

Ecology, Culture and the Changing Behaviour Pattern of the Food-Gathering and Hunting Peoples : The Hill Kharia Situation in Similipal Hills

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ABSTRACT Any change in the physical environment has direct or indirect bearing on way of life of the people depending on it. During the pre-independence time, Hill Kharias were recognised as a specialised food-gathering and hunting tribe by the-then-kings and granted rights to exploit the renewable forest resources in Similipal Hills for the maintenance of livelihood. But during the post-independence period, the loss of their right to exploit such resources due to the changing forest policies, made them intruders in their own territory. The loss of their exclusive right, on the other hand, encouraged the neighbouring agriculturist tribes to intrude into the forest and compete for the collection of natural resources. With ample number of empirical facts, ultimate consequences of the above-stated situations have been reflected in the paper which show not only their adverse impact on the Hill Kharia economy and social structure leading to the emergence of idiosyncratic tendencies but also highlight similar impact on the culture and behaviour of the people due to the disruption of people's emotional attachment with the natural and supernatural environments.

While enquiring about the behaviour pattern of a food-gathering and hunting community, the role of ecology cannot be neglected. The physical environment, though do not determine, is in all possible ways related to the culture and behaviour pattern of a forest-based community. Therefore, any change in the physical environment has direct or indirect bearing on the way of life of a forest-based people. The Hill Kharia, a food-gathering and hunting community in Similipal Hills, Orissa, is no exception to it. The paper attempts to elaborate a few empirical observations/case studies on the community.

Out of the three major sections of Kharia community living in Orissa, the Hill Kharia section is the most primitive and usually found in and around the Similipal hills located in Mayurbhanj. The other two Kharia sections namely Dudh and Dhelki are mainly found in

Sundargarh. Although the Hill Kharia are acquainted with agriculture and some of them possess land in forest valleys, they are primarily food-gatherers and hunters. Some of them also inhabit plains. But majority of the community usually lives either in the forest or in the forest-plains fringe areas. As a semi-nomadic tribe, the Hill Kharia temporarily shift to different forest areas for the collection of seasonal forest produce (Dash, 1982-83). So far as their permanent settlement is concerned, they usually prefer to live in multi-ethnic villages where other ethnic groups are agriculturalists. This is mainly practised in view of (i) social security; (ii) for immediate marketing or exchange of forest produces for rice or paddy; and (iii) for getting employment opportunities as wage labourer during the rainy season when food-gathering activities are minimal due to dense vegetational growth in the forest.

As a forest-dependent community, the Hill Kharia make use of a variety of wild roots, tubers, fruits, nuts, berries, leaves flowers, etc., as food and other household needs. However, rice is their staple food. Although they manage through hard toil their minimum living conditions in the potentially resourceful Similipal hills, the food-gathering and hunting activities are left to chance and never guaranteed of any definite output. Still the people continue such activities, as no investment and careful attention for growing the crop in the productive sites in the forest are needed.

Besides the Hill Kharia, the vast stretch of Similipal hills which is spread over 3000 sq km of area as a single patch compact-biome, is also exploited by nomadic people like the Birhor, seminomadic people like the Ujia, and a number of agricultural tribal communities like the Santal, the Bathudi, the Bhuiyan, the Kol, the Gond,

along with a number of non-tribal communities inhabiting around the hill range. But unlike the Birhor and the Ujia, no other community is either forest-based or primarily food-gatherer and hunter in the area.

The importance of Similipal hills is not simply explained as a resourceful forest eco-system with great economic potentialities, it is all the more, a national park as well as wild life sanctuary of the country. The core area of the hill range has been also identified and managed by the Project Tiger Department for the protection of the tigers (Chaudhury, 1974). In the peripheral forest zones, the Similipahar Forest Development Corporation was also functioning for the preservation and protection of the forest from 1979 to 1990 (Memorandum, S.F.D.C., 1979).

II

Under the above geo-ethnic conditions of Similipal hills, the Hill Kharia and other forest based communities, experience a number of restrictions for food-gathering and hunting pursuits. It is mainly felt in fields of hunting and felling down of trees. Food-gathering activities which are carried mainly on the renewable items of the forest by the Hill Kharia, are purposively permitted in view of the collection of forest revenue.

The dependency of the Hill Kharia on Similipal Hills, has not only imposed on them a forest-based or oriented culture, but also defined and explained critically their institutional interactions. Every minute change in the eco-system has, therefore, its noticeable impact on the Hill Kharia culture and behaviour.

