a unique drink called Diyang, Bordya, and Hadiya rice beer. The preparation of these traditional drinks usually involves tribal women. These beverages are prepared by adding medicated herbs, leaves, and roots to rice. Hadiya rice beer is particularly refreshing during the summer season. However, it's important to consume it in moderation, as it provides natural cooling to the body only when consumed in

limited quantities.

Tribal festivals often involve the worship of sacred trees like Karama Tree and Sakuwa Tree. However, the Sal Tree is revered the most among the tribal people. This tree is considered alive, and its parts possess remarkable properties. For instance, if a flower is plucked from the Sal Tree and kept anywhere, it remains unchanged for an entire year, unaffected by any external factors. Similarly, if the petiole (stalk) of the Sal leaf is removed and kept in water, it will facilitate germination of bio insects. Sal leaves are integral to tribal culture and are used in various occasions, including births and deaths ceremonies.

Sal leaves are used in two ways: as a leaf bowl called Dona and as a leaf plate called Pattal. During rainy days, tribal women can easily do their field work because they have a Gungu (made from gungu leaves) to protect them from the heavy rain. When tribal ladies cover their bodies with gungu, they feel warm even in the rain. When women carry their children on their backs and work in the field during the rain, they cover their children with gungu. The child feels warm and falls asleep on their mother's back. As their children sleep, tribal ladies can easily finish their field work.

The elderly tribal ladies hold a special place in their families. If they can't go to the field, they take care of the house and look after their grandchildren. They craft mats from palm leaves and make brooms using broom grass. Palm leaves are integral to various rituals and even weddings. In tribal communities, elderly women create Ledra, which is made by stitching together old clothes like sarees and bed coverings.

Tribal women hold deep spiritual and religious beliefs. The colors of cock, hadiya (rice beer), arwa chawal, and sakuwa leaves are essential and revered items in their worship practices. Giandu Pahanien, a tribal woman, recounts her experiences in her village during an interview. She reveals that anyone in the village who experiences stomach ache or a baby crying in pain when touched or blessed by her is healed within a few minutes.

Adivasi women pass on the value of hard work to their children, leading to their gradual development in fields like education, sports, and leadership. Today, India is proud to have many Adivasi women making significant contributions. In sports, we see hockey players like Tete, while in politics, we have dynamic leaders like Shilpi Neha Tirkey and Kalpana Soren, Geetashree Oraon at the state level, and Draupadi Murmu as the President of India.

Women Fostering Socio-Cultural Ties

In any tribal village, early in the morning, women and young girls form small groups and visit the nearby jungles in order to collect fodder for their cattle as well as to collect firewood for the kitchens. Tribal women are known for their cooperative nature and teamwork spirit. They efficiently complete their tasks like sowing crop seeds and harvesting the produce, in a small amount of time. This can also be attributed to their cooperative nature. While going to the jungle or while working in the fields, women often sing songs and enjoy the process.

During paddy cultivation season, women form groups and

collectively work in a field and sow paddy saplings. The process of sowing these saplings is locally known as ropa in Jharkhand, while the practice of helping each other cultivate the fields quickly is known as madait in the region. After completing on field, the group moves to the next and then to the next. During the entire process of ropa, women sing cultural songs. They also have and share their lunch with each other, thereby cultivating their relationship with each other.

Traditionally, during any socio-cultural celebration in villages, food is served in plates and bowls made from tree leaves, generally sakhua leaves, and not the disposable plates and bowls. This is not just environment friendly, but also provides the added benefit of using the used plates and bowls as fodder for the cattle. During events like marriage, etc, women from a village collect sakhua leaves from the nearby jungles and sit together sewing these leaves in the form of plates, locally known as pattal in Jharkhand, and bowls, known as dona in the region. Such events allow women to chit chat and relieve themselves of any stress. They talk and share with each other, thereby fostering social ties. In addition, on any such occasion, women collectively sing traditional songs and dance together, further strengthening their bond.

Women Contributing to Tribal Economy

Tribal women, in accordance with the traditional division of labour, take care of the household as well as contribute in the agricultural fields. They collect fodder and firewood, clean

the house, prepare the food and bear and rear children. In addition, they also help the men in preparing land for cultivation, sowing the seeds as well as harvesting the crop.

In the forest dwelling tribes, women also collect minor forest products such as mahua from the nearby forests. They then prepare the traditional liquor, also known as mahua, from its flowers, using the traditional distillation technique. Apart from mahua, women also prepare the traditional rice beer or hadia. These are then sold in the market.

In addition, tribal women prepare various types of baskets and fishing nets using bamboo. With sakhua leaves, they also prepare plates and bowls. Likewise, they prepare traditional raincoats known as gungu from gungu leaves as well. All of these are then sold in the local markets.

Tribal women grind various types of oil using traditional methods. They also prepare different types of pickles and preserve them in clay pots to ensure their longevity. Their efficient preservation methods prevent spoilage for years.

Jani Shikar (Women as Hunters) and Budhi Karam

Jani shikar is a festival organised to commemorate the victory of Oraon women, led by Sinagi Dai, Champai Dai and Kaili Dai, who fought bravely against the invading Mughal army and defeated them twice. The battle took place at the Rohatargarh Fort, in present day Bihar, in the 17th century. Oraon women, dressed as men, fought valiantly with the Mughal army. In memory of their victory over the Mughals, Oraon women of Jharkhand dress as men and go hunting in the forest every 12 years. They hunt chicken and

goats, etc, which are then used for the community feast. This cultural tradition celebrates the bravery, self-respect, and self-defense of tribal women.

Karam is one of the two most important festivals of the tribal population of Jharkhand. The festival honors the Karam tree (*Nauclea parvifolia*) and deity, symbolising youth, power and fertility. This harvest festival marks the end of monsoon season and the beginning of agricultural cycle. Among the Oraon tribe of Jharkhand, Budhi Karam is an interesting event. A few days after Karam, Budhi Karam is organised especially for the old ladies of the village. They come, they booze, they sing and dance, and enjoy themselves. This underscores the value attached to women.

Conclusion

The mountain, river, and waterfall serve as the real teachers of the tribals, and nature serves as their classroom. Tribal philosophy is rooted in the profound connection between humans and nature. From ancient times to the present day, the tribals have faced significant challenges in preserving their forests, mountains, culture, traditions, and education—all of which are possible only through education. Numerous individuals from various fields, including education, sports, culture, politics, and beyond, are actively contributing to providing new directions to the tribal people. The government has implemented numerous educational programs aimed at ensuring the literacy of the tribal population.

In the field of education, there was a remarkable woman named Yashoda Devi Bhagat from a tribal community. She was a dedicated student who attended school every day without fail for three years. Even during the floods, she bravely crossed the river to reach school. Her consistent attendance and unwavering dedication caught the attention of the SDO, who rewarded her for her efforts.

Yashoda Devi Bhagat's story is a testament to her courage and determination. She faced challenges and obstacles but never lost hope. Her story serves as an inspiration to all who encounter difficulties and strive to overcome them.

References

1. Bhowmick, K. N. (2024). Status and empowerment of tribal women in Tripura. Kalpaz Publications.
2. Chhetri, A. B. (2009). Women empowerment and family management in tribal region. Concept Publishing Company.
3. Green, J. (Ed.). (2025). Making space for Indigenous feminism (3rd ed.). Fernwood Publishing.
4. International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs. (2016). Indigenous heroines: A saga of tribal women of India. IWGIA Publications.
5. Mann, R. S. (2000). Tribal women empowerment and gender issues. MD Publications.
6. Misra, K. K., Das, L. K., & Pant, N. (Eds.). (2005). Tribal women: Yesterday, today and tomorrow. Rawat Publications.
7. Singh, S. K. (2012). Empowerment of tribal women

through self-help group. LAP Lambert Academic Publishing.

