

Deforestation induced change in Subsistence pattern of the kharia tribe: a study from Purulia district

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Introduction

Deforestation is one of the biggest environmental problems in the world. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the expansion of agriculture caused nearly 80% of global deforestation, with the construction of infrastructure such as roads or dams, together with mining activities and urbanization, making up the remaining causes of deforestation. The loss of trees and other vegetation can be caused by climate change, desertification, soil erosion, fewer crops, flooding, increased greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, and a host of problems for indigenous people. Deforestation refers to the decrease in forest areas across the world that is lost for other uses such as agricultural croplands, urbanization, or mining activities. Greatly accelerated by human activities since 1960, deforestation has been negatively affecting natural ecosystems, biodiversity, and the climate. Deforestation affects wild animals, plants, and humans in at least four distinct ways, via soil erosion, which can lead to clogged water ways and other problems.

The symbiotic relationship is seen between the indigenous people and forest. So an important source of income for indigenous people is for forest survival and livelihoods. Forest degradation like environment degradation of any area and its socio-economic conditions are related to each other. Degradation of forest and its affected community of Purulia is the subject of this study. The ancient Manbhum district named Purulia in 1956, 1st November. Separated from Bihar and joined to West Bengal. Purulia district has poor economy and agricultural background. They are many more dependent on forest and forest produce.

The kharia are an Austro-Asiatic ethnic group from central India. This tribal ethnic group in India is subdivided into three groups known as the Hill Kharia, Dhelki Kharia and the Dudh Kharia. These tribes are closely dependent on forest. They are known as forest people, and traditionally their occupation is hunting and food gathering. In West Bengal, the Hill Kharia is mainly found in West Midnapur, Bankura and Purulia districts. The majority of their population are found in Purulia. The Hill Kharia is also called Pahari Kharia, Savara / Kharia, Kharia. The occupation of this Hill Kharia is food gathering, hunting and labourer. The Dhelki Kharia is agricultural labourers and agriculturalists, while Dudh Kharia is exclusively agriculturists in their primary economy. According to Prof. Chandi Das Mukhopadhyay, "these Kharia people with smaller and scattered population live in remote and isolated areas. They are still pre-agriculturalist stage and mostly depended on outmoded forest economy". According to S. C. Roy (1937) "the Hill kharia represent the archaic form of the more evolved Dudh and Dhelki kharias who live in the adjoining areas Orissa, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh."

In 2006, government of India has announced the PTG as a particularly vulnerable tribal group (PVTG). According to the PVTG list government of India, the kharia is not enlisted as PVTG in West Bengal. According to the list kharia tribal group is enlisting as PVTG in Odisha state and Hill kharia tribal group is enlisting as PVTG in the state of Jharkhand and Bihar. According to the K. S. Singh (1994) the hill

kharia are mainly distributed in Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal. But in West Bengal they are inhabited in districts of Paschim Midnapore, Bankura and Purulia. They are living in small population hamlet and totally isolated from others population group. S. C. Roy in his monograph has elaborated an account of the migration of the Kharias to the different district of Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh.

The hill Kharia is known as 'Sabar' in West Bengal and enlisted as a scheduled tribe (Sinha 1994). The hill Kharia was live in hilly regions, at one time covered by forests. Local people also call them Hill Kheria and Bon-Digar. The forests are now destroyed. In such situation they have been trying to re – adjust themselves to settle down beside rural areas. For their sustenance, they depend mainly on forest resources such as collecting honey, fruits, vegetables and herbs. Now a day the Hill Kharia finds that due to deforestation and scarcity of forest animals, hunting and as an exclusive made of subsistence is no longer possible at present situation. (Dikshit Sinha).

Hill kharia is so – called because they used to live in and around hilly tracts. Generally a hill kharia village is situated at the foot of hills but neither on the top nor on the slope. They are sometimes referred to as wild erenga or Pahari kharia. The tribe now use the mythical term Sabar as their name (Vidyarthi, L. P. 1980). The hill kharia lives in complete isolation from the other non tribal groups. These people prefer to live near hill area, have adequate facilities of natural resources and sufficient availability of forest product. The hill kharia is very close to nature and the culture of the tribe is influenced by its ecological and social surroundings. They are still now do not like to mix with any outsiders. They depend predominantly on forest resources such as collecting honey, fruits, vegetables, roots.

Objectives of the Study:

In present study, the researcher tried to find out the present subsistence pattern, socio – cultural life and the major changes in the subsistence pattern as a result of deforestation of Kharia people of Purulia District.

Research Methodology

The Kharia community live in a less transforming social cultural life in ecological perspectives. The habitations are in remote area, hard to accessibility keeping a distance from other communities. There settlement locally people called Kharia Dih or Basti, a considerable distance separate from the main village settlement. In last few decades a rapid deforestation breach the ecological balance of their society, culture and scarcity of natural resources brought them in constrain of flux. This study was conducted in two blocks of Purulia districts. For fulfilment of this research two Kharia inhabited village was selected. Kulabahal and Damodarpur villages are located within three km from the Forest (Since 3km is considered the working area). Traditional Anthropological tools and techniques were used to collect the primary data.

