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CULTURAL CHANGES IN BAGHMUNDI, PURULIA

Introduction

Tribes are the important part of the population in our country with their own significance and cultures. Most of the concentration of the country's total population is found in central zone of India comprising of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar and West Bengal. Tribes are distributed almost in all districts of West Bengal in varying degrees of concentration. Most important among them are the Santhals followed by Lodha, Bhumij, Kharia, Birhor etc. Economically these tribal groups show considerable diversity. The range spreads from hunter-food gatherers like Birhor to settled cultivators and industrial labourers like. Santhal, Munda etc.

Among these above mentioned tribes Birhor is one of the most primitive, semi-nomadic, least known jungle tribe found in the forest clad hilly region of Chotanagpur, which at present consists of Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Palamau, Singhbhum (East and West) and Dhanbad districts of Jharkhand State and Purulia district of West-Bengal.

Birhor is a small community of people with unique tribal characteristics. As per 1911 census, there were 3085 Birhors (1489 males and 1596 females) living in the region of Jharkhand state. There were hardly 128 Birhors (65 males and 63 females) in Purulia district (formerly known as Manbhum district). They survived on a very simple stage of subsistence economy and used to lead a nomadic life, moving around in isolated groups.

The name 'Birhor' is derived from the word 'Bir' meaning 'Jungle' and 'Hor' meaning 'Men' in santali. Thus, the literal meaning of Birhor is 'Jungle Men'. They are also identified as foresters, woodmen or forest cutters.

Ethnologically, the Birhor people are dark skinned, short statured, long headed, wavy haired and broad nosed and show features that resemble the people of the Munda and the Santhal tribes of the same region (Roy, 1925:28). The Birhors, according to their mode of living are divided into two divisions that is '*Uthlus*' (wanderer) and the '*Jaghis*' (settled).

The Birhors of Purulia district is a small tribal community with unique characteristics who has migrated from the forest areas of Ranchi and Hazaribagh districts of Jharkhand state to a nomadic life in jungles at western part of the districts, and settled themselves in Baghmundi, Balarampur and Jhalda I community blocks of the district and comprise of only 0.023% population.

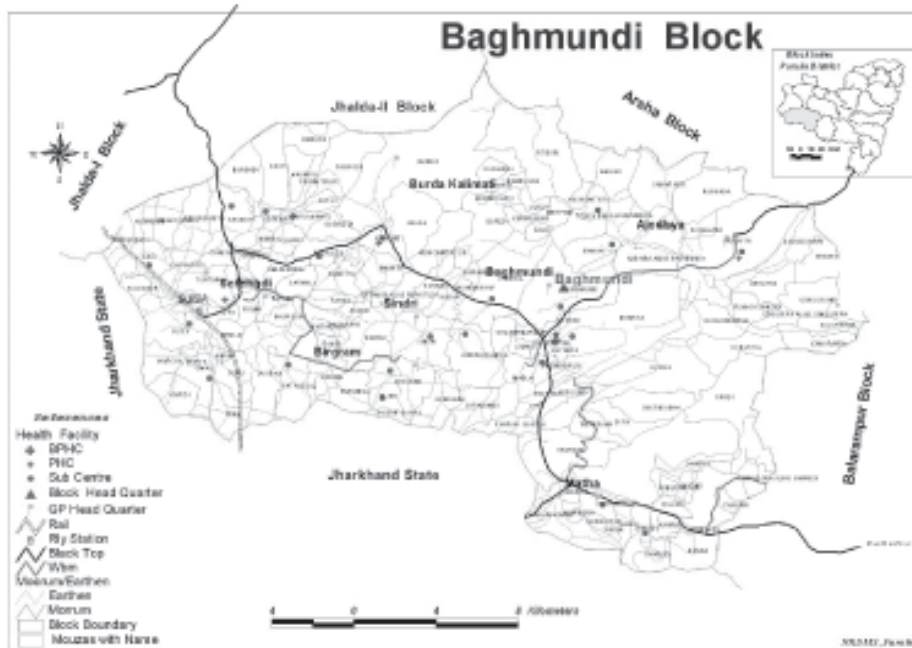


Figure 1: Baghmundi Block Map of Purulia (Source- official Website)

The area under Baghmundi and Jhalda Police Station of Purulia District forms an extension of Hazaribagh plateau. The Baghmundi plateau is characterized by undulation relief and rugged hills which are traversed by many perennial and seasonal streams. In Jhalda, there are series of isolated groups of hills and peaks which ultimately form a rectangular range in the South known as the Ajothya Hills. Because of such characteristics features of the terrain, some parts of the region are most difficult to approach. The peaks of Baghmundi and Jhalda are covered by small but dense jungle with few mango and mahua tree along the foothills. The most important trees of this regions are *Sal*, *Kusum*, *Kend*, *Mahua*, *Palash*., etc. Useful creepers like '*Chihorlata*' and at the higher altitude, bamboos grow more or less in abundance in this region. There are also many wild fruit bearing trees around. Game birds like pea-fowls, grey-partridges, pigeons, sparrows and paddy birds are also found, though are not in plenty in this region. Wild animals like boar, hare and monkeys are also found (Choudhury, 2004)

Being a hunting-gathering tribe, Birhor considers forest their home, supplier of food, giver of fortune and protector of their lives. Here in the forest live their god and goddesses, the spirits of their dead ancestors move around in the still hours of night and the complete forested environment provides them utmost pleasure in their day-to-day life. Thus, living within the forest ecosystem, they have developed specific set of responses to the immediate environmental situations from a long time in the past which has given rise to particular pattern of life, i.e., culture.

The hunter gatherers living in the midst of the forest and depending exclusively on the forest resources have developed cultural pattern specifically integrated with the variegated forest based factors. Forest ecology designs the cultural development of these people. The people always prepare themselves to cope with the ecological setting of the forest in their daily behaviour pattern. But nowadays the environment in which these peoples are living is in a rapid process of change, due to which certain issues have come up regarding their existence and their transformance. Therefore, a need has been arisen here to understand these peoples in the face of their changing ecology and its affect on their cultural pattern.

In this paper, The researcher has tried to throw light on the cultural changes in the Baghmundi area through various discussions with Birhor of Purulia, mainly in the Baghmundi block.

Brief outline of the Birhor

Social organisation

Like other hunter gatherer society, Birhor organized their social structure in two forms, one for the purpose of food quest and other for the purpose for marriage and kinship. The households and bands are the two important social units for performing their socio-economic activities.

Keeping in mind the features of the hunter gatherer society the term band or *Tanda* used here to designate the unit. A band or *Tanda* comprises of a number of households or individuals having nuclear families belonging to same or different clans (Mehta, 2004). Household and band groupings of Birhor always underline pattern of kinship. The household is built around a nuclear family while a band comprises of a number of small patrilineal descent families and are dispersed over a number of small groups. Customarily, a son, on marriage, set up a separate household with his wife. The patrilineal "clans" (*killi*) are divided into smaller exogamous units called *bansa*. Marriages frequently involve sister exchange and daughter exchanges. Brother- brother, sister- sister, and brother- sister ties are the most enduring kinship links (Adhikary, 1999).

Birhor devote their full time activities and thinking patterns to the

food searching expeditions. As the food quest to be a needs joint enterprise specially when hunting of different animals are concerned, Birhors have felt the necessity of small group formation. These are known as bands. A Birhor band is composed of relatives. Generally, the band organization is effective with the joint participation of the males from the single patrilineal descent group. The family and the lineage are the basis of social organization of Birhors. They are found to reside in a peculiar residence known as *tanda*. The *tanda* is generally constituted by 10 to 15 families and sometimes a few more. It works as a unit of food quest. The social organization of Birhor *tanda* is characteristically influenced by varied principles based on their socio-economic patterns centring round forest ecology. The *tanda* is the ideal unit of the development of forest culture.