8. Singh, S. S. (2006). Tribal religions (History of science, philosophy & culture in Indian civilization, Vol. 2). Concept Publishing Company.
9. Warren, K. J. (Ed.). (1997). Ecofeminism: Women, culture, nature. Indiana University Press.

Understanding the Bottlenecks of Tribal Entrepreneurship vis-a-vis Tribal Wisdom

Dr. Shampu Tirkey

Assistant Professor (Commerce), Rajiv Gandhi Govt.P.G.College Ambikapur, Surguja (C.G.), India.

Email: shamputirkey1977@gmail.com

Article DOI Link: <https://zenodo.org/uploads/17132369>

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.17132369](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17132369)

Abstract

Tribal entrepreneurship in India is a fascinating mix of cultural heritage, indigenous knowledge, and modern economic dreams. But it's facing some tough challenges that are holding it back from becoming a truly sustainable development powerhouse. This chapter explores the obstacles that are blocking tribal entrepreneurship, while also highlighting the incredible wealth of tribal wisdom that could unlock economic empowerment. By looking at social, cultural, commercial, and economic perspectives, the study finds key constraints like limited access to financial resources, poor infrastructure, lack of market connections, and a lack of awareness of modern entrepreneurial practices. These challenges are made even worse by systemic issues like policy gaps, social marginalization, and the erosion of traditional knowledge due to modernization pressures. On the other hand, tribal wisdom, which includes sustainable practices, collectivism, and a deep connection to the environment, offers valuable insights for creating resilient entrepreneurial models. This chapter proposes some

strategies to overcome these obstacles. It suggests public-private partnerships, digital empowerment, and capacity-building initiatives that align with tribal values to foster inclusive and sustainable entrepreneurship. The chapter emphasizes the importance of balancing modern economic systems with tribal wisdom to achieve the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, ensuring economic independence while preserving cultural and environmental heritage.

Keywords: Tribal Entrepreneurship, tribal wisdom, sociocultural marginalisation, sustainable entrepreneurship, tribal ethos

Introduction

India's tribal communities, making up over 8% of the population, have a rich cultural and ecological heritage. They're a mix of traditional knowledge and amazing resilience. Despite their deep wisdom based on sustainable practices and teamwork, tribal communities often get left behind in economic growth. Tribal entrepreneurship, with its huge potential to create inclusive development and fit India's vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, faces many challenges that limit its reach and impact. These problems, like not having enough money and poor infrastructure, lack of policies, and a disconnect from the market, are a stark contrast to the strengths of tribal wisdom, which is all about living in harmony with nature, working together as a community, and being resourceful.

Tribal entrepreneurship faces complex challenges due to systemic barriers and the underutilization of tribal wisdom.

These obstacles include limited access to capital, lack of digital literacy, and the erosion of traditional knowledge under modernization pressures. These structural and cultural barriers hinder their growth. At the same time, tribal wisdom, which includes ecological stewardship, collective decision-making, and indigenous innovations, can inform entrepreneurial strategies that are both economically viable and culturally resonant.

Let us look at successful tribal businesses, like those that used the Forest Rights Act (2006) to start small forest-based businesses. By studying these cases and analyzing important policies, we can find ways to overcome these challenges. We should try to use modern tools like digital platforms and public-private partnerships with tribal values to create inclusive, sustainable, and growing entrepreneurial environments. By doing this, we can better understand how tribal entrepreneurship can help empower people economically while protecting the cultural and environmental heritage of India's tribal communities.

Objectives

This chapter deals with the following objectives:

- To understand the traditional economic structure of tribal communities
- To look at the various factors hindering full-fledged growth of tribal entrepreneurship
- To discuss whether the tribal wisdom hinders tribal entrepreneurship
- To understand the concept of tribal haat bazaars and

discuss the feasibility of developing tribal entrepreneurship in this context

➤ To discuss strategies that can help remove the bottlenecks in tribal entrepreneurship

Data and Methodology

The present work is a result of prolonged field research conducted among the tribal villages of Jharkhand. The research work particularly focussed on the traditional economic organisation of the tribes

Theoretical Framework

The economic structure in tribal society is different from other societies. The study of the economic structure of tribal society began from the middle of the twentieth century. Karl Polyani's much discussed book - 'Trade and Market in the Early Empires' clarifies the above incident. In the tribal community, social relations are more important than economic relations. In this socio-economic relation, profit and loss remain indirectly in a hazy state. The second important factor is our community ownership. The water, forest and land that is mine, is equally owned by every person of my society. Till a few decades ago, the concept of personal property did not exist among the tribals. And hence accumulation of wealth for 'seven generations' was meaningless.

We find this type of economic structure in many communities of the world. There are many such socio-cultural practices as in the Juno of Africa, Maori of New Zealand or Kwakiutl tribal community of North America,

which maintain community ownership and at the same time do not allow accumulation of wealth. The Kwakiutl tribe has a similar custom which we know as 'Potlatch'. Under this, a person is free to accumulate wealth but when he has earned it, he has to throw a community feast on a particular day. It is so lavish that after the feast, the person has nothing the next day. This cycle continues through many people in that society.

Tribal Wisdom: A Hindrance?

Today when tribal entrepreneurs are trying to start some business, our cultural mindset is still not able to keep up with the profit-making notion of the larger community. This is difficult. There are many tribal youths who are on the verge of taking off in the field of business after making hard efforts. But when we look closely at the market structure, it is consumer based. Without social support, one cannot move ahead only by self-efforts. This becomes challenging and full of struggle. Social participation and support become essential. And that is why it seems that the tribal youth cannot do business.

The second viewpoint is- why, can't the tribal youth do business? Of course they can. Tribal society has the capability to do business. In recent times, there are many tribal youths who have tried to take huge surges. They have set many such examples in which tribal youths have institutionally chosen business as a career. In this process, their network has definitely strengthened. But as said, the market is consumer based. In such a situation, it is the

responsibility of the society to support and encourage these youth. It is also necessary to keep one away from personal relationships. Youngsters also have to show seriousness towards entrepreneurship.

Collective ownership never had the custom or necessity of individual accumulation of movable and immovable property. This collectivity was the foundation of tribal society. Whether it was food grains, hunting, or gathering of roots and tubers, all were distributed equally among the families of the group. This is still the case today.

Accumulation of private property was meaningless in this type of social structure. This is a very profound characteristic of tribal society. This collective ownership prevented individual accumulation of wealth and resources. And whenever resources were exploited from the environment, it was always as per requirement and was always largely controlled. Only the required resource was obtained from the environment. When there was no greed, there was no concept of accumulation of wealth. The tribal society was satisfied, contended, capable and balanced in itself. It is a proven fact in social science that if the society is internally satisfied and balanced, then the speed of change or transformation in such a society is very slow. For the process of social change, it is necessary that change takes place only when the present social structure is unable to fulfil its responsibilities and requirements.

Tribal wisdom that always fostered communal ownership and was largely kinship based, acted as a bottleneck for the tribal entrepreneurs to venture into profit making businesses. Tribal

wisdom that emphasizes collective ownership can be tough for entrepreneurs to navigate. It can lead to decision-making delays because everyone needs to agree, which can slow down the quick, decisive actions that entrepreneurs need to take to seize opportunities. It can also make it hard for entrepreneurs to own their own assets or profits because the tribal system favors sharing. Entrepreneurs have to be risk takers whereas the tribal wisdom calls to prioritize stability over risk taking attitude. This can create social pressure that discourages entrepreneurs from pursuing their ambitious goals.