Land and People

This research work is carried out in the Purulia district of West Bengal state. Purulia is one of the 23 districts of west Bengal. According to states reorganization act 1956, 1 November Purulia was separated from Bihar and annexed to West Bengal. The economic situation of Purulia has largely evolved over

industrialized farming and tourism areas. At present, the forest area of Purulia district is 797sqkm. According to the census 2001 Purulia district 19.22% population are schedule tribe. The district is located in the humid sub tropical climate region or comes under plateau region characterized by arid and dry zone and is specified as chronic Drought Prone Area (DPA).

Hura is a community development block (CD block) that forms an administrative division in the Purulia Sadar subdivision of the Purulia district in the Indian state of West Bengal. It has 1 panchayat samiti, 10 gram panchayats, 107 gram Sansads (village councils), 116 mouzas and 111 inhabited villages. Gram panchayats of the Hura CD block are: Chatumadar, Daldali, Hura, Jabarrah, Kalabani, Keshargarh, Ladhurka, Lakhanpur, Manguria-Lalpur and Rakhera-Bishpuria. The present study was carried out in Kulabahal village located in Hura block. Kulabahal village situated in Jabarrah Gram Panchayat.

Puncha is a community development block (CD block) that forms an administrative division in the Manbazar subdivision of the Purulia district in the Indian state of West Bengal. It has 1 panchayat samity, 10 gram panchayats, 97 gram sansads (village councils), 109 mouzas and 99 inhabited villages. Gram panchayats of the Puncha CD block are: Bagda, Chandra, Chhirudih, Jambad, Kenda, Lakhra, Napara, Panipathar, Pirah, and Puncha. The present study was carried out in Damodarpur village located in Puncha block. Damodarpur village is situated in Napara Gram Panchayat.

The present study was carried out in two Kharia villages located in the Hura & Puncha block. The total kharia household number of these two villages is above 100. Both these villages are inhabited by multi-ethnic communities. However, the kharia tribes live in separate hamlets. There are two Kharia hamlets in Kulabahal village. In one hamlet only kharia tribes live and in another hamlet kharia tribes and other community live together.

Data Collection

For this qualitative study I used participant observation, in depth interview and focus group discussion with kharia people and other villagers. Participant observation and depth interviews are chief methods for data collection of this study. Focus group discussion was also an important method. The questionnaire included questions about the livelihood pattern. Data was collected by asking questions. Secondary data were collected from references. To study the situational context in which the kharia live, I also visited a few villages in Manbazar – II, Barabazar, Bandwan, and Balarampur blocks.

Major Findings and Discussion

Present Subsistence Pattern of Kharia:-

The Hill Kharia leads a semi- nomadic life by nature at present. Their economy is mainly forest based in Purulia. Most of them traditionally engaged in gathering forest foods or selling jungle products like firewood, dry leaf, mats, brooms, fish – traps, rat traps etc. thus they also collect food materials like fruit, vegetables, tubers and roots from the forest and they also till now continue to traditional method of hunting. Their major economic pursuits based upon the selling handicrafts such as broom – stick, fish traps and rat traps made bamboos. The major collection is honey which is available in dense forest. They have selling this collected honey to the nearer local market.

In Damodarpur and Kulabahal village, the most of the kharia people as very much dependent on making and selling bamboo handicraft. As an agricultural labour is the main occupation of this tribe. Many of them are also and engaged as a brick field labour. Women and old person are mainly engaged in making bamboo handicrafts. Leaves of shal tree are also collected from the forest by women. Occasionally during marriage or other social ceremonies villagers ask them to make leaf plates. Some kharia men from these villages go to different states to work as migrant workers.

Kharias of Purulia district originated and developed mainly from the forest. The various kinds of trees of, and shrubs in the forest nears to the village are helpful to them in their daily livelihood. The forest near the village has the trees like Mahua, Sal, Jam, bamboo, Taetul etc. These trees have a great importance in their village economy. The Kharia women were engaging in collect Mahua flowers from the forest for in future use, they have dried them under the sun for preservation and sell them in the local market. Forest provided different type of herbal medicine of them. This forest is not only a source of food, medicine and liquor etc but it also provides them house building materials like bamboo, leaves. Forest also provides them wood for use as fuel and firewood. They have also put excess firewood's on the local market.

In all hill kharia villages men spend days in searching of food materials from nearest forest. Various animals like snakes, rats, and birds are found in the forest. They also catch birds or trapped them. Hill kharia is very much dependent on hunting but due to the scarcity of animal, they hunted a small animal like snakes, rats, birds etc.

Change in the Subsistence Pattern of Kharia Tribe

Dikshit Sinha, in his book 'The Hill Kharia of Purulia' describes the whole year's livelihood pattern of the kharia tribes. In the month of Magh (jan - feb), the Kharia tribes collect paddy from rat holes and sak, roots and fruits from the jungle. During this time they hunt rabbits, rats, foxes and hural and makes bamboo brooms. In the month of Falgun (feb-march), they are collect roots, wood, sak and sal leaves from the forest. During this time they hunt hare, rats, squirrel. In the month of Chaitra (march-april), they are collect fruits, roots, kend leaves, sal leaves, honey etc. during this time they hunt birds. In the month of Baisakh (april-may), they collect kend leaves, sak, honey and wood. During this time they hunt birds, dhaman snake and make fish traps. In the month of Jaistha (may-june) they collect kend leaves, sak, and wood. . During this time they hunt birds, dhaman snake, make fish traps and loan of paddy from the peasant as advanced wage of transplantation. In the month of Asar (june-july), they collect sak, and certain kinds of insects. During this time they hunt Goi, dhaman snake and loan of paddy as advanced wage-labour. In the month of Sravan (july-august), sak, certain kinds of insects. During this time they hunt goi, fish, crabs, frogs, and work as a wage labour. In the month of Bhadra (aug-sept), they are collect roots, and tubers, sak, insects and selling sal leaves. During this time they hunt goi, fish, crabs, frogs, snails and transplantation of seedlings. In the Aswin (sept- oct), they are collect roots, tubers, sak and selling sal leaves. During this time they hunt goi, fish, crabs, frogs, snails and transplantation of seedlings. In the month of Kartik (oct-nov) they collect roots, sak, selling sal leaves, wood, etc. During this time they hunt goi, fish, crabs, frogs, snails, and hare and make broomstick, fish traps. In the month of Aghrayan (nov-dec), they are collect paddy from rat holes, snails, leaves. During this time they hunt hare, rats and harvesting paddy on contract, threshing. In the month of Paush (dec-jan), they are collect paddy from rat holes, snails, leave, fruits, roots etc. During this time they hunt hare, rats and harvesting paddy on contract, threshing, reaping millet etc.

Basically the Kharia tribe depends on forests for their food. But now they are facing food crisis due to declining the forest cover area or deforestation. They are no longer able to collect leaves, fruits, and roots, from the forest like before. The number of animals and birds is also decreasing so they are not able to hunt like before. At present many of them are working as agricultural labourers with advance money. Some kharia tribal's are moving out of the district to work in brick kilns labour. Some kharia people have now started cultivation other people's lands. They are not getting food from the forest as earlier. Their eating habits are changing. Many Kharia tribals are not able to get proper food so they are suffering from malnutrition. They are constantly faced with the problems of proper food supply. The hills and forest has provided them raw material to prepare implements required for hunting, fishing and collecting food from forest. The hills and forest also provided for them from resources around them.

The Kharias are reported to be traditionally food gatherers and hunters who managed their livelihood by collecting roots, tubers, herbs and fruits and hunting and killing animals in the forest and jungles one of the major economic pursuits based upon the selling handicrafts such as broom-stick, fish traps made of bamboos. There are now practicing as an agricultural labourers on other non-tribal villagers in neighboring village or own village. They engaged as casual workers on daily basis. Their occupation is mainly based on forest. Among the major collection is honey which is available in dense forest. They have selling this collected honey to the nearer local market.

The Hill Kharia has intimate interactions with the forest and forest products. The fruits of Mahua are used for brewing liquor which is very popular among the 'hill kharia' as a country drink. Duo to wanton exploitation, these trees are gradually rare. As the hill kharia are virtually depends on the forest produces, so the over deforestation of these plants has adversely affecting the nutritional as well as dietary structure.

Socio – Cultural Life

The forest has an important role on the socio- cultural life of the kharia tribes. The festivals they perform throughout the year are mainly cantered around the hills and forests. They worship the goddess of the forest to get good hunt. In addition to the forest and hill deities, they also practice the culture of Purulia district. Broadly speaking, the culture of the hill kharia's originated and developed mainly from the forest. The various kinds of trees, herbs, and shrubs in the forest nearer to the village are helpful to them in their daily livelihood. Their gods, goddesses and spirits are all connected with the forest. It is the source of their economic security. These all the benevolent spirit plays a crucial role in their social life.

The hill Kharias are completely different from the socio – cultural living as well as food habit also (Dikshit sinha 1984). The kharia tribes observe few festivals in different seasons of the year. Some of the festivals are traditional and exclusively of their own. But there are some others which are of all Purulia or regional spread.

Dharam Devota or Gram Devota is the village daity worshipped for the god of the whole kharia community. Besides the garam devtas, every Kharia family has a Tulsi than, where on different occasions, like the Akhan yatra on the first Magh, worship is performed. The main worship of the Kharia tribe is Maghi puja or Akhan yatra. This puja is performed on the first day of the month of Magh (January -February) in a festival when the harvesting of paddy is over. They also believe hill gods. When sacrifice is made to different hill spirits in the name of the specific hills, all the members of the village participate. They are believed these hill gods help the villagers during collection of food from the forest.

The Sarhul puja is also known as flower festival. This festival is celebrated by all Kharias in the Bengali month of Chaitra tritya. This festival are controlled the village priest (Laya). All the villagers are gathers in a particular place. The flowers of shal, mohua, are offered to the gods. Asharia Puja is observed in the month of Ashar (June -July). The ceremonial observance of the festival consists of Worship Garam Devota of worship of the village concerned at its sacred spot. The deity, represented by a White stone erected in the ground in an open field, is worshipped by the Laya with sacrