

# Changing Status of Tribe and Caste: An Anthropological Study in Birkona Village of Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh

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**KEYWORDS:** Tribe-caste continuum. Birkona village. Bilaspur. Indigenous traits. Intercultural communication. Socio-cultural change.

**ABSTRACT:** Indian village, tribe and caste, both live in close proximity of each other that often led to exchange of indigenous traits of each other. Many Indian anthropologists following Redfield's concept of folk-urban continuum, started to study the relationship and exchange between tribe and caste societies of Indian villages and gave a new concept of tribe-caste continuum which states that when any tribe and caste communities live together, neither of them is true tribe, nor a true caste, there must be exchange of socio-cultural traits between them. A combination of anthropological and historical analysis is a necessity to uncover transition from tribe to caste. With fast growing industrialization and urbanization in village areas, this is high time to study Indian villages, in order to understand and investigate the individual traits of village communities, socio-cultural changes or any transformation of tribe into a caste or vice versa. Present study made in Birkona village clearly depicts the changing social-cultural life of tribe and caste communities.

## INTRODUCTION

Indian villages with their distinctive social and cultural identity and background have long attracted both foreign and Indian anthropologists and still they are interesting subject of anthropological studies. In an Indian village both tribes and caste live in close proximity to each other. Early anthropologists till 1930's studied only far isolated people and pre-literate, small-scale societies but this trend was replaced by Robert Redfield, an American anthropologist of Chicago school of anthropology. Systematic village study of a Mexican village 'Tepoztalan', study of 'Folk culture of Yucatan' and 'Peasant Society and Culture' by Redfield (1930, 1941, 1956) respectively had provided a new thrust area and scientific model for other

anthropologists. Following this model, other scholars of Chicago school like Morris Opler, Oscar Lewis, McKim Marriott and David Mendelbaum made anthropological village studies in India. Influenced by these studies, many Indian anthropologists also started doing village studies.

During colonial rule, numerous census operations were made, and British officials tried to define tribes and caste as two independent communities of Indian society. In this regard, it was found much difficult to give a concrete definition for tribe because a tribe was showing many traits similar to Hindus. Like Hindu, tribe can also interpret as a race, an aboriginal group, a nationality, a community, a religious group that has always shown Hinduised traits. Risley (1901), then a Census Commissioner in colonial India, defined tribes as 'a community or a group of people occupying

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a definite territory, having common language, belief in common ancestor and are tied together through the ties of brotherhood and revenge' (Risley and Gait, 1901). Hutton (1931) made an important study on Caste and Tribe of India. He interchangeably used tribe and race. He viewed that a caste shows clearly Hindu religious beliefs and traditions while a tribe believes in animism. Bailey (1960, 1961) found differences in culture and lifestyle of the caste and tribes of villages in Orissa.

Ghurye (1959), in his book "*The Scheduled Tribes*" called tribals as backward Hindus as the tribes were not found to be true tribals nor they could be isolated from Hindus. Bailey (1961) in his first paper "Tribe and Caste in India" advised to view 'caste' and 'tribe' in terms of continuum but he further stated that a caste society is 'organic' and 'hierarchical' whereas a tribal society is 'segmentary' and 'egalitarian'. Beteille (1986) viewed that feature of tribes like relative isolation, speaking variety of indigenous dialects, having their own religious beliefs and practices differentiates tribes from castes. Some tribes like Mundas and Oraons of Chota Nagpur speak different dialects but others like Bhumij have lost their tribal dialect. Bose (1941) found that both tribes and castes are interdependent and there are many similarities in their customs, one of them is clan exogamy which is followed by both tribes and caste.

Tribe-Caste continuum, a distinctive feature of Indian villages means transformation of tribal group into a caste group. If two dissimilar societies live in close contact with each other, there must be exchange of socio-cultural traits between them. The term 'continuum' was first introduced by Robert Redfield in his book "*Folk culture of Yucatan*" (1941) to study the interaction between folk and urban societies. He made this study on four communities namely Marida (a city society) Ditzas (town), ChanKom (peasant village) and Tuski (folk village) and gave the famous concept of 'Folk-Urban continuum'. Later many Indian anthropologists started doing village studies to understand the process of caste formation among the tribal of India and gave the popular concepts of Tribe-Caste continuum, Tribe-Rajput continuum, Hinduisation, Sanskritization, etc. In his book, "*The Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption*", Bose (1941) has written about the transformation of primitive tribes of

Orissa into a caste. Elwin (1952) described about the impact of Hinduism on tribal culture and society and Majumdar (1936, 1947, 1958) also did study on concept of tribe caste continuum.