Concept Of Traditional Market or Hat Bazar Among the Tribal Communities

Traditional markets, or Haat Bazars, are deeply ingrained in the socio-economic and cultural fabric of tribal communities. These markets are a regular feature of tribal villages in Chhattisgarh. These open-air markets, held weekly or biweekly, serve as vibrant hubs for trade, socialization, and cultural exchange, embodying the collective ethos of these communities. Beyond commerce, Haat Bazars function as social gathering places where tribal members meet relatives, share information, and strengthen community bonds.

Haat Bazars are bustling marketplaces that connect people with a wide variety of goods. They sell everything from small forest produce like honey, tamarind, and medicinal herbs to agricultural products. For many tribal communities, like the Gonds, Maria, and Muria in Chhattisgarh, these markets are their main way to sell their MFP and handmade items. These

products make up a whopping 60-70% of their income! But sadly, they often don't get paid enough for their hard work.

Hat Bazars serve not only as marketplaces for tribal communities but also as dynamic spaces where economic, social, and cultural life converge. These spaces are deeply rooted in the tribal wisdom of collective ownership, which supports community resilience and provides a foundation for cooperative entrepreneurship. However, this collective ethos can also pose challenges for individual entrepreneurs.

The tribal hats are not essential for the tribals in the region. In and around Ambikapur, when we observe closely, the tribals visit these places to take a regular break from their daily chores. The tribal girls choose their cosmetics, while the children come solely for entertainment with small amounts of money in their pockets. The adults usually bring their kitchen produce to barter for their daily needs of salt and other items. It's actually a fun place for the tribals.

In contrast, urban spaces rely on marketplaces for their existence. Since urban areas don't grow food, they must procure essential items from the marketplace. If these marketplaces shut down, it would negatively impact the lives of urban dwellers. However, if the marketplaces shut down, it would put the tribals in an uncomfortable situation, but it would never question their existence.

Is There a Space for Tribal Entrepreneurship in Hat Bazaar?

Tribals often face exploitation by middlemen, resulting in only 15-20% of their produce's market value being retained.

This limitation hinders their reinvestment potential, as exemplified in Chhattisgarh's Haat Bazars. Additionally, poor infrastructure, including inadequate transportation, high travel costs, and limited storage facilities, negatively impacts profitability and market access. Furthermore, isolation from urban markets and a lack of awareness about broader demand trends hinder entrepreneurs from scaling beyond their local Haat Bazars. It was reported during a research interview that the local non-tribal middlemen force the tribals to sell their produce and product at much lower costs. They had no say in selling their produce.

Low literacy and limited digital access pose significant challenges for tribal entrepreneurs in India. Literacy rates in tribal areas, as evidenced by the 2011 Census, are relatively low, averaging between 50% and 60%. Consequently, many tribal entrepreneurs lack the necessary skills to effectively navigate digital platforms and employ modern marketing strategies. Financial constraints further exacerbate these challenges. Limited access to credit, as discussed in discussions on tribal entrepreneurship challenges in India, hinders investment in value added products and market expansion. Additionally, competition from external traders, particularly non-tribal vendors, dominates Haat Bazars, selling urban goods that overshadow local products. This competition reduces opportunities for tribal entrepreneurs to thrive. In addition to this the tribal wisdom and way of life also is a bottleneck for entrepreneurship. The tribal way of life is self-dependent and contented with whatever few requirements they have, so there are also weak aspirations for

venturing into large profit-making entrepreneurial efforts.

The Lack of Commercialization of The Products and Confinement of Opportunities to Urban Tribal Entrepreneurs

Tribal products face challenges stemming from systemic, cultural, and infrastructural barriers that hinder their reach to broader markets and limit entrepreneurial opportunities in urban centers, which have greater access to resources and networks.

In the rural areas, there is an absolute lack of commercialisation of the products. There are many constraints that have already been discussed above. Moreover, the opportunities if any with the tribal entrepreneurs are available with the urban tribals. Many of the tribal youths have ventured into entrepreneurship and are doing good but they are still struggling. Hence it is imperative that the society also come in support of these efforts. The lack of capital is the biggest bottleneck even for the urban tribal entrepreneur. Even in the case of urban entrepreneurs, to sustain for long without much profit during the initial phase has resulted in failure of their ventures.

Moreover, the entire tribal social and economic structure may come under question if the limited and community owned resources are commercialised in the tribal areas. The available resources are sufficient enough only to meet the community needs. There is less scope of surplus production and sale of the same. For example, Millet is rich in nutrients and it is only in the past decade that its consumption has

amplified in urban centers. The production capacity of the rural areas is not enough to meet the market needs of non-rural areas. Tribal products often remain in their natural state because they lack the skills, technology, or resources to add value. For instance, tamarind pods are sold raw instead of being processed into sauces or health products. This limits their profitability and appeal to the market.

Meager Usage of Modern Technology and Competition from the Larger Business Houses

Tribals are less familiar with the use of modern technology to promote their businesses. While some tribal entrepreneurs are located in urban centers, utilizing technology requires significant capital and infrastructure, which can be challenging for both rural and urban tribal entrepreneurs to access. There is a cut throat competition when it comes to taking head on with the larger business houses. The complicated permissions, food processing sanctions, amplifying branding, expanding consumers is a tedious task. Tribal entrepreneurs are trapped in low-income cycles due to the lack of commercialization, preventing them from reinvesting in their ventures or expanding beyond subsistence-level trade.

Strategies To Remove Bottlenecks in Tribal Entrepreneurship

To promote tribal entrepreneurship and address the lack of commercialization and urban bias, strategies must harmonize traditional tribal wisdom with modern tools, ensuring inclusivity for rural entrepreneurs.

1. Support tribal entrepreneurs in processing MFP and handicrafts into high-value products, such as packaged organic honey, tamarind-based cosmetics, or branded tribal textiles, thereby adding value to their products.
2. Promote geographical indication (GI) tags and organic certifications for tribal products to enhance their market appeal and branding.
3. Organize workshops in Haat Bazars, collaborating with NGOs and government agencies like TRIFED, to educate tribal entrepreneurs about consumer trends, particularly the growing demand for eco-friendly products.
4. Deploy mobile training units and market linkage programs to rural Haat Bazars, as successfully piloted in Chhattisgarh, to provide remote entrepreneurs with skills, credit access, and technology.
5. Strengthen the reach of schemes like the Forest Rights Act and Van Dhan Yojana in rural areas by improving local governance and monitoring. This will ensure that rural Haat Bazar vendors benefit equally.
6. Invest in roads, storage facilities, and market sheds in rural Haat Bazars, as outlined in India's Viksit Bharat 2047 vision, to reduce transportation costs and enhance product quality.
7. Tribal women, who are integral to Haat Bazars, can lead entrepreneurial ventures through self-help groups (SHGs). For instance, Santhal women in Jharkhand have successfully increased their incomes by 20-30% through SHGs, which have enabled them to scale lac bangle production.

8. Community-driven innovation involves utilizing traditional knowledge, such as the Gond's Forest management practices or the Khasi's herbal medicine expertise, to create sustainable products that resonate with contemporary markets. This approach ensures cultural preservation while fostering economic growth.
9. NABARD should provide microfinance and startup grants specifically designed for rural tribal entrepreneurs to help them overcome financial challenges and facilitate the commercialization of their ventures. Government efforts and Handholding is also very important in promotion of tribal entrepreneurship.
10. The Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED) promotes tribal entrepreneurship by connecting Haat Bazar vendors to larger markets through Tribes India outlets and e-commerce platforms. Additionally, Van Dhan Vikas Kendras support value-added MFP products, with over 3,000 centers established by 2023.