Economy

The traditional occupations of the Birhors was based on hunting of animals, gathering of roots tubers and collection of chop creepers for preparing rope from its fibres. Thus, their total movements in relation to the economic operations are completely forest oriented. The *tanda* moves according to the availability of the games and chop creepers. When a campaign group finds that the resources of its daily life are being exhausted, then they shift to another place where resources are available.

Two varieties of monkeys, *Maccacus rhesus* and *Presbytes entellus*, are hunted by the Birhor with rope- net traps by using a long hunting net and strong bamboo stick. The nets are handmade with ropes from bark fibres of the *Bauhinia* creeper. The elongated rectangular nets are set in jungles in a semi circular manner by the members of a hunting party, which normally consists of seven to ten members. The hunters then take strategic positions in the jungle and chase the monkeys towards the net traps by beating the trees. The game hunted is shared with all the members of the party (Adhikary, 1999). While distributing the sale fifty percent of the cash belongs to the owner and other fifty percent is distributed to the other members.

Two kinds of nets (*ghari jhari* and *tur jhari*) are used in hunting. The formers are used for hunting monkeys (*gari*) and the latter for entrapping rats (*tur*) and the other small animals. *Jhari* means net. Hunting is pursued both communally and individually by the men (Adhikary, 1984:32). Game is hunted primarily for consumption; live monkeys are sold if customers come to their camp. Moreover, skins of langur (*Presbytes entellus*) and rabbit are taken for sale in the local markets. Hunting occurs mainly in winter and summer seasons. The making of ropes and rope- products is carried on throughout the year. This is the principal economic of the contemporary Birhor. They peel fibres from the bark of the *Bauhinia* creeper and weave them into various kinds of ropes, *Pagha*, *Jara*, *Sikuyar*, *Jhalkari*, *Barhidora* etc. (Chakroborty, 1976). Normally the men of the household collect bark from the jungle while women

prepare the articles and take them to villages for barter and sale. On market days, however, both men and women trade at the local markets. Women weave the rope products by hand, using only common knives and wooden clubs. A household of six adult members can produce upto 12 to 14 pieces of rope in one day. Rope and rope products are bartered for paddy or maize or other food grains. Some Birhor men work as magico-religious experts for the surrounding village people.

Patterns of settlement and movement

Being hunter-gatherer they move from one Jungle to another and make temporary hut/ settlements at the outskirts of mountain or some peasant village, known as *kumbhas*. It is a conical hut constructed with branches of trees, leaves and creeper with a single doorway. Normally six to eight households settle together. The duration of their stay does not exceed more than a month. During the rains, their camps may last for a longer period. One or two households may also move independently, joining another band, visiting relatives or arranging marriages (Adhikary, 1999).

Tanda organization

Each *tanda* has a headman elected supernaturally. He is called the '*Naya*' or the priest. The *Naya* appoints two other men of his local group known as '*Pahan*' and '*Gorahito*'. The duty of the *Naya* is to pray for the welfare of the people and the *Pahan* help him in his work. The duty of the *gorahito* is to communicate the news to the people for attending the hunt, sacrifices and the puja. The *tanda* organization is not only based for the purpose of securing food by hunting. A large association of men belonging to different *tanda* come together for inter *tanda* association hunting (*Disum sendra*) also known as regional hunt. It is an annual hunting expedition which starts before the full moon in the month of *Baisakh*. Apart from the inter *tanda* association, the men from numbers of *tandas* gather together at weddings and panchayat. The heads of the families of the *tandas* take part in the panchayat. The panchayat looks after the customary laws. Those who do not obey the laws are punished according to the decisions of the panchayat.

Religion and spirituality

The Birhor society is divided into a number of clans each of which has a traditional home on hills or mountains. Each clan has a deity '*Buru Bonga*' (hill god) who resides on hills or mountains. Once a year in every settlement the men of each clan assemble at an open space outside their hut to offer sacrifice to their presiding spirit of ancestral hill. The most noteworthy feature in Birhor totemism is the belief in the vital connection between the human clan and their totem, the hill, which is the original home, or the spirit of such hill. The paramount importance which the Birhor attaches to his clan spirit known as

Buru-Bonga or hill god, regarded as guardian spirit of the clan, and prominent place is assigned in clan sacrifices to the emblem of the clan totem (such as a bit of skin or hair or horn of totem animal or wings or feather of the totem bird).

Birhor identifies three broad categories of supernatural entities: *bonga*, *hapram* and *churgin*. The *bonga* include all personified supernatural entities of non human origin, while the *hapram* are the spirits of their ancestors. Both are benevolent spirits. All the evil spirits (including the spirits who have died in an unnatural manner) are categorized as *churgin*.

The *hapram* live close to the *bonga* (God) and work as intermediaries between the *bonga* and the Birhor. They protect their descendents from the *churgin* (Adhikary, 1999).

Life Cycle

Different types of rites, rituals, restriction and prohibition mark the life cycle of the Birhor. Before the birth of a child, certain things are observed or maintained. During pregnancy, the members of the house must abstain from invoking any spirit and offering sacrifices the husband must not eat the head of any animal offered in sacrifice. Generally, for twenty-one days after the birth the mother and the child are considered as impure. During this period no puja or sacrifices are celebrated in the *tanda*. Previously, the pregnant women or any other sick person were not taken to the hospital for the treatment. This trend has been changed now and Birhors goes to the hospital for their treatment.

The Tathi or First Purification

This ceremony is celebrated on the seventh day. The baby's head is shaved, men and women have purifactory bath. After that the *Naya* (priest) facing the east, offers a chicken to '*chowrasi*' (shrine under *palastree*, worshiped after the child birth). On the twenty-first day, final purification is performed. The head of the family offers the sacrifice of the chicken and rice-beer to the spirits of the ancestors and pray for the health and longevity of the baby. For the first nine-month the diet of the child consists of honey and mother's milk only. It was known from the previous work on Birhor and from the field survey that not a single drop of water is given to the child as they believe that due to their profession they have to spend most of the time in the jungles and remain thirsty. Thus, they have a good self-control on thirst.

The Name giving ceremony or the 'Saki'

This ceremony takes place in the following manner. A bowl of water is placed in the open space in front of the hut. A handful of rice and grass (dub) are placed on the ground as '*saki*' or witness. A grain of '*til*' (sesame) seed

representing the baby's name and 'dhan' (unhusked rice) representing paternal grandfather are dropped into the water of the bowl. If the *til* seed and grain of the *dhan* floats till they meet, the baby is named after the paternal grandfather. Another process of naming the child is naming the child after birth day, birth month and the natural calamities or circumstances for example of the child is born on Tuesday he was named as '*Mangal*' (Roy, 1925).

Some childhood customs

A common custom observed in most of the tribal group, found among the Birhor boys, is burning wick of a lamp and producing scar on the arm, generally done within the age group of ten to twelve. Birhor girls of same age must have tattoo marks made on arm and chest with an iron needle. Floral designs are commonly used. It is their belief that if a girl is not tattooed her spirit on her death will remain in the other world. The children socialize according to their cultural tradition. Food gathering and trapping of birds and animals are their socialization process. Tattoo is been observed today both in the body of tribal and non-tribal group.

Marriage

Marriage is the most important social event in Birhor life. Marriage is indispensable among Birhor for attainment of status and also for economic cooperation and progeny. Endogamy is practiced within the tribe concurrently with clan exogamy.

