

Ecology and Economy: A Study Among The Birjia of Chotanagpur Plateau

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ABSTRACT Environment is one of the important factors which influences the needs, customs, behavior and mental make-up of people, in short the culture of people. This becomes more determining in case of the tribals who live amidst forests and for whom environment has a direct bearing on their occupation and consequently economy. This paper is chiefly aimed at examining the above hypothesis in the case of the Birjia, a lesser known primitive tribe of Chotanagpur plateau.

It is already established that environment plays a vital role in conditioning the culture, life-style of the people and the geographical situation of a locale plays an important role in shaping the needs, customs, behaviour and also the mental make-up of people. In different habitats, different types of cultural traits are expected to be established with distinctive economy, social organisation and religious beliefs and practises as the people have to coalesce with the nature to eke out their existence. J. Steward (1955, 1968), in his concept of cultural ecology, mentioned that there is a close relationship between the eco-system and some parts of culture which he had mentioned as culture core. Economy was described by him as one of those and the economic life of the people is very close to the environment. He again stated that through a set of interweaved techniques and implements of material culture, the people can convert their environmental resources into usable food and commodities. It is again mentioned that not only ecology plays a vital role in conditioning the cultural life of a community but also the culture influences its surrounding ecological niche. Therefore, it can be said that there is an inter-relationship between these two.

The following hypothesis are taken in this paper:

1. A community living in a forest will have to largely depend on the immediate habitat that is forest; for its major economic pursuits.
2. The natural environment always affects the nature of occupation of the community of a particular niche.

THE TRIBE, METHODOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

The study is done among the Birjia - a lesser known primitive tribe of Chotanagpur plateau. The present study is done in the Gumla district, who number 4057 according to 1981 census, and it examines how the habitat plays a vital role in the economic life of the Birjia.

As per convention in social-cultural anthropology, the standard anthropological methods and techniques are applied for collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data along with participant observation, concrete case studies, and genealogical method for collection of data relating to occupation, marriage alliance and migration.

In Bihar, the Birjia are mainly found in the Gumla, Lohardaga and the Palamau districts. They are also found in the districts of Madhya Pradesh, adjacent to Bihar. According to them they are originally the inhabitants of Madhya

Pradesh, migrated to the present habitat. Regarding their origin Driver (1889), wrote that they have similarities with the Agaria. Dasgupta (1978) wrote that Elwin also mentioned them as one of the sub-groups of the Agaria. The Birjia do not agree with the views and they simply believe that they are the children of dummy figures of a man and a woman, animated by Lord Siva. They speak the Birjia dialect.

The Birjia are divided into two endogamous *Kombs* (sub-divisions) namely, the Sinduria and the Telia. Each of these is again divided into some exogamous, totemistic *killis* (clans). The *Killi* is further divided into several *Kodakus* (lineages). Previously *Komb* endogamy and *Killi* exogamy were the marriage rules. But now-a-days, as they live isolated, dispersed in small hamlets, they can not strictly follow the marriage rules of *Komb* endogamy and *Killi* exogamy and instead of those they practise *Kodaku* exogamy as a rule of marriage.

The district Gumla is surrounded by forest-clad hills on its north-western periphery. The hills consist of flat topped, small plateau and with narrow valleys. Most of these laterite topped parts rise above 3500 feet (1100 meters) and some of them are above 3800 feet (1200 metres).

The river koel flows through the narrow valley of Bahar Barwa (Bishunpur P.S.) towards Palamau. The place consists of laterite and Bauxite soil. Alluvial soil is found at the plains which is helpful for agriculture but it is very scanty and most of those are possessed by Oraons, Mundas and Kherwars. The land possessed by the Birjia is found at the *pats* and the *ghats* which is rich with laterite and Bauxite and not helpful to grow paddy.

The forest of the region is of dry, tropical type. Sal (*Shorea robusta*) is the main type of tree. The others are *Asan* (*Terminalia tomentosa*), *Gambhar* (*Gmelina arborea*), *Kend* (*Diospyros tomentosa*), *Simul* (*Bombax malabaricum*), *Karam* (*Adina cardifolia*), *Kusum* (*Schlichera trijuga*), *Paisar* (*Pterocarpus harsupium*), *Piar* (*Buchanania latifolia*), *Mahua* (*Bassia latifolia*) etc. The wild life of the district consists of both the car-

nivores and the herbivores types. The climate of this region is dry and bracing. The year can be divided into hot season (March to May), monsoon (June to September), and cold season (November to February). October is the transitional month in between monsoon and winter

THEIR VILLAGES

The present study was carried out in three villages: Holang, Range and Harup, situated in the Bishunpur block of Gumla district. Village Holang is situated in between the other two villages - Range and Harup. All these villages are surrounded closely by forest. In village Holang, there is a stream; named Serka, also named as Holang river by the people. The Birjia live at the outskirts of the northern portion of the village, adjacent to the forest, where there are bamboo clump and various types of trees specially *mahua* and *sal*. They have a separate *tola* (hamlet) where nine families live. Their houses are situated sporadically on the *ghat* (hill slopes). They possess *tanr/tand* (non-irrigated) types of land, some of which are attached to their homestead called *bari* land.

The Range village is situated at the *ghat* (hill slopes) of Netarhat plateau. River Koel flows little away from the village and there are three rivulets in the village namely, Donga Pathal, Kelwa Amba and Gatijharia. Twentyfive Birjia families live in this village forming a separate *tola* (*Tusrukona tola*) on the *ghats* which is full of bamboo clumps. There is a bamboo depot, set up by the Forest Department, here. For collection of bamboo, the forest contractor, appointed by the Forest Department, employs labourers from this-village on *theka* (contract basis) and all of the labourers belong to the Birjia community.

The village Harup is located at the north of Holang village. The village is divided into the following hamlets namely, the Perwa pat, Kulukona pat, Risha pat, Mayla pat, and Kabra pat and the Garha Harup. All the hamlets except the Garha Harup are situated on the *pat* (plateau).

The Garha Harup is situated in the *garha* which means gorge. The Birjia are mainly found to inhabit in the *Kabra pat* and the Garha Harup regions. 32 Birjia families live in Harup, of whom 12 live in *Kabra pat* and 20 live in the Garha Harup tola of the village. The *Kabra pat* is rich with Bauxite and *lateritic* soil. The way from *Kabra pat* or from any other *pat* region of the village to Garha Harup is *fringed* with dense forest. There are two rivulets - the Harup and the Jalim flowing from north to south of the village. At the base of the gorge, the land is irrigated by the water of the rivers and is fertile, suitable for paddy cultivation. But most of the fertile land are possessed by the oron or the Kherwar. The Birjia land is mostly found on the *pat* region which is of non-irrigated, and less fertile type of land.

THEIR ECOLOGY AND ECONOMY

From the above description it can be observed that the Birjia live either on the *ghat* or on the *pat* region, in or very close to the forest and they prefer to live isolated from other communities, preferably in the outskirts of the village. They have mostly non-irrigated and less fertile type of land. According to their local geographical situation it is observed that their habitat is different from the people who live in the plains. Those who live in the plains, live comparatively far from the forest and have the cultivable land of productive type. Settled cultivation is the mainstay of their economy. But the Birjia have got land mostly on the hill tops often called *chatan*, which are of less productive type. They have got no facilities of irrigation. So they have to depend on the natural rainfall, that is; on monsoon for cultivation. The production from their land is also not sufficient to maintain their livelihood throughout the year. On the contrary they live in close proximity to the forest and they depend much on the forest and its products to maintain their livelihood.

Now in the following lines the inter-relationship between their occupation and natural environment is illustrated.

Traditionally the Birjia were primarily iron

smelters, basket weavers and the *beonra* (slash-and-burn) cultivators; of which *beonra* cultivation was the most important occupation to them. Collection of various types of roots, fruits etc. and hunting animals from the forest also supplemented their economy as subsidiary occupations. Their place of habitation is rich with iron, which they used to extract by their indigenous process and prepare iron implements such as *tangi* (axe), *rambha* (dibble), *far* (plough-share) etc. But gradually this occupation lost its importance in the local market because implements of better quality have captured the market. Their prepared implements are of crude variety and not liked by the local people.

Basketry is an important occupation to them for which they use bamboo locally available in the forest. They prepare various types of baskets such as *tokri*, *nuchua* and also different types of *soup* (winnowing fan).

Among the other occupations, *beonra* (slash-and-burn) cultivation was a very important occupation to them. They used to do it by cutting and burning the part of a forest. However, with the implementation of Forest Act, 1952, *beonra* cultivation has been banned by the Government. Their own *Khut Katti jamin* (land which is cleared by themselves for cultivation) are taken away under Reserve Forest. In lieu of that as a compensation they got mostly less fertile land on the hill tops of the hillocks, which are locally called *chatan* mentioned earlier. With the implementation of Forest act, the Birjia economy has been in the state of turmoil. They are forced to start settled cultivation. But the land distributed among them by the Government is not suitable for paddy cultivation. Only one crop can be produced during rainy season which is not sufficient to maintain themselves throughout the year. Side by side it is also observed that they can not totally leave the *beonra* cultivation. They do it very secretly in small patches of land. But the *beonra* cultivation in small patches is not sufficient and hence from the economic point it is not at all productive for them. Therefore, it is found that among their traditional occupations regarded as

primary occupations, only except basket weaving, others lost their importance. It is observed that at present, for survival, they do whatever job they get at hand. They have no fixed occupation of their own. A man may be a basket weaver or wood or bamboo cutter etc. It mainly depends on the surrounding ecological niche that is; depending upon the availability of local resources which is mainly the forest and its products.

A survey on the occupation among Birjia in three villages show the following points:

(i) The Birjia have no primary and subsidiary occupation. They do many jobs whatever is available. It mainly depends on the occupational opportunity and availability of local resources. As for example, in Holang, a man may do the jobs of basketry or labour, or at Range a man can do bamboo cutting or labour.

(ii) There are occupational variations in these three villages. In Holang, majority of working males are engaged in basketry, whereas their women sell them; in Range, most of them are engaged in bamboo cutting; whereas in Harup, males are engaged in wood cutting and females sell them.

In spite of having the same occupational resource - the bamboo, in both, Holang and Range, there is occupational variation between the two villages. Holang is the village of basket weavers, and Range is the village of bamboo cutters. Now what is the reason behind this difference?

The Bamboo clumps near Range are very dense. It is thought by the Forest Department profitable if they supply the bamboo to other places. So the Forest Department has given the bamboo clumps on *theka* (contract) to persons for bamboo cutting. The place then has gone under the contractors. So it became very difficult for the Birjia to collect bamboo from the forest for basketry. On the other hand, they got an opportunity of better earning through another job avenue that is bamboo cutting under the contractors on daily wage basis. It is a very lucrative job to them. They can earn Rs. 17/- to Rs. 20/- (approx.) daily. But in case of basketry, a

man can not prepare a complete basket daily. It takes two to three days to weave a complete basket (beginning from bamboo collection), and a basket costs only Rs. 5/- to Rs. 7/- at the most. So basketry as an occupation lost its importance to the Birjia of Range.

The bamboo clumps near Holang is very scanty and not taken by the Forest Department for supply the bamboo to other places. So the Birjia of Holang has got no opportunity of the job of bamboo cutting as it is found in Range and they are only the basket weavers. Hence, it becomes clear that ecology plays a vital role for their occupational opportunity.

(iii) Collection of edible roots, fruits and tubers play a vital role in the economic life of the Birjia beside basket weaving, bamboo or wood cutting. Collection is done daily throughout the year. All the persons (except the children upto 5 years of age and the disabled persons) of a family are involved in gathering activity. The children above 5 years of age accompany their mothers generally. Whenever a person goes to the jungle for bamboo or wood cutting, he collects the available items from the jungle.

Among the collected materials *mahua* is a very important item. It is consumed by them and also exchanged in the market by rice or other items of daily use. There are some other collected items such as *bidi patta* and *sarai* (sal) seed, which are sold for cash earning to the contractors of the Forest Department. Nearly 80 to 90% of working population are engaged in collection of forest produce in all the three villages.

(iv) Cattle herding as an occupation is not so important to them. The cattle except the bullock are less useful to them because neither they drink nor sell milk. It is true that they can consume beef or do the business of cattle selling. But according to them their place of habitation is not favourable for cattle rearing because there is less grazing land. Often the cattle go to the jungle in search of fodder and in such cases the cattle many times are killed by the carnivores. Moreover, if a cattle crosses the boundary and enters the Reserve Forest, and caught by the forest guard,

a fine is imposed on the owner of the cattle. If it is killed by a carnivore in the Reserve Forest, no compensation is paid to the owner by the Government. Due to the reasons mentioned above, the Birjia do not like to take cattle rearing as an occupation. In all the three villages, less than 20% people do cattle rearing.

Manual labour in different unskilled sectors including agricultural sector predominates the Birjia occupation. In Holang 75% males and 90% females; in Range, 90% males and 85% females; and in Harup 75% males and 85% females do manual labour throughout the year. They mainly work as agricultural labourer in the field of other neighbouring communities. They also work as labourer in road construction work or well digging work under P.W.D. In this way they get themselves engaged in labour whenever it is available in unskilled sectors.

(v) It is further observed that to the Birjia the occupations are temporary and the occupations are changed with seasonal variation. To the Birjia the whole year is divided into three seasons namely the summer (*garmi*), rainy season (*barkha*) and winter (*jara*). For them summer starts after Holi (in the month of February-March). Blooming of sal and *mahua* flower is also a symbol of summer season. When the sal flowers begin to fall and when frequently wet cloud is seen in the sky, they think that the rainy season is coming soon and within a few days after performance of *Sohorai* (a ritual of cattle worship performed in the month of October-November) they believe that the winter comes.

It is observed that during summer and winter, the Birjia are engaged in similar occupations such as basketry in Holang, bamboo cutting in Range and wood cutting in Harup. But it differs during rainy season, when the Birjia do cultivation.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it is observed that the Birjia live in or close to the jungle. Their job avenues are mainly oriented with forest and eco-

nomie life of the Birjia is very much linked with the forest - their local surroundings.

Collection of roots, fruit and tubers from the surrounding forest plays a vital role in their economic life. Unlike other occupations (which vary according to season), collection is done by them throughout the year. They can collect plenty of items for their own consumption, exchange and also for sell. Their other occupational resources namely wood and bamboo are also brought from the forest. Cattle herding as an occupation is not suitable for them due to the local forest environment.

Moreover it is also observed that the occupations of the Birjia get changed with the changes of season. As for example - wood or bamboo cutting or basketry - all are the works done during summer and winter but these are stopped during rainy season when the Birjia get busy in their cultivable land. During monsoon it is tough to go to forest for wood or bamboo cutting. So in monsoon, automatically these works are lessened or stopped. On the other hand during monsoon the Birjia get busy in their agricultural field. So they shift to devote much time in agricultural work instead of bamboo or wood cutting or basketry.

Thus the seasonal changes in occupational pattern is also governed by the natural environmental condition. It is evident, that the economic life of the Birjia of the three villages is integrated with the locale in which they live.

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