Haat Bazars, with their potential for inclusive tribal entrepreneurship, face challenges due to limited commercialization and opportunities confined to urban areas. Addressing these challenges through value addition, digital platforms, rural-focused policies, and cooperative models can transform Haat Bazars into vibrant hubs for both rural and urban tribal entrepreneurs. These strategies align with the collective wisdom of tribal communities, fostering sustainable economic growth while preserving cultural

heritage.

Conclusion

Rural diaspora also presents substantial opportunities for tribal entrepreneurship if provided with accessible platforms for trading minor forest produce, handicrafts, and cultural products. These platforms capitalize on the collective ownership wisdom of tribal communities. However, their impact is limited by the lack of commercialization and the restricted opportunities available to urban tribal entrepreneurs, particularly rural vendors. Systemic barriers, such as the exploitation of middlemen, inadequate infrastructure, limited access to skills and markets, and cultural resistance to individual profit, hinder scalability and inclusivity.

To address these challenges, Haat Bazars can promote value addition, establish digital market linkages, implement rural focused policies, adopt cooperative models, and foster cultural tourism. These initiatives empower both rural and urban tribal entrepreneurs, aligning economic growth with communal values. Targeted interventions, like those implemented by TRIFED and Van Dhan Yojana, can bridge the urban rural divide, ensuring sustainable and inclusive entrepreneurship that preserves tribal heritage.

References

1. Dalton, G. (Ed.). (1968). *Primitive, archaic, and modern economies: Essays of Karl Polanyi*. Beacon Press.

2. Dana, L.P., & Anderson, R. B. (Eds.). (2007). International handbook of research on indigenous entrepreneurship. Edward Elgar Publishing.
3. De Bruin, A., & Dupuis, A. (Eds.). (2003). Entrepreneurship: New perspectives in a global age book
4. Gudeman, S. (2001). The anthropology of economy: Community, market, and culture. Blackwell Publishers.
5. International Labour Organisation. (1991). Convention (No. 169) concerning indigenous and tribal peoples in independent countries. International Labour Organisation.
6. Peredo, A. M., Anderson, R. B., Galbraith, C. S., Honig, B., & Dana, L.-P. (2004). Towards a theory of indigenous entrepreneurship. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business*, 1(1/2), 1–20.
7. Polanyi, K. (1944). The great transformation: The political and economic origins of our time. Beacon Press.

Rites De Passage and the Wisdom of The HO Tribe of Jharkhand

¹Dr. Jai Kishor Mangal

²Dr. Saraswati Gagrai

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Ho, Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee University, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India.

²Assistant Professor, University Dept. of Ho, Ranchi University, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India.

Email: jaikishor005@gmail.com

Article DOI Link: <https://zenodo.org/uploads/17132578>

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.17132578](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17132578)

Abstract

Rituals have special importance in tribal culture. A rite of passage is a ceremonial or ritual event that marks a significant transition in an individual's life from womb to tomb. From ancient times, rituals have been performed to strengthen and enrich the personality of a person as well as for his social recognition and spiritual development. According to the beliefs of the tribals, the ancestors believed that rituals reorder the human mind and make the personality impressive and life joyful. Therefore, rituals were born to mitigate the obstacles and strengthen the calamities in human life directly or indirectly. In social life, cleanliness, purity, religiosity, and identity of a person are considered to be the main elements of rituals. Religious worship, rituals, and ceremonies are considered to be its basic foundation. It is generally believed that by practicing these rituals, human life can be improved, refined, and cultured. According to this, it

is a 'process of purification'. The present chapter discusses the rituals prevalent in the tribal communities of Jharkhand, particularly the Ho community. It discusses how the ritualistic aspect of human life might have come into existence and how it is a potent force that preserves and maintains community identity. Apart from this, the chapter also makes an attempt to explain the internal logic of the Ho community behind the performance of various rituals. The rites de passage is a prerequisite of the Ho community to allow an individual Ho to enter into the next phase of life as a social member of the community.

Keywords: Rituals, Rites de passage, Community Identity, Internal Logic, Philosophy, Rationality

Introduction

A rite of passage is a ceremonial or ritual event that marks a significant transition in an individual's life within a cultural or social context. These rituals symbolize and facilitate the movement from one social status or life stage to another, such as birth, puberty, marriage, or death. Since eternity, rituals have held a special place in Indian culture and traditions. In simple words, rituals refer to the socially accepted way of performing certain actions, symbolic of fulfilling a particular socio-cultural process such as rituals related to the birth of a child, marriage, or death rituals. The origin of rituals could have occurred for various reasons. In ancient times, man was unable to explain the logic behind various events like lightning, heavy rains, earthquakes, etc. As a result, belief in some form of supreme power emerged.

The urge to please this supreme power led to the birth of primitive forms of religion, and with religion, rituals came into existence. Also, since man at that time was in the hunting and gathering stage, food availability was uncertain. Hunting expeditions did not necessarily guarantee availability of food. As a result, man began performing certain actions, which were socially accepted and symbolic of the band praying to the supreme power for a successful hunting expedition. This marked the beginning of the ritualistic aspect of human life. Thus, rituals, in a way, mark spiritual growth of mankind.

Jharkhand is officially home to 32 Scheduled Tribe communities, each having its own unique culture, customs, and traditions. Rituals are an important aspect of this unique tribal culture. These rituals bind the members of the community together and foster community identity. It is important to mention here that unlike most non-tribal communities, rituals in tribal communities have been transferred over generations based on oral traditions. If lost, the entire rich culture associated with a particular tribe will be lost. Thus, rituals play an important role in preserving the cultural legacy of tribal communities.

Externally, many of the rituals may appear to be illogical and vague to an outsider; however, when analysed contextually, one can understand the rationality behind and the significance of these rituals in maintaining the identity of a community. The various rituals of the Ho community of Jharkhand, highlights the rationality and tribal philosophy behind these rituals.

Why is the Study of Rites de Passage Important?

In tribal societies, the member of the society when born is just a biological being. Rituals are to be performed that will finally adopt the biological being into a social being. Right from the pregnancy, to childhood, to adulthood and from marriage until death, there are rituals that gradually consider the members of Ho community to transfer in a meaningful way. It is only when these rituals are performed, a biological Ho is adopted by the community as a Sociological being.

Among the Ho people, performing rituals is not just a process of purification but it is also a means of providing a person with a social identity, traditional rights, and recognition. Apart from this, a person is also given customary legal rights like the right to property, the right to agricultural work, and the right to worship. Rituals mark the transition from one stage of life to another. Right from the birth of a child, the naming of the child till marriage, death, etc., of an individual, rituals are performed on all these occasions. Thus, we can say rites de passage is a process in which a member of a society experiences it right from the mother's womb and continues till the tomb.

Objectives

This chapter deals with the following objectives:

- To understand the concept of rituals prevalent in different tribal communities.
- To understand the origin of rituals.
- To understand the folk beliefs of the tribal community related to various rituals.

- To highlight the spirituality and philosophy hidden in the rituals of the Ho community.
- To explain the importance of rituals in modern times.

Data and Methodology

The present chapter has been compiled based on extensive fieldwork conducted among the various tribal communities of Jharkhand, particularly the Ho tribe. During the entire fieldwork process, due attention was paid to the ritual aspect of their socio-cultural processes. Observation, particularly participant observation, interview, case study collection, schedules, and questionnaires were the primary research techniques employed. Apart from this, I have taken the help of books, articles, and compositions as secondary sources.

The Concept of Rituals in the Ho Community

Rites and rituals are a process that allows a member of the Ho community to become a human being morally, culturally, and spiritually. Our social and spiritual life is strengthened by culture. Rites (culture) keep a man away from sin and ignorance and unite him with conduct, thoughts, and knowledge. In Ho language, rites have been called 'doshtur'. Ho people believe that all the shortfalls that arise in the process of producing children for procreation by a man and a woman, their refinement can be done only through ritualistic rituals, which is doshtur.

The Ho community believes that God, i.e. Singbonga is the creator of the universe. In the beginning, Singbonga created the universe with the help of five powers like Govanvonga, Nage Bindi Era, Jaira, Deshauli, and Pau. With the mixture

of these five elements, by Singbonga, the first two humans, Luku Hadam and Lukumi Budi, were born. The Ho community considers itself the offspring of Luku-Lukumi. Consequently, mention of Luku-Lukumi can be found in every rite, ritual, festival, folk tales, folk songs, etc., of the Hos. They believe that it is from them that the entire human race has proliferated. Over time, the activities performed by Luku-Lukumi for the growth of family were passed on from generation to generation in the form of rituals and rites. The Ho people believe that in order to remove or eliminate these defects, it is necessary to worship, pray, and serve these five powers along with Singbonga. Rituals are the means to worship, pray and serve these powers, in order to live a happy life.

Various Rituals and Beliefs of the Ho Community

Birth Rites: Regarding birth rites, Ho people believe that the creation of life and later the society, is almost similar to that of the first two humans, Luku-Lukumi. Similarly, the new born child also has to undergo the birth rites. Birth is called 'Jonom' in Ho language. The literal meaning of Jonom can be understood as sprouting or emerging. Jonom is made up of two words, Jo and Onom. Here, 'Jo' means seed or nature having life, whereas 'Onom' means beginning, emergence, birth, eruption, or blooming. Thus, 'Jonom' among the Ho people basically refers to the process of planting a life. It will bloom with time. In the case of humans, this process of Jonom can be understood as planting the life-containing seed or embryo in a woman's womb, in accordance with the laws

of nature, which then blooms in the form of a newborn baby. The Ho people believe that children conceived naturally (Garbhadharan) by the above-mentioned process are strong, powerful, loyal and obedient.

The rituals related to the birth ceremony begin once the mother conceives. Although no specific religious rituals are performed for conception, some prohibitions have been determined for the would-be father and pregnant mother by the Ho community. For example, a pregnant woman is prohibited from crossing a rope lying on the road, going out of the house during a solar eclipse or lunar eclipse, seeing the Aagomari bird, closing the rats' holes in the house, closing the hole of a vessel, making a hearth, sewing, embroidering, plastering, cutting anything, etc. During such times, the father does not hunt or kill any living creature, etc. This signifies that the tribal wisdom under the taboos allows the women to rest during the pregnancy. She is banned from engaging in tedious work that may adversely impact her health and the child in the womb. The would-be father is also under taboo. While he is not allowed to hunt as killing would be a kind of dishonouring the life of other creatures.

Commonly, the deliveries were done by an experienced woman of the village or nearby villages, known as dai maa, along with other women of the village decades back. After delivery, the umbilical cord of the child is cut and it is buried in the backyard of the house along with rituals. After burying the umbilical cord, a stone is placed over it. This stone symbolises that the newborn child is now a legitimate member of that family, thus granting him social recognition

and acceptance. According to the customary law of the Ho community, the child now has full right over the ancestral property. The stone symbolises the acceptance of children as the members of the Ho community and now they will be allowed in all the traditional and cultural activities of the Ho community.

After the birth of a child, many religious rituals and processes are performed as part of the birth rites by the Ho community. Among these, Koyong Ader, Sar Sidub, and Nutum Saki are the prominent ones. Koyong Ader refers to the ritual of entering 'Ading' (inner sacred room of Ho house) built inside the house, while placing the newborn child in the lap of the mother. Ading is a special room built in every house of the Ho community, in which the Ho people serve and worship their ancestors. After entering the Ading, the newborn is introduced to the ancestors by following some religious rituals, and prayers are offered for his or her happiness, prosperity, and safety. After entering the Ading, the child becomes a socially recognised member of that family. As per the customary law, he now becomes the heir of that house.

The second process is of 'Sar-Sidub'. It refers to the ritual in which the father buries a 'Sar', i.e. arrow, in front of the head of the newborn child. It can be interpreted as the child being made to sleep under the arrow. This arrow remains buried in front of his head until Chhathiyari ends. The Chhathiyari is a ritual that is organised after the seven days of birth of a child. According to the traditional belief system of the ho community, it is believed that the father makes the

newborn child take a spiritual oath through this arrow. When the father does this, the child indirectly grows up under the control of the father and follows the orders of the parents. This arrow contains the soul of Singbonga and that of the ancestors, under whose protection the newborn child will remain safe. These forces will protect the child from snake and scorpion bites, negative powers such as evil spirits or ghosts. Secondly, this process conducted by the father authorizes the child to protect his home and family from that day onwards. The child becomes entitled to hold and use arrows and bows as traditional weapons from that very day.

The third ritual is 'Nutum-Saki', which refers to the naming ceremony of the newborn child. A special and unique method is adopted for naming. Here, the child is named after one of the ancestors. The process involves calling in the name of the family ancestors and once the process consolidates a name, the child is traditionally named after that ancestor. Naming ceremonies are organised to preserve the lineage of that house. Ho people believe that the soul is the only entity on this earth, which is immortal. Therefore, in order to control the energy of the soul and to protect lineage from generation to generation, the naming ritual is a must. In this special ceremony the traditional name is generally the name of some ancestor of the family, especially grandparents. Through this ritual, the ancestors are respected, honoured, valued, and revered by the community members. The newborn child is now a member of a Kili (Clam) and Gotra.

Marriage Rituals: In most of the tribal communities of Jharkhand, including the Ho tribe, marriage is considered essential for the fulfillment of sexual desires and for the perpetuation of lineage. Not marrying is considered a conduct against nature. The Ho community believes that marriage is the only medium through which family can be formed and legitimate members can be added to the community, thus protecting one's lineage, clan, religion, ritual, tradition, identity and culture.

The term marriage is used in two aspects among the Ho community. The first is the ritualistic aspect which includes the actions performed in order to establish a permanent relationship between a man and a woman. The second aspect underscores the meaning of marital relationship and family life established through the socially accepted norms. In the Ho language, marriage is referred to as 'Anadi' or 'Aandi'. Anadi is made up of two words 'Ana' and 'Idi'. Ana means to nurture, while Idi means to bring. Thus, Anadi refers to the process of bringing a woman from one place to another, to a man, to give birth to a child, in order to nurture and raise it.

First and foremost, the maternal uncles of the bride and the groom play a major role. A marriage is not socially recognised in the Ho community unless and until the maternal uncles are involved in the process. 'Ere Bonga' is performed before marriage. It refers to a ritual performed in order to remove the auspicious and inauspicious, planetary and constellation defects. Before marriage, during the match making process, both the bride and groom's family visit each other's houses. Tribal wisdom engages non-human living

beings as well in their decision-making process. While travelling during the match making process, the elders observe cues in their surroundings that include, both auspicious and inauspicious signs. These signs include, a fallen tree on the way, a cat crossing the path, bulls fighting with each other, dogs barking or digging the soil with their feet, etc. The Ho community believes that all the inanimate elements on this earth such as earth, water, river, waterfalls, lake, air, sky etc. and biological elements such as animals, birds, trees, plants, insects etc. are all integral parts of nature. By recognizing these signs of nature, the HO community tries to decipher the natural signals. These signs before marriage and removed by Are Bonga. The new bride and groom are blessed by many religious rituals and finally social recognition is given for procreation.

Taboos in Ho Community

They have to follow many prohibitions and social rules in the society. In Ho society, these prohibitions and social rules have been determined according to nature and tribal wisdom. For women in society, it is forbidden to marry within the same Gotra, touch plough and build the tiles of the house, enter the Deshawli etc. It is also forbidden for a man to marry within the same gotra. Apart from this, it is forbidden for a man to kill animals, hunt, chop wood etc. when his wife is pregnant. This is a time when men and women are forbidden to engage in anything destructive. This is also a method of controlling the destruction of the natural environment; however, it is epimeral in nature.

There is also a provision for punishment for not following this in the Ho society. There are many beliefs, folktales and philosophies of the Ho people behind this. They believe that a woman is the form of a mother. The role of a mother is to create. For creation, she biologically needs a man. Similarly, in Ho society, physically, the plough is a spiritual symbol of a male phallus. Just as the seed is established in the female body through the male phallus to give birth to a child naturally, similarly, a plough is needed to sow seeds in the earth. Therefore, in Ho society, it is forbidden for a woman to touch and plough.

The same concept is visible in the context of marriage rituals also. Ho people believe that human beings are born through the penis. The structure of the female body, its physical activities such as menstrual cycle changes, are very similar to the changes in nature. The changes that take place in a female body from birth to becoming a mother, the same changes take place in nature as well. Both women and nature have the capacity to create. Both of them perform the work of creation in their own suitable time.

The Ho community keeps the calculation of these changes taking place in women and nature through 'Lita Gorgoni'. Lita Gorgoni is a (Calendar) prevalent in the Ho society, according to which the entire life of the Ho society is conducted. From agricultural work to all festivals and social activities are conducted according to it. At the same time, the changes taking place in nature are marked in the form of festivals.

Death Rituals: In the Ho community, death rituals are performed in three steps. In the first step, the dead body is either buried or burnt; in the second step, the ritual of 'Rova Keya Ader' is performed and in the third step, the ritual of 'Diri Dul Sunum' is performed. When a member of the community dies, the first step is to either bury or burn the dead body. Whether a body will be buried or burnt depends on the nature of death. In case of natural death, the body is buried while in the case of unnatural death such as death due to an accident, a disease or snake bite, etc., the body is burnt. The tribals burn the body during unnatural death as they do not become the part of ancestral divine figures to be revered by the family. The Ho wisdom here is that since the unnatural deaths are painful, the family disposes them from the ancestral and family system. They are to be forgotten soon for the mental health of the family members. No memories are kept of such deaths. On the contrary, deaths occurring naturally are fondly remembered even when the person is gone.

After the body has been buried or burnt, 'Rova Keya Ader' is performed. It refers to the ritual of reinstating the soul of a naturally dead person in Ading (the inner sacred room of Ho house). In contrast, the soul of a person who died under unnatural circumstances is not allowed to enter the Ading. It is installed on a tree within the boundary of the village. Members of the Ho community believe in reincarnation. According to their belief system, when someone dies in the family, he is born again in the same family. For the purpose of refinement, such a soul is not allowed to enter the house

through the Rova Keya Ader ritual. They believe that if such a soul enters the house, then in future this soul will be born again in the form of a child in the family and there is a possibility of such unfortunate incidents happening again in the family.

After this, 'Diri Dul Sunum' is performed. It refers to the traditional ritual of placing a stone over the grave of the deceased. This is the third and final step of death rites among the Ho people. Various rituals are performed after the stone is placed on the grave and oil is poured on it. Going by the literal meaning, Diri Dul Sunum means pouring oil on the stone in the Ho language. This ritual is considered to be mandatory. Without completing this process, marriage of anyone in that family and division of property in the future cannot occur. It is believed that only after pouring oil on the stone, the taboo on the family ends. The soul of the deceased now is ready to take birth again. On this occasion, all the clan members and villagers are invited and feasts are served.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that the Ho community is full of creation and spiritual knowledge. They were able to experience the uniformity in the structure of the human body and the natural structure. Their rituals are backed by the internal logic of the community, and thus they play a crucial role in maintaining and preserving their identity. Today, these rituals are losing significance under the influence of modernity. There seems to be an urgent need to explore these rituals through various researches, only then the natural

knowledge of the tribal people of this community as well as the entire global community can be understood.

References

1. Barda, Dr. Das Ram (2022), Sacraments of The Ho Marriage, Chaibasa
2. Ibid. (1984), Bah Buru Bonga Buru, Part-1, Angof Ipil Press, Jhinkpani
3. Ibid. (1984), Bah buru Bonga Buru, Part-2, Ango Ipil Press, Jodapokhar, Jhinkpani
4. Ibid. (2016) Kol Rule, Adi Sanskriti ewam Vigyan Sansthan, Jodapokhar, Jhinkpani.
5. Bodra, Lako, Sahar Hora Part-1 & 2, Adi Sanskriti ewam Vigyan Sansthan, Jodapokhar, Jhinkpani.
6. Chaki, Sadhna (2008) Seyan Sudita, Chakradharpur
7. Goswami, Sudha (2016) Adiwasi Sanskar geeton ka saundarya shashtra. Parikrama Prakashan, Delhi.

Exploring Tribal Philosophy in Mahasweta Devi's 'Jungle ke Davedar'

Dr. Dipak Paramanik

Dept. of Bengali, R.L.S.Y College Ranchi, Jharkhand, India.

Email: dipak.rlsy@gmail.com

Article DOI Link: <https://zenodo.org/uploads/17132857>

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.17132857](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17132857)

Abstract

Mahasweta Devi, a trailblazing Bengali writer and activist, shed light on tribal philosophy through her literary works. Her groundbreaking exploration of indigenous resistance and worldview, "Jungle ke Davedar" (The Owners of the Forest), explores the core principles of tribal philosophy. Devi's work on the Munda tribal leader Birsa Munda exemplifies this philosophy, emphasizing the deep connection between nature and the forest (jungle), which is not just a resource but a sacred, communal entity that embodies collective identity, spiritual nourishment, and existential sovereignty. Devi's narrative unravels the colonial and feudal encroachments that alienate tribals from their ancestral lands. Through vivid descriptions of Birsa Munda's Ulgulan (Great Tumult) rebellion in late 19th-century Bihar (now Jharkhand), Devi illuminates tribal epistemology, highlighting the knowledge gained from oral traditions, mytho historical lore, and experiential communion with the ecosystem, rather than imposed scriptural or legalistic frameworks. Devi critiques dominant structures like British imperialism, zamindari

oppression, and religious indoctrination while affirming tribal agency. Land rights, in Devi's view, represent not just economic survival but philosophical autonomy and cultural preservation. Devi's empathetic engagement with Adivasi communities explores themes of subaltern dignity, gender equality within tribal communities, and the interplay between tradition and resistance. Devi's work encourages a re-evaluation of mainstream narratives to include marginalized voices. Beyond biography, "Jungle ke Davedar" goes beyond to philosophize tribalism as an ethical framework of equity, sustainability, and defiance. It influences postcolonial discourse on indigeneity in India. By blending historical facts with fictional depth, Devi's "Jungle ke Davedar" stands as a manifesto for reclaiming tribal wisdom. Devi asserts that true guardians of the earth are those who live in symbiosis with nature rather than dominating it.

Keywords: Tribal Philosophy, tribal ecology, Oral tradition, Mother Nature, Spiritualism

Introduction

Jungle Ke Davedar, originally titled Aranyer Adhikar in Bengali, was written by Mahashweta Devi in 1977. It's a historical novel that takes readers back to the late 19th century when Birsa Munda led a Munda rebellion in Jharkhand. Birsa Munda (1875–1900) was a tribal leader from the Munda community in Jharkhand, India. He was a really charismatic person who lived according to a deep tribal philosophy. Mahasweta Devi beautifully describes this philosophy in her book Jungle ke Davedar. Birsa's life was

all about fighting against colonial and feudal oppression. He believed in a worldview that was deeply rooted in tribal wisdom, which blended spiritual, ecological, and communal principles.

Tribal wisdom of Birsa's, is based on Birsait, a cult founded by Birsa Munda. This Munda religion sees nature as sacred. Forests, rivers, and land are not just resources, they're living things that are connected to the tribe's identity and spirituality. It is an amalgamation of other dominant religions where non-violence had ample space. Simple living was the underlining factor.

Birsa believed that the forest (jungle) was the center of Munda life. He saw the land as something they all shared, not something they could take advantage of. His rebellion, the Ulgulan (Great Tumult, 1899–1900), was because of the way the British controlled the forests and the zamindars who were taking over land. This disrupted the natural balance between the people and the forest. Birsa fought for their land, seeing it as important for their spiritual and cultural survival.

In *Jungle ke Davedar*, Mahashweta Devi shows how Birsa respected the forest as a way of thinking against the British taking it over. The forest is like a claimant (davedar) alongside the Mundas, showing a way of life where people live in harmony with nature, not against it.

Methodology

The present chapter is based on the novel that was written by renowned Bengali author Mahashweta Devi. Originally, the novel was in Bangla titled *Aranyer Adhikar*. The novel

clearly depicts the tribal way of life, their philosophy, and wisdom. These traits of the adivasis assisted them to take head-on with the mighty British. The chapter focuses on the tribal characteristics and how the wisdom they hold has made them survive for ages. Based on secondary resources, effort has been made to unravel the tribal wisdom in their mundane activities along with when they are at war.

Tribal Wisdom of Birsa Munda Through the Lenses of Mahashweta Devi

Devi's work adds to the oral traditions of the tribes. She keeps the legacy alive through her emotional writings, where Birsa talks to his mom. Starvation, salt, and a fancy bowl of rice seem like a treat. She shows how bare sustenance was so common among the tribals of the region. Even during such tough times, the tribes under Birsa's leadership still loved their land, forest, and water resources. This shows the important ideas that make tribal wisdom so strong. Owning the land and making decisions together is the biggest thing that helps a tribal community. Devi shows how Birsa used storytelling to get his people to fight for what they believed in, showing how tribal wisdom can resist the power of reading and writing that came from outside the tribe. His songs and sermons, based on Munda stories, were like tools that helped people feel stronger and keep their culture alive even when things were changing.

Oral Tradition and Tribal Wisdom

In tribal culture, wisdom is passed down through stories, myths, and personal experiences. This way of thinking helps

communities remember their history and stay true to themselves. Birsa, for example, used Munda stories and predictions to inspire his followers. He saw himself as the “father of the earth” (Dharti Aba) and a leader who would help the Mundas regain their independence. His teachings mixed historical facts with practical ways to fight against British rule and missionary efforts.

Tribal wisdom sees resistance as more than just politics; it’s a deep philosophical statement of self-determination, dignity, and cultural identity against external control. Birsa’s Ulgulan was a direct response to British policies that took away tribal land, imposed heavy taxes, and forced labor (begar). He fought against the dikus (outsiders, including British officials and local landlords) who were destroying tribal rights. His rebellion was based on his vision of Abua Disom, abu raj (our land, our rule), a self-governing tribal homeland free from exploitation. When he was arrested in 1895 and died in 1900 at the age of 25 in a British jail, his legend grew even stronger as a symbol of defiance.

In Jungle ke Davedar, Devi portrays Birsa’s resistance as a continuation of tribal wisdom’s rejection of hierarchical oppression. His fight wasn’t just about land; it was about a worldview where fairness and communal ownership are more important than individualistic greed.

Community Behaviour and Deep Kinship Ties Within the Jail

Mahashweta Devi highlights in her opening chapter the scenes of jail. The community ties are so strong among the

tribals that despite all atrocities in the jail, the inmates clung strongly with each other. Devi describes that, despite all kinds of atrocities and the verge of killing the inmates and associates of Birsa, they stayed honest. This is an epitome of tribal communalism. Birsa was unconscious, probably due to poisoning and diarrhoea, and he struggled hard to fight for his life. The inmates tried hard to support him, but eventually they were helpless. They still sang the glory and valour of Birsa and their ancestors. This incident accounts for the deep-rooted reverence for their ancestors among tribals. This is tribal wisdom and philosophy. Once Birsa was dead, there was absolute silence, and his inmates used strong words against the British in Mundari. The kinship or close ties here is not because the inmates in jail are close biological ties, but this is close communal ties that gets reflected. The tribal wisdom here reflects in the village as a larger family, probably with the clan ties as the strongest.

Birsa's Encounter with Wider World

Tribal wisdom harmonizes spirituality with leadership, perceiving leaders as intermediaries between the divine, the community, and the natural realm. This frequently entails syncretism, the fusion of indigenous beliefs with external influences. Initially educated in a missionary school, Birsa adopted Christianity but rejected its imposition, returning to sarna dharma. He incorporated Christian messianic imagery into his persona, proclaiming himself a divine messenger to unite his people. His spiritual leadership engendered mass

mobilization, integrating tribal rituals with anti-colonial rhetoric.

Devi shows how Birsa cleverly mixed tribal wisdom with familiar symbols to fight against missionary influence and keep the Munda identity alive. His spiritual power came from tribal beliefs, so his rebellion was seen as a sacred act of reclaiming their land.

Tribal Wisdom and Relationship with Nature and Jungle

In the narrative, Birsa is born in the ‘Bir’, thereby meaning Jungle in Mundari language. Tribal wisdom is all about living in harmony with nature and not taking advantage of systems that mess up the environment and society. Birsa didn’t like the colonial forest laws that stopped the tribes from getting their resources and the zamindari system that made them pay heavy rent. He wanted a place called Abua disom where the tribes could hunt, gather, and farm without anyone else getting in the way. His fight was a way to protect their own way of life and make money for themselves. In Jungle ke Davedar, Devi compares the tribal way of life that cares for the environment with the greed of the colonial and feudal times. Birsa’s fight is seen as a way to protect a philosophy that puts the long-term health of the planet before short-term profits.

Birsa’s Connection with Non-Living Entities

Mountains hold a significant place in Munda mythologies. They are revered as Buru Bonga, meaning Mountain God. The Mundas understood the importance of mountains as they blocked the wind that could bring in rains. It also symbolised

the Mundas' galore and sturdy in their personality as hard as rock. Birsa initiated his Ulgulan rebellion from the top of the Dombari Buru. Even today, the Domabrai Mountain is considered as one of the most revered and sacred spaces among the Munds and Birsais who would flock annually to extend their gratitude to Birsa and his unsung heroes.

Birsa had deep respect for non-living entities. This aligns with these thoughts of tribal wisdom where the clans are named after totems that are living as well as dead entities. These totems are revered and one would protect it with one's life. In the work of Mahashweta Devi, she describes how Birsa with little contact with the missionaries understood that diarrhoea was because of contaminated water and he instructed his people to consume fresh water. He revered rivers and treated them equivalent to divine entities.

Birsa's Connection with Living Entities

Birsa established a distinct cult called Birsais, distinct from the tribal religion Sarna. It was a fusion of Sarna and a few ideas borrowed from Vaishnaivism. During his struggle, he realized that the tribals' plight stemmed from severe alcoholism. After gaining charismatic leadership, he sought to unite the tribals to combat colonial rule on one hand and initiate social reform and improvement on the other. He strictly warned the tribals to abstain from drinking and adhere to the path of nonviolence. The Birsais refrained from consuming non-vegetarian food. They lived a minimalist lifestyle, leading simple lives. Animal and foul killing were strictly prohibited. The charismatic leadership gave birth to a

new cult with a large following. Birsa believed that every creature had the right to live.

Despite Acute Poverty, Tribalism Sustained

Devi, in her notable work, vividly describes the impoverished tribals of the region. Two meals were a constant struggle, and the tribals endured arduous hardships to survive. The British and moneylenders, in unison, crushed the tribals, looting their land and resources relentlessly. This cyclical poverty further impoverished the tribals, making them more susceptible to exploitation. The illiterate tribals were unable to comprehend the treacherous tactics employed by the British and moneylenders. In one segment of her narration, Devi describes Birsa dreaming of surplus food and salt as delicacies. Despite the immense hardships, the tribals managed to preserve their adivasi nature. They endured the atrocities and fought back. Birsa's revolt against the British and moneylenders, barefoot in and around Ranchi district, sparked a wave of profound change. The forest, land and water resources are so integral to the tribal way of life that one does not hesitate to lay their life in the struggle. This is true adivasiyat.

Bow and Arrows Counter the Bullets

Birsa and his army knew of the British counterattack. The British army, with its updated weapons and long-range shooting, was a formidable force. But Birsa and his men were determined to protect their land and forest, even if it meant sacrificing their lives. Birsa's army had a unique advantage: guerrilla warfare. They were incredibly united, and their

indigenous wisdom for signaling nearby villages was brilliant. The smoke rising from their camp had a specific pattern that signaled either a meeting or a war. This ingenious method of combat showed how the tribals could adapt and find a way out during tough times. Three smokes in the air had a different meaning than two smokes in the nearby village. Drum beats were another way to share information quickly. Birsa's army was so united that they were ready to fight and face the consequences of bullets. This incredible unity is a testament to the power of community, as exemplified by the work of Mahashweta Devi.

Deep Respect for Mother

Birsa Munda and his mother, Karmi Hatu, had a deep emotional connection that's a bit hidden in Mahasweta Devi's *Jungle ke Davedar* and historical accounts of Birsa's life. Devi's story mostly focuses on Birsa as a tribal leader and the bigger social and political issues of the Ulgulan rebellion. But the bond between him and his mom is a subtle but powerful part of the story, showing the importance of family loyalty, mutual respect, and emotional strength in Munda culture.

In Munda society, family is everything, and mothers are respected for their role as nurturers and keepers of cultural knowledge. Karmi Hatu, as Birsa's mom, was not just a personal friend but also a link to the Munda oral traditions. Her influence shaped Birsa's beliefs, making his revolutionary spirit rooted in the emotional and spiritual life of his community.

In Jungle ke Davedar, Mahasweta Devi shows Karmi Hatu as a quiet but strong supporter of Birsa's mission. While the book doesn't go into explicit emotional talks, we can tell from her presence in the house and community that she was like a rock for Birsa. Her emotional support is clear when she accepts Birsa becoming a spiritual and revolutionary leader (dharti aba), even though it puts their family in danger. The respect and love for mother is also manifested in love for the mother land.

Role of Women in Jungle Ke Davedar

Birsa's movement was led by women, reflecting the Munda tradition of gender equality. His mom, Karmi Hatu, and other women in his family supported his cause, and tribal women joined the Ulgulan, fighting for their land and way of life. Birsa's teachings didn't directly challenge gender norms, but they respected tribal values where women's contributions were important. Mahasweta Devi, known for her feminist perspective, emphasizes the role of women in Birsa's movement, seeing them as keepers of tribal wisdom. She highlights their power in helping the community stay strong, which aligns with the idea of equality in tribal culture.

Conclusion

Mahasweta Devi's Jungle ke Davedar tells the story of Birsa Munda, a tribal leader who embodied tribal wisdom. Birsa's philosophy was all about respecting nature, sticking together with his community, and fighting against oppression. His Ulgulan wasn't just a rebellion; it was a way of life that valued living in harmony, being fair, and keeping their

culture alive. Devi's story makes Birsa a symbol of resistance for indigenous people in India, and his legacy continues to inspire fights for their rights and the environment. Birsa's life shows that tribal wisdom isn't just a thing from the past; it's still important today for building a sustainable and fair future. In Jungle Ke Davedar, the tribal philosophy emphasizes the deep connection between humans and nature, and the importance of keeping this balance. Mahashweta Devi, who has worked closely with tribal communities, shows how the Mundas resist colonialism by defending their way of life and spiritual beliefs. The novel proves that tribal wisdom is still relevant today, fighting for environmental and social justice.

References

1. Dandekar, G. (2024). *The incredible life of Birsa Munda*. Speaking Tiger Books.
2. Devi, M. (1977). *Aranyer adhikar*. Kolkata, India: Karuna Prakashani.
3. National Biography Trust. (n.d.). *Birsa Munda (1872-1900)*. National Book Trust, India.
4. Ranjan, R. (2023). *The political life of memory: Birsa Munda in contemporary India*. Cambridge University Press.
5. Singh, K. S. (2002). *Birsa Munda and his movement (1872-1901): A study of a millennial movement in Chotanagpur* (2nd ed.). Kolkata, India: Seagull Books.
6. Sen, A. (2015). *Tribal resistance in Mahashweta Devi's Jungle ke Davedaar*. In R. K. Sharma (Ed.), *Literature*

Dr. Dipak Paramanik

and resistance in India (pp. 45–60). New Delhi, India: Academic Press.

ABOUT THE EDITORS



Dr. Abhay Sagar Minz

Dr. Abhay Sagar Minz, currently an Assistant Professor at the Department of Anthropology at DSPM University, has been an ardent advocate of tribal rights and issues both nationally and internationally since 2006. His primary focus encompasses tribal rights, culture, tribal knowledge systems, and endangered indigenous languages. Notably, he currently holds the position of Director at the International Documentation Centre for Endangered Indigenous Languages and Cultures at DSPM University. Beyond his academic achievements, Dr. Minz served as the former Asia Regional Focal Point (RFP) of the Global Indigenous Youth Caucus (GIYC) from 2013 to 2014. Furthermore, his expertise was recognized by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), who invited him as an Adviser to the Global Environment Outlook (GEO) in 2020. In this capacity, Dr. Minz contributed his valuable insights on ecological anthropology to the GEO.



Ms. Diksha Singh

Miss Diksha Singh is a PhD Research Scholar at DSPM University, Ranchi. She is currently working on Indigenous Knowledge Systems of Tribals of India and their sustainability. She holds a double Gold Medal in graduation with a Major in Anthropology and a Gold Medal in her Masters. Additionally, she is a senior researcher at the International Documentation Centre for Endangered Indigenous Languages and Cultures, DSPMU. Her research has focused on the highly endangered languages of the Turi, Asur, and Lepcha communities. She has made significant contributions to Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and Sustainable Development Goal 2030 through her presentations at various European Universities and in India. Her exceptional contributions in social research were recognized by HER Excellency Smt. Droupadi Murmu, the former Governor of Jharkhand State and the current President of India.



Mr. Anal Kishore Minz

Mr. Anal Kishore Minz, an Assistant Professor at the Department of Anthropology at S.S.J.S.N College Garhwa, holds a B.Sc., M.Sc. and M.Phil degree from Hansraj College, University of Delhi. Currently, he is conducting research on the Munda Tribe and the impact of developmental efforts in Jharkhand. He is also actively associated with the International Documentation Centre for Endangered Indigenous Languages and Cultures, DSPMU.



Mr. Bimal Kacchap

Mr. Bimal Kacchap, an Assistant Professor at the Department of Anthropology at S.S.J.S.N College, Garhwa, is currently engaged in research on the Indigenous Knowledge System of the Oraons of Jharkhand. He maintains a close association with the International Documentation Centre for Endangered Indigenous Languages and Cultures, DSPMU.



Nature Light Publications

309 West 11, Manjari VSI Road, Manjari Bk.,
Haveli, Pune- 412 307.
Website: www.naturelightpublications.com
Email: naturelightpublications@gmail.com
Contact No: +919822489040 / 9922489040