Marriage among the Bihors does not concern patrilineal descent group directly. Most of the marriages are sister exchange and daughter exchange. On the appointed day the bride is given a pair of sari and blouse and the price for one *maund* of rice and one goat. There the *Naya* worship '*Chando Bonga*' (Moon God). After this with the exchange of mango leaf garland the marriage starts. Then according to the advice of the *Naya* the groom put vermillion paste mixed with oil on the bride's forehead. The next day the bride leaves for her -in-laws place. Some rituals are held there, followed by feast. After everything is over, a new hut is built for the newly married couple where they start their new life. Nowadays Bihors hardly Practise sister exchange and daughter exchange marriage.

Death

In their society, Bihors believe that death is caused by some supernatural power. When a Birhor is at his last gasp, his son or wife put a little water into his mouth. Then all present there walk out of the hut leaving the door open so that the departing soul may not be obstructed in the way. Whenever, a Birhor may happen to die, two earthen vessels one in which rice and the other in which vegetables were cooked, are taken out from the hut of

the deceased and laid upward until the '*Hoyon*' or the shaving ceremony. When the pall bearers return home after the burial, all the old fire in the *tanda* are extinguished and the ashes in the hearth of all the huts in the *tanda* are thrown away and every Birhor in the settlement takes bath.

Changes Observed

The changing situations due to the environmental factors like deforestation restrictions imposed on the use of forest resources and prohibition on killing of the games have gradually resulted in a cultural change in the life of Birhors. Keeping this changing situation in mind, the changes observed are discussed below.

'Birhor Resettlement Scheme'

This scheme was planned firstly to put an end to the nomadic life of the Birhor under this scheme each family was persuaded to resettle for which a ward was established in Baghmundi named, Bhupatipally. The Birhor now resides in the semi-pucca rectangular houses provided by the government (Govt. Of west Bengal, 2004) and not in *kumbha* which were made on branches of trees designed in triangular shape. Changes have also been observed in the construction of their houses. They now build their houses with mud wall and tiled *khapra* (baked tiles). A hearth is located outside the house in the courtyard.



Figure 2: Birhor Kumbha (Courtesy: Roy, 1925)



Figure 3: Mud built house of the Birhor



Figure 4: Govt built houses of the Birhor in Baghmundi block

They now use woods for making windows and doors. The house possesses slightly a raised floor. There are two compartments inside the house. The pets are being kept in the courtyard. During the rainy season a drain outside the house is dug to drain the water. Thus, from nomadic life they became sedentary. But from the study of the report, it was observed that the process of sedentarisation, was adversely affected because of the poor housing scheme. The Birhor who traditionally lived in leaf thatched huts have failed to live, and maintain mud-houses with big windows and tiled roofs, and most of the hut have been reduced to ruin within a year or two. Passing through all these hazards of socio-ecological adjustments, presently, there are only few families of the Birhor.

Occupation

With the adoption of a sedentary life, the Birhor economy has undergone a major change. To improve their economic condition each family was given few acres of waste land, a mud hut, a pair of bullocks, a cow, agricultural implements, seeds etc. In addition, a common provisions of school,



Figure 5 : livestock provided to the Birhor



Figure 6. Rope making activity

rope making –cum- production centre, community hall and minor irrigation schemes have been initiated. A number of schemes like goatary, basketry, house construction, wage labour, etc. were being implemented (Govt. of West Bengal, 2004).

These are the changes in their economic life after their settlement. Presently, they have started to adapt to other activities like agricultural labour and industrial workers. These types of occupation help them to earn more than their traditional activities. Moreover, they are exposed to complex market economy for their subsistence, which in turn has made their interaction with the agriculturalists and the villagers. They depend on them for various exchanges of goods and services. This is how they manage to make their both ends meet.

At present they not only consume rice, various roots and forest products but have also started consuming potato, tomato, brinjal and other vegetables. These crops are produced by them through plough cultivation in their own fields. Rope making is also widely practiced till today. This is how, they are gradually being introduced to a settled life and plough cultivation.

Other cultural changes occur in their traditional dress, shirts and blouses and petticoat are slowly becoming popular. With their earlier childhood custom like tattooing their interest is increasing towards glass bangles, anklets,

earrings and lace for hair. They have also taken fancy to vessels and other utensils of brass and aluminium for their household. They use modern match boxes at present along with their traditional *thondi and chakmaki pathar* (flint stone) for fire making. They now also own transistors-sets, searchlight, bicycles, etc

Discussion

Thus, the information gathered from the preceding pages reveals that the Birhor categorically classify as one of the ideal primitive communities of the world, totally dependent on forest ecology. They represent a community which is in the speedy process of transition.

The forest is the basic geographical unit which moulds the environment pattern, and the people living in this environment develop specific cultural perspectives. Ecological degradation and resettlement programmes are the two factors which force them to accept the newly introduced items of life. The newly built brick houses in place of their traditional leaf-huts or *kumbhas*, the free distribution of agricultural lands and bullocks were implemented to stop their wandering all through the forest which in turn destroyed their age old values of life. It can be said that the Birhor and the forests are synonymous with one another. Therefore, any development scheme which puts them away from the forest oriented thinking is bound to fail. It is evident from the close study that though after their settlement they started living a sedentary life, with agricultural and wage labour work as new occupation but still they have to face the financial uncertainties as they do not get the wage labour work regularly. Moreover, due to lack of knowledge they fail to cultivate the land. Thus, besides the manual labour work on wages they continued their foraging and trapping habit. They still fabricate rope from chop (*Bauhinia vahii*) fibres collected from the forests.

It is still the forest which provides them food, when there is no grain at home. But with the deforestation and industrializations the forest has become unsuitable and inadequate to support these families on permanent footing. The market for their finished products has also become limited and constant. This has brought competition within the Birhor sellers themselves. The demand curve owing to constant and large supply has gone down in the market. Hunting and gathering work has also been affected. Many times they returns with empty hands. *Chop* have been affected. *Chop* fibres are not available these days as much as it happened to be in the earlier days.

Thus, with the passage of times they are also trying to mould themselves according to the situation. But still it needs a lot of attention in this matter. What we see is the method implemented behind the changing of Birhor life is that settled life has been imposed on them and "this imposition of a settled life, not properly planned and executed, had led to more failures than success" (Bose, 1972:32). Therefore, lastly it can be said that the forest ecology oriented cultural traditions of the Birhor requires a systematic analysis for its

proper evaluation at the time of bringing any change to this nomadic community.

The other changes are the household activities which are no longer pursued together. The band is observed only during the annual hunting. No longer are the primitive huts made of twigs and branches are found. Now the huts are constructed with mud, bricks, and straws with rectangular ground plan and are organized in a systematic pattern and not in a scattered manner as were found earlier.

Coming in contact with the neighbouring villagers they have learned to cook the food, dress to minimum cover themselves and use ornaments that are found in the market. Thus, besides hunting equipments, few earthen pots, steel and aluminium utensils, umbrellas, hurricanes are also found in the house of the Birhor's.

Being primitive they lacked social awareness. Previously the Birhor's whatever condition it may be did not use to visit the hospital even if the patient was in critical condition, neither they used to sent their children to the school. Presently a positive change among them has been observed. They take their patient to the hospital so that they may get the proper treatment. Earlier delivery used to take place in their *tanda* but now it takes place in the hospital, which is a safer place for the pregnant lady. Another change is that the Birhor, parents are sending their children to the school.

They still worship the mounds representing their '*Burha-Burhi*'. These mounds are placed within the Birhor settlement and also found in the courtyard of some of the Birhor families. These mounds are being built every year before the puja.



Figure 7: Mound worshipped by the Birhor

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NOTES

1. The term *tanda* used here denotes settlement.
2. *Bonga* is the local term used for God in the tribal group.
3. *Kumbha* is the mud hut built by the Birhor with leaves, twigs and branches.
4. Baghmundi block is selected here because more concentration of Birhors are found in this block of Purulia District

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