In the past, during the kingship, as a forest-based and forest-dwelling community, the Hill Kharia were enjoying full right to use and exploit forest resources. They were accompanying the king as 'path finders' in the forest during hunting expeditions. On the whole, they had a feeling that the forest belonged to them and the exploitation of forest resources was their birth right. Such a feeling of belongingness had, on the other hand, also given rise to a strong sense of territoriality. The whole forest eco-system was mutually divided among various Hill Kharia bands or groups. At present, specifically after independence, most of the rights and privileges have been restricted under the present forest acts, and still some trace of territoriality is noticed among the

people (Dash, 1986). Such a change in the rights and privileges to exploit forest resources has no doubt some lasting impact on the socio-cultural traditions of people. Some of them are mentioned below for reference.

- (i) The loss of right to use and exploit forest produces in the Tiger Project area or reserve forest area, very much establishes the notion that the forest does not belong to the forest-based peoples like the Hill Kharia, the Ujia and the Birhor.
- (ii) In spite of the above official restrictions, although the people are permitted to gather renewable resources in view of the forest revenue collection, they are looked down as intruders into their own land.
- (iii) Such a state of affairs encourage other forest-dependant agricultural communities to intrude into the forest for various other forest collections beyond the basic need during their leisure time. As a result of this, competition in a few major collections like honey, sal resin, roots, and tubers, bird catching, greens, fruits etc. which were traditionally the monopoly of the Hill Kharia and the Ujia, was very much evident among the other local communities.
- (iv) There is no doubt about the fact that such a competition among the primary gatherers like the Hill Kharia and secondary gatherers like the local agricultural tribes leads to severe mental stress and strain on the Hill Kharia, a forest-based food gathering community.
- (v) The Hill Kharia in the face of such a competition, not only lose their close interaction with the forest eco-system, but also face a lot of problems as worst sufferers in the collection of forest resources as they do not have any suitable and permanent alternative to maintain livelihood. Although agriculture is practised as a secondary occupation, it is only restricted to a few in the society.
- (vi) As full-time gatherers and hunters, the Hill Kharia were taking utmost care for the renewal of the mostly needed forest resources. The competition, introduced by the secondary gatherers, (usually the agricultural people), gave rise to rude and

reckless collection of such items without paying any attention for their renewal or propagation, which not only cause a severe loss to the forest eco-system, but also create a great crisis for the forest-based Hill Kharia.

- (vii) As a result of such competitions, the nearby resources of the forest are mainly exploited or over-exploited as well as exhausted and the Hill Kharia have to cover long distances in the forest for food collection.
- (viii) All the above mentioned results which are mainly started with the restrictions imposed by the forest department and subsequently with the competition of poachers and secondary gatherers, are having remarkable impact on the society and culture of the primary gatherers, finally affecting their behaviour pattern.
- (ix) Such impacts are significantly observed in the structure and function of various socio-cultural institutions like kinship, marriage, political organisation, religion, economic organisation, etc. Out of these, the most significant change is noticed primarily in the field of religion which forms the core structure of the society and basic to all other institutions, specifically in the field of man-nature interaction and this is focussed in the paper.

With reference to the above mentioned situations in the Hill Kharia environment and society, and with reference to the hypothetical objectives of the paper which states that the factors like ecology, culture and behaviour pattern of a people are very much interrelated with each other and the change in ecology may cause subsequent change or impact on the culture and behaviour among the food-gathering people. It is finally said that ecology as a controlling factor is the key-point of discussion here. As it is mainly observed and understood, changes in the eco-system or ecology are brought about mainly by two major processes : (i) climatic or natural, and (ii) man-made. Man, usually does not have any control over the natural factor which may create a catastrophe for the whole environment or eco-system by destroying it. Here as such, there is no clear-cut instant remedy than to take some preventive measures. But as regards the second one, it is

observed that since a few decades, man is in a better position to exploit or transform the eco-system for the fulfilment of his selfish ends. This has been observed in the Hill Kharia environment, imposing an adverse effect on the people.

The temporal changes in the Similipal environment both by the nature-made and man-made processes are directly or indirectly leading to cultural changes of the dependent peoples. As stated earlier, the Hill Kharia economy mainly centres around three major collections like honey, sal resin and arrow-root besides a variety of other collections like roots and tubers, fruits, nuts, berries, leaves, flowers, timber, gum etc. alongwith bird-catching, fishing and hunting of small game animals in the Similipal forest. For such collections, the Hill Kharia make use of a variety of techniques or expertise and accordingly the division of labour on the basis of sex and age, and the pattern of temporary migration in the forest for seasonal food collections are very much interlinked. The females usually carry on less skilled forest collections and the males mainly the skilled types of collection which requires a great expertise. In the patrilineal Hill Kharia society, although the females organise a number of forest collections for household consumption, the males with greater expertise go for large scale collections to some extent for household consumption and to a great extent for earning cash. The migration pattern of the Hill Kharia confirms a semi-nomadic nature. For the specific collection of arrow-root, as per the traditional pattern several families were to shift to the crop-site in the forest and camp preferably at a stream-side site where they temporarily stay for a couple of months alongwith their respective family members. During such collections the incapable/physically handicapped, and aged/old persons are usually left in the permanent settlement. However, in the temporary site, some temporary adjustments develop. Activities on the basis of division of labour of age and sex are undertaken and the interpersonal behaviour temporarily manifest a specific pattern confirming to a greater cohesion or unity in the band or group. Conflicts and quarrels are although not altogether absent, but rarely found. Such temporary social organisations in the forest, away from the permanent settlement, ensure better understanding and guarantee better cohesion. It also provides a better

scope for the unmarried boys and girls to develop courtship. Besides this, in case of the other major and minor collections, usually the male members temporarily migrate to the productive sites and remain there for a couple of days till they collect in large amounts. People, through such temporary migration, move either with the whole family or only with the male members in small bands or groups, and such occasions provide ample scope to the people for the exercise of the oral traditions (myths, riddles and tales are usually told) and insurance for effective co-operation. But under the present circumstances of change and competition in the Similipal eco-system, the migration of the whole family into the deep forest has been greatly minimised. Only the male members are able to continue such temporary shifts. This has greatly contributed to the decline of the forest-oriented oral traditions.

As stated earlier, the greatest damage caused to the Hill Kharia culture by the poachers or outsiders is significantly marked in the field of religion. The movements of the neighbouring communities into Similipal forest has severely affected the sentiments of the Hill Kharia. Traditionally, the Kharia economic year begins with the month of 'Magh' (Jan-Feb.) and during this month, the 'Magh' ritual is carefully organised in almost all Hill Kharia villages (Dash, 1982-83). Through such rituals they propitiate the forest deities, village deities and all other malevolent as well as benevolent deities in order to get assurance from them for better food collection, bird-catching, fishing and hunting in the forest round the year. Such a ceremony was central to all other institutional activities in the society. The people observe it once in a year and before the observance of this ritual, the entrance into the deep forest and the collection of new forest produces are strictly prohibited. Thus, such ritual increases psychological strength and brings in culturally determined behaviour pattern in the field of economic, political and social organisation.

In the 'Magh' ritual, people mainly offer the newly grown forest produces to the deities and after the ritual is over, all the members of the society are spiritually permitted to exploit the forest resources throughout the year. But due to the intrusion of the neighbouring communities or outsiders who do not follow such restrictions in

forest collections before the deities are propitiated and offered the new harvest of forest produce, it is marked that such new produces are consumed first by the neighbouring communities. Such a matter creates discontentment that the new forest produces are first of all used by the other people and the deities are offered only their left over resources. The Hill Kharia and the Ujia strongly react to this and as the situation in the environment is not under their control, it is affecting their sentiment badly (Dash, 1992). With reference to such unpleasant happenings, it is now marked that people are not showing any serious interest as before in such rituals. It is also not organised timely in some villages. In some Hill Kharia as well as Ujia villages, such rituals are also not found to be observed at all in some particular years recently.

This has on the other hand, an equal impact on the culture and behaviour of the people. People of some villages where rituals are not properly followed, they are mainly found to become more and more care-free leading to idiosyncratic or individualistic tendencies. Thus, social integration or cohesiveness is found to be weakend, even though the forest collections are maintained as before.

Such a trend or behavioural transformation following a set back in the religious rites, ultimately defines the role of the individuals in the society. Thus, in such villages the role of the individual who is specifically a leading personality is going to be more distinct. Such manipulative individuals try to bring out change in the environment through exploitation for meeting their selfish ends. In a few Hill Kharia villages, such individuals carry on trade like outsiders by utilizing the fellow members of the village and their collections. Against the ethics of preservation and propagation of renewable forest species in their culture, they also rudely and recklessly exploit the valuable natural resources.

Thus, in conclusion, it may be stated that the Hill Kharia along with the Ujia who live in different parts of Similipal hills are still in the primitive stage of food-gathering and hunting. They consider Similipal as their home and identify themselves as autochthones of the hill range. But with striking contrast, it is found that the intrusion of other neighbouring communities into their field for specific collections has emerged as a background

condition for change (to some extent) of their culture, specifically their religion. Although it is effective only in some villages and progressing slowly at present, in the long run, may disrupt the essential socio-cultural elements of the food-gathering and hunting Hill Kharia. The matter is not coming to an end with this much of disruption. The process, as it seems from empirical observation, may be cyclical in the sense that the transformations in the eco-system as caused by the outsiders and individual personalities will lead to cultural as well as behavioural changes of forest-based peoples which in turn, further exploit or affect the eco-system with a greater speed or force due to the rise of individualistic trend and the loss of socio-cultural values for the renewal or propa-

gation of the mostly needed species.

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