



VULNERABLE TRIBAL GROUPS BIRHOR

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ABSTRACT

Globalized Earth, we and our society, are feeling that indigenous and traditional socio-cultural terrain, settlement morphology and ecological identity of tribe are belonging at the door of abolition. Changes and modification are everywhere. The need and value of the tribal culture and identity are being increased to protect our environment even in geo-environmental field. While some tribal communities have adopted a mainstream way of life, at the other end of the spectrum, there are certain Scheduled Tribes, 75 in number known as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), who are characterized by: pre-agriculture level of technology, stagnant or declining population, extremely low literacy and subsistence level of economy.¹ The committee, headed by Gobinda Chandra Naskar, had earlier expressed its apprehension about the decline of population of some of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PTGs) (Earlier called Primitive Tribal Group), like Birhor in Jharkhand.² This research will be mainly limelight on Demographic Dynamics, Settlement, Culture and Challenges for sustainability of

particular tribal society and identity management of Birhor tribe of West Bengal and Jharkhand on the light of their present environmental conditions and adaptation to environments. An open and extensive research on endangered Birhor tribe of West Bengal and Jharkhand is not found, especially in respect of Settlement structure, Demographic challenges, indigenous cultural identity, environmental sustainability and conservation point of view.

KEYWORDS: PVTGs, PTGs.

INTRODUCTION

Vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs) who were forced to leave their traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle and adapt to a modern way of life and the result is not good. 13 government's efforts to transform the once-nomadic tribe into a settled community were good, but after the houses were built, the authorities forgot the Birhors,³ accesses the MNREGA opportunity is minimum or zero in most cases,⁴ food grain supplies to the birhor villages under TPDS is not functional.⁵ For example, Tilra villagers were not getting pension and access to health facilities.⁶ Non-renewal of housing schemes have meant that the older generation has moved out into a make-shift house to make space for the younger generation in the pukka government-built house. Thus, older Birhor and his wife have moved out of their house to live in the decrepit house in the background. In winter the district administration provided blankets to the families but villagers asked what would a family of ten do with one quilt. More serious is the fact that the authorities have not renewed the house allotments, forcing the elderly to shift back to traditional



houses to make space for the younger generation in the government-built houses.⁷ So need a new environmental fruitful policy of conservation for these 10,000 persons in world.

OBJECTIVES:

- To discuss the current status of Birhor tribe in Jharkhand and West Bengal.

METHODOLOGY:

The research is based on both literature review and field study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Jungle people Bihhor (bir means jungle, hos mean men⁸) are forest people, traditionally nomadic, living primarily in the Indian state of Jharkhand. They speak the Birhor language, which belongs to the Munda group of languages of the Austroasiatic language family.^{9,10} They are one of the smaller of the thirty scheduled tribes inhabiting Jharkhand. Birhors are found mainly in the area covered by the old Hazaribagh, Ranchi and Singhbhum districts before these were broken down into numerous smaller units, in Jharkhand.¹¹ The Birhor are of two types (1) Uthaln Birhor and (2) Jaghis Birhor, both groups have their own district style of life. The Uthaln Birhor has wandering style of life and their economy is an example of wandering economy even-to-day. The Jaghi Birhor has settled style of life and their economy is agricultural economy. They have settled on hill-top or on some out-skirts of the forest. The Uthaln Birhor is always on the move from Jungle to Jungle. When the food supply in a particular Jungle is exhausted, they move to another Jungle. But during the rainy season, they have to stay at a particular place in the Jungle. Sometimes, they travel long distance in the Jungle. Previously, they used to wander from Orissa to Hazaribagh.¹² Among the primitive tribes living in the West Bengal, Birhors are the most underdeveloped. Birhors of Purulia migrated from Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Dhanbad of Jharkhand State more than 150 years ago and finally settled in 3 blocks- Baghmundi, Balarampur and Jhalda-I in Purulia of West Bengal.¹³ The census report says that 271 of the total number found in West Bengal live in Purulia while the rest are scattered in the jungles of Bankura and West Midnapore.¹⁴

The temporary Birhor settlements are known as *tandas or bands*. These consist of at least half a dozen huts of conical shape, erected with leaves and branches. The household possessions traditionally consisted of earthen utensils, some digging implements, implements for hunting and trapping, rope making implements, baskets and so on. In recent times aluminium and steel have found their way into Birhor huts.¹⁵

The "primitive subsistence economy" of the Birhors has been based on nomadic gathering and hunting, particularly for monkeys. They also trap rabbits and titirs (a small bird), and collect and sell honey. They make ropes out of the fibres of a particular species of vine, which they sell in the markets of the nearby agricultural people. Partly forced by circumstances, partly encouraged by government officials, some of them have settled into stable agriculture, but others continue their nomadic life, but even when they settle down in a village, their tendency is to lead a nomadic life. According to the socio-economic standing the Birhors are classified into two groups. While the wandering Birhors are called Uthlus, the settled Birhors are called Jaghis.¹⁶ The family is the smallest unit of Birhor society. Traditional inheritance follows the male line. The husband-wife relationship is very cordial. They dress in a manner similar to their settled neighbours, using mostly traditional Indian dress with some western influence. Women are fond of ornaments. They are divided into a number of totemic clans named after plants, birds, animals, rivers, etc. Birhors follow the rules of tribal and clan endogamy. A Birhor boy is supposed to get married with a Birhor girl, but the clan of the boy and the girl should not be same. Tandas or bands have families of different clans but they follow the rule of tanda exogamy. At the time of marriage, the blood relationship is explored. The marriage between a boy and a girl is possible only when they are not related up to three generations from the father's and the mother's side. Birhors follow the practice of bride price. When the child attains the marriageable age, it is responsibility of the father to get his son or daughter married. As per traditional custom the father of the boy approaches the father of the girl. When the latter agrees, the father of the boy settles the bride price with father of the girl and

the marriage is fixed.¹⁷



After independence, central as well as state governments have taken up special programmes for the rehabilitation of tribes having wandering economy in the form of food collection, hunting and shifting cultivation. Some Birhor families were also settled in colonies meant for them. Under rehabilitation scheme, each family was given 5 acres of land, 10 decimals for house erector or homes head land, a pair of bullocks' agricultural implements and seed. Schools for their children were also started. Rope making centers were also opened. Training center in honey collection was also imparted. But unfortunately, the rehabilitation programmed was not suitable for their cultural practices. They abandoned the colony and starved wandering economy. As a result, they are still backward educationally and economically. They are facing the problem of drinking water, healthy, nutrition and sanitation. Till now they have not been brought at the level of development they are far away from the mainstream of the nation many more things are yet to be done for them.¹⁸ However, these efforts have borne little fruit as most of the Bihors have reverted to nomadic life.¹⁹ The CCD would also focus on welfare, economic development of the PTGs, the ministry said.²⁰ Researcher have to find out the implication of CCE for this vulnerable tribe. Both the Uthar and Jaghis Birhor used to practice shifting cultivation. But, now this practice has been banned by the Government. They are also facing problems in hunting due to forest regulations and wild life protection acts.²¹ The Bihors are not educated. Therefore, the benefits of reservations availed by those tribes who are well educated. The Birhor are minor tribe, therefore, they are not in a position to elect Mukhia, MLA and MP from their own community.²²

The Birhor tribe in West Bengal and Jharkhand inhabited so remote and inaccessible area of Singhbhum that they are deprived of almost all kinds of basic necessities like education, sanitation, health assistance and pure drinking water. ***There are many ethnographers who do not have a clear idea about the Birhor tribes of West Bengal and Jharkhand and there are very few researches on them. After the completion of this research work, people will come to know about this particular Tribe in respect of demographic view, settlement structure, socio-economic-cultural terrain, environmental sustainability, and challenges to sustain. The Tribe and our Indian Tribal Research, too, will be benefited.*** All aspects of the Birhor tribe's life like: racial history, population, migration, birth, death, sex ration, education, demographic dynamics, marriage, dress, funeral, spiritual activities, their food habits, belief, traditional knowledge, environmental knowledge, disaster management knowledge, racial identity, settlement, political life, administrative system, traditional game, indigenous identity, ecology, and their geo-political importance will be recorded in the research archive. The Birhor tribes have lived a very isolated existence. They suffer from severe malnutrition. Without health facilities, skin diseases and tuberculosis are widespread. The mortality rate among infants and children is also high. This is primarily because they do not understand the necessity of

personal hygiene. Birhor villages, with its flora and fauna and immense natural beauty, are fast turning out to be a popular tourist destination. Speaking of ways in which the Tribe could benefit from tourism and Birhor tribes could find employment as guides and porters for the tourists who visited the region. ***With the invasion of modernity and western perception most of the indigenous-demographic structure, traditional-socio-cultural-economic terrain, settlement structure, ecological viewpoint, and resource management are being changed. To conserve their historical identity and to curtail the challenges of their contemporary life this research is very much important. In this way they can conscious vis-a-vis our Indian Government can also give prior intention on the matter of their conservation.***

Traditional settlement, socio-cultural-cultural life, and environmental knowledge of Birhor tribes can be as important as, and sometimes even more important than, the knowledge of the geographical terrain. These all are relevant and important to policy and strategy making for their conservation. We can consider demographic view, settlement structure, socio-economic-cultural terrain, environmental sustainability as the way Birhor tribes assign meaning to the world around them and define their place in that world.

Sustainability of Birhor tribe community is a concept which promotes equality between the Birhor tribe people of today and the Birhor tribe people of tomorrow. The idea of sustainability is to create a balance between their demography, ecology, social and livelihood needs. Their needs of today must be taken care of in such a way that it does not negatively impact the needs of the next generations. ***Ecological sustainability*** of Birhor tribe ***community*** refers to the capacity of the biosphere to meet the needs of the present Birhor tribes, without hindering future generations from being able to meet their needs. This means using their natural resources shrewdly in the short-term so that these resources are available in the long-term. Ecological sustainability is the belief that all Birhor tribes must use natural and indigenous resources wisely and efficiently so that these resources never become exhausted. To ensure that the environment is not destroyed forever, humans need to start living in a way which reduces their pressure on the environment and helps to preserve the Nature's resources for the future (means ***ecologically sustainable development in Birhor tribe and their socio-economic-cultural environment***). This means that Birhor tribes not only need to avoid destroying the environment any further but also attempt to repair the resources which have already been damaged.

The need for study of this tribe is highly valuable and relevant in the light of their present environmental conditions and adaptation to environments. Due to cultural suicide, mixed culture, cross-culture, globalization and modernization most of the indigenous ecological resources, settlement structure, socio-economic and cultural terrain are belonging at the edge of destruction. The concept of sustainability is highly questionable for tribal society. Changes may found in their social and cultural adaptations as a result of inter and intra connectivity and opening up of spatial and economic relation with surrounding territories and cultures. Being a researcher we should develop a conceptual framework for understanding their demographic and cultural changes, as well as human-environmental relationships. In this proposal, an aspect of demography, settlement, indigenous socio-culture, economic and livelihood opportunities, resource of natural environment related with their life, Governmental approaches for development in the areas of Birhor tribes territory and sustainability issues (development which achieves ecological sustainability while striving to meet Birhor tribe's other needs) of the tribe in terms of traditional resources management (the maintenance of life support systems and the achievement of a 'natural' extinction rate) will be highly concerned.

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