T. C. Das (1960) in an article 'Assimilation, Integration, acculturation', described about the socio-cultural changes takes place after interaction between dissimilar societies. Srinivas (1952) in his book "*Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*" gave concept of Sanskritization, Hinduization, also termed as Brahmanization to describe the socio-cultural upward mobility in traditional Indian society. He said that lower caste and tribal group in order to elevate their status in the society and to get rid of untouchability, social disability, etcetera, started to imitate and follow the rites and rituals of higher caste groups and maintained higher status in society. They not only emulated Brahmins but also Rajput and Kalashas. In another book, "*Social Change in Modern India*" Srinivas (1966) explained and put the reasons behind changing tribe and caste status in post-colonial modern India and introduced term westernization in relation to Sanskritization. In this regard, mention may be made of study of Khasa by Majumdar (1962), Tharu's of CIS-Himalayan region by Srivastava (1958) and State formation and Rajput myth in Tribal Central India by Sinha (1962). In 1959, in a study made on scheduled tribes of central India, it was found that the tribals and lower caste groups gave up their uncleaned jobs, ascribed status and followed Rajput life style, customs and also adopted their surnames to achieve top status in social order and are rigidly integrated with caste system (Upadhyay and Pandey, 1993).

Munshi (1979) in an article 'Tribal absorption and sanskritisation in Hindu society' criticized Bose and Srinivas for their theories of Hinduisation and Sanskritisation respectively (Guha, 2018). Vidyarthi (1961) in his study of a tribal village 'Ghagra' explained the adoption of Hindu life style by Munda tribe to become a caste and in another book "*Aspect of Religion in Indian Society*", Vidyarthi (1961) showed how tribals were changing their own cultural beliefs and practices in coming contact with Hindus. Vidyarthi (1964) in his book "*Cultural Contours of Tribal Bihar*" worked on different factors affecting tribal life of Chota Nagpur Region, and also studied

the concepts of unity and extension, Sanskritization, de Sanskritization, tribalization and detribalization in order to study socio-cultural changes in tribal life. Orans (1965) worked on same idea of impact of Hinduism on tribal culture.

Sachchidananda (1970) in a paper on 'Tribe-caste continuum: A study of the Gond in Bihar' stated that Gonds of north Bihar became Hindu caste after absorption of Hindu religious beliefs and practices, festivals and rituals, etcetera. Roy Burman (1972) in his paper entitled 'Tribal demography: A preliminary appraisal' in K. S. Singh (ed.) '*Tribal Situation in India*' classified tribes in terms of their orientation towards Hindu social orders. In another book, Roy Burman (1983) worked on transformation of tribes into castes. Chaudhuri (1997) has also worked on tribal-caste continuum. Xaxa (1999) wrote about tribal transformation in India. Tripathi (2012) in her study found that even after technological development and urbanization, the villagers and the folk people of the nearby villages still maintained their age-old traditions and folk-urban continuum is evident in life style of folk and urban people.

It is known fact when any two dissimilar societies come in contact with each other; both of them borrow and share traits with each other. This borrowing of traits is not always unidirectional. Singh (1978) in his concept of tribalization stated that the non-tribal communities also adopted customs, rituals and norms and living style of tribals when they meet them. Nihar Ranjan Ray viewed Adivasis are the 'the original autochthonous people of India' and found that many of religious beliefs and worship practices followed by Aryans were the result of their contact with Adivasis of that time (Guruswamy, 2019). Some other scholars studied this process of socio-cultural change from other angle. A new concept of detribalization was kept which defines that when tribal societies meet some urban communities or their living style and behavior patterns are changed through some developmental programs and plannings, they got detribalized, that is they started losing their own identities, their values, norms etcetera. In this way this change is bidirectional that means exchange of cultural and social traits in both societies.

#### MATERIALS & METHODS

*Chhattisgarh:* The state is famous for its natural

resources, unique ethnic tribal and caste culture, and society. The state has its mention in Ramayana and Mahabharata. The old name of Chhattisgarh was Dakshin Koshal, capital of Koshal king, whose daughter Kaushalya was mother of Lord Rama. During his fourteen years exile, Lord Rama had visited and resided in Dandkaranya region of Chhattisgarh, that is at present is known as Bastar. The state was part of central provinces and Berar and was merged later with Madhya Pradesh. It became a separate state out of Madhya Pradesh in year 2000. People of all religion and sects are living in Chhattisgarh. Satnami, Ramnami, Kabirpanthi sects' followers are in large number in Chhattisgarh. Total ten percent of scheduled tribal population of India is constituted by Chhattisgarh. Fifty percent of total population of state is constituted by scheduled tribe and scheduled castes. The tribal population shares 30.62% of state population which was 31.76% during 2001.

*Bilaspur:* Bilaspur city is located 111 km north of the state capital Raipur with latitude 212 473 to 232 83 North and longitude 812 143 to 832 153 East, spread over area of 6,377 sq. kms, is one of the oldest and historical cities of Chhattisgarh. The city is around 400 years old and is said to be named after a fisherwoman named 'Bilasa' in the 17th century. Bilaspur district was constituted in 1861 and Bilaspur Municipality was constituted in 1867. With a population of 1.9 million people, historically the city was once part of Kalchuri dynasty of Ratanpur, Maratha Empire (1741) and was also under rule of British government (1818). Bilaspur District became part of the Chhattisgarh Division in 1903 with constitution of the new province 'The Central Provinces and Berar'. Bilaspur is the second-largest district in the state in population. Bounded by Korea on the north, Anuppur District and Dindori District of Madhya Pradesh state on the west, Kawardha on the south-west, Durg and Raipur on the south and Korba and Janjgir-Champa on the east, the city is situated on the banks of Arpariver. Enriched with dolomite and other minerals, city is surrounded by lush green forests in the north and coal mines of Hasdeo valley in the east. Because of High Court, it is called 'Nyaydhani' (legal capital) of state. Besides this, headquarters of the South-Central Railway, which comprises the Bilaspur, Nagpur and Raipur divisions

and the only central university of state named 'Guru Ghasidas Central University' (named after the famous Satnami saint 'Guru Ghasidas') is situated in Bilaspur. The city is also known for famous Kosa and Tasar silk industries, and good varieties of rice.

#### *Birkona Village*

The present study was carried out in Birkona village. It is one of the villages in Bilha tehsil/block of Bilaspur district in Chhattisgarh state. It comes under Birkona panchayat. It is located 9 km towards north from district headquarters Bilaspur. 20km from Belha, 132 km from state capital Raipur. The latitude of Birkona village is 22.141380, and the longitude is 82.161644. Birkona village code is 762300 (*Source*: Census of India, 2001) and Pin code is 495224. Postal head office of Birkona village is Bilha (Belha). Birkona is surrounded by Belha tehsil towards south, Masturi tehsil towards east, Takhatpur tehsil towards west, Kota tehsil towards north. Ramtala, Koni, Baima, Sarkanda and Uslapur are nearby villages of Birkona. Bilaspur, Akaltara, Naila Janjgir are nearby cities of this village.

This village is very near Guru Ghasidas University campus. Many of the villagers are educated and are employed in various occupations. Primary occupation is agriculture, other occupations include labour work, business, government services etcetera. A number of villagers of Birkona work in different services in the Guru Ghasidas University campus. The total population of Birkona is close to 2,000. Male and female literacy rate is average. There are so many problems in Birkona village like shortage of electricity and water supply, rationing of food, grain issues, health problems, unemployment, etcetera. Lack of health facilities is a big problem for villagers in this village as they have to travel several kilometers to reach hospital for the treatment of patients. Several patients die on the way to hospital. The village is linked by a black top road from the main road. The internal roads are cemented by nature. 'Chhattisgarhi' is the local spoken language. Other spoken languages in village are Agariya, Bagheli. Beside this, they also communicate in Hindi. Some literate people also understand and speak English.

*Field Work Techniques Used:* The study adopted household survey, controlled participant observation,

schedule, focus group discussion and audio-visual techniques, etc. to collect the primary data. The simple random and purposive sampling technique was adopted to select the households. A total of twenty households were selected for the study as sample for data collection due to time limitation of ten days' field work. Out of 20 household, ten households of tribal group and ten households of caste group were selected. Of these ten tribal households, all belonged to Gond tribe, while among the households of the caste group, the data were collected from Bahmin, Yadav and Sheduled Caste group.

#### DISCUSSION

The present study made in Birkona village is only an attempt to find out whether tribes and castes living in villages together have maintained their age-old indigenous traits or is there any transformation of tribe into caste or is there a case of borrowing of traits between both. In Birkona village, it is found that most of the people (65%) were migrated from other blocks of Chhattisgarh in which out of total ten Scheduled Tribe families, people of eight households (80%) are migrated from other regions to the village, mostly for job and labor work. This percentage was found less among caste groups. 70% of the people living in village have nuclear families in which schedule tribe are 8 out of 10 households, which is the highest percentage because they had left their native place. 95% villagers are mostly agriculturalists and wage laborers, and 5% people are found in government service. Villagers communicate in both Chhattisgarhi and Hindi language. Gondi is totally lost among the Gonds.

Tribals believe in totemism, malevolent and benevolent spirits. They believe that their ancestor resides in some plants and animals. They pay reverence to totemic animals like fish, lion, goat etcetera and neither harm or eat them. In same way, totemic trees like *Aam (Mangifera indica)*, *Peepal (Ficus religiosa)*, *Bargad (Ficus benghalensis)*, etcetera are worshipped by them. Villagers believe presence of benevolent spirits in *Bargad (Ficus benghalensis)*, *Neem (Azadirachta indica)*, *Peepal (Ficus religiosa)*, and malevolent spirits in *Ber (Ziziphus mauritiana)* and *Imli (Tamarindus indica)* trees.

On the basis of data collected on various variables of religion of Gond tribe and caste people, it is found that in spite of urbanization and globalization factors, tribals of village still believe and worship their tribal ancestral and village deities like Budha deo, Thakuraindai, Thakur deo. Budha deo is the main God of Gond people and is worshipped inside home or under a neem tree with a pot and coconut. Goat, pig and cock are offered to Budha deo on their specific occasions like *paushpoornima*, 'Cherchera, etc. Other ancestral deities like Budhidai, Kankalindai, Sarangadindai, etc. All these ancestral gods and goddesses are worshipped inside the house of Gond people of village.

Thakur deo is the village god and is believed to protect the whole village from enemies, disaster or any difficult situations. He is worshipped at the 'Sirana' (vicinity) of village. During marriage, birth and other occasion he is worshipped and offered with coconut. Thakuraindai is a Goddess worshipped inside the house and is offered meat in the form of 'Bali' (sacrifice/killing) of goat, cock and pig on every 3 or 5 years. Beside this they also worship Hindu Gods and Goddesses like Shiva, Krishna, Rama, Hanuman, Sita, Durga, Kali, Laxmi, Parvati with local deities like Mari Mai, Puliya Devi, Mauli Devi, etc. One interesting evidence that is found among Gond families is presence of a number '୭୫୦' (750) and 'Satrangijhanda' (Seven coloured flag) in their houses. A *Shivling* (lingam) with *Trishul* (trident) is found in the houses of all Gond families.

It is found that like tribal, the caste people also worship village God Thakur deo and Goddess Thakuraindai. Beside this, they follow their Hindu religion and worship both ancestral and Hindu God and Goddesses. Ancestral gods and deities like Purwaj Deo, Budhimata, Banjarimata, Chottemata are worshipped daily inside the house by people belonging to different castes of Birkona village. Purwaj Deo is an ancestor God offered with goat and cock in every three years for betterment of family and protection of house from bad spirit. Both tribals and caste people worship local deities like Mahamaya devi, Mauli devi, Puliya devi, Mari mai, etc. Village caste people do not worship totem but believe in nature worship. Both caste and tribal people of village

worship their deities after taking bath with *agarbattis/dhup* (incense sticks), milk and milk products, water (*Gangajal*), rice, coconut, flowers, fruits etcetera. They chant *mantra* like Shiva *mantra*, Durga *aarti*, etc. Earlier Gonds and other tribes celebrated their own tribal and local festivals like hareli, cherchera, pola, akti, athe Kanhaiya, Gaura-Gauri, etcetera, but with time and coming in contact with caste and urban people, they have also started celebrating festivals like Diwali, Holi, Teej, Rakshabandhan, Nagpanchami, etcetera. It is found that both caste and tribal people of Birkona village celebrate same festivals.

Like festivals and other rituals, almost all the marriage rituals like lagan, phaldan, mandap, chulmati, tel, devtala, chikat, haldi, barat, pargahni, ratibhaji, phera, panipuja, vidai, kankanare equally celebrated among both the caste and tribal groups. Exceptions are rituals namely Dhurpawa (head hunting of goat), *Mirga Maar* (deer killing) which are only celebrated by Gond tribe. Dhurpawa is a ritual in which after coming up of newly wedded couple (in case of elder boy's marriage) in house, first a goat's head is cut, then bride and groom slide the goat's head by their feet and serve that to Thakuraindai (ancestral deities of house). After this, the head is cooked and eaten by all the family members. *Mirga Maar* is also a unique ceremony among Gonds, in which bride holds a pot filled with pond water on her head with the help of both the hands, and the bridegroom from the gap in between the hand and shoulder of the bride, kills the *mirga* (deer) made up of soil with the help of arrows. In the ancient times live 'Mirga' or deer was killed to perform this 'Mirga Maar' ceremony but due to ban of killing of animals in present days a *Mirga* (deer) made of earth is used. After that the groom's *jija* (husband of sister) run with holding *mirga* which is chased by groom and, *jija* (husband of sister) when caught is beaten by groom as a ritual.

One change in marriage ritual is found among Gonds is that earlier marriage ritual was of one day, that was called 'Ek Telia' (one day) in which they perform all the marriage rituals in the same day, but now a days, like caste people they started to celebrate marriage ceremony for three days called 'Teen Telia'. One interesting fact found in village was from one of the Yadav family. It was found that father pass a 'Seal' (a stone slab) to his elder son from generation to

generation. Caste and tribal endogamy and clan or totemic exogamy (except in one of Yadav family, where a case of clan endogamy was found) is followed among both tribal and caste group as according to their socially accepted rules of marriages by their society. In case of *pratilomvivah* (hypogamous marriages), inter-caste and tribal-caste marriages, a 'Dandh' (penalty) in the form of fine <sup>1</sup> 20,000-60,000 and grand communal feast is given by the accused party, which if not made, were often excluded from society and village as a whole. Untouchability and caste-based discrimination is seen among both tribals and caste groups of villages.

Almost all the rituals and taboos of birth and death are found to be same among both caste and tribals group of villages (except Brahmin caste of village). Burial practice which is common among Gonds is performed among caste groups only in case of death of a child below 7 years of age and of an old age person. Mostly caste groups perform cremation practices. During entertainment and festive occasions, village Gonds perform "Karma" and "Danda Naach"(dance forms) in which both males and females take part but with change of time due to increasing urbanization and globalization, people are taking less interest in these ancient folk traditions. A famous *naach* or dance form of Chhattisgarh called "Raut Nacha" (a symbol of worship to lord 'Krishna') is performed by some Yadav community in village during the month of October or November (on the day of 'Devuthani Ekadashi')

#### CONCLUSION

Tribe and caste groups are an important segment of Indian society. Chhattisgarh with dense tribal population presents good evidence of tribe-caste continuum in most of its villages. Tribal people live together with caste people in villages. Tribe-caste continuum is found to be clearly apparent in Birkona village as both caste and tribes are living in close proximity of each other and share each other's rituals, traditions and also modified their own beliefs and practices in influence of each other.

Many cases of adoption of each other's rituals and practices have been observed in case of marriages, birth or death rituals, festivals etcetera, in which mostly tribal groups have adopted many rituals,

religious beliefs and practices of Hindu caste groups. But with their unique folk traditions, animistic beliefs and rituals, tribal people are still following their age-old traditions add reveal along with Hindu way of life. While analyzing cultural data among both tribe and caste community, it is found that religious beliefs and practices are important part of their life. In spite of worshipping ancestral, local and totemic deities, tribal also believe in Hindu religion and worship. Same is the case in caste communities, they worship deities of both little and great traditions and celebrate festivals of both traditions. They are still restricted to their age-old caste/tribal endogamous and clan/totem exogamous rules.

On the basis of different socio-cultural aspects, it is also found that Birkona has all the characteristics of an urban village being very close to the main city of Bilaspur. Study shows that tribal people especially Gonds have shown migration from other places to Birkona. They have lost their own language 'Gondi' and now they are speaking Chhattisgarhi and Hindi along with other villagers. Most of tribals have nuclear families. Agriculture is the basic economic support but many of them also do labor work, business and government services. Their children go to both private and public schools according to their economic status. Almost all the urban facilities are found in the village.

Present study clearly reveals presence of little and great traditions, folk-urban continuum and tribe-caste continuum at the same time in the village Birkona. At one time increase in education, job opportunities and social awareness brought by governmental development programs is very important for social upliftment and overall development of society while at other point increased urbanization and industrialization especially at village areas badly impacted their cultural values and tradition. Therefore, it is high time to investigate the socio-cultural changes taking place in fast growing villages and cities and their impact on society, so as to predict future Indian villages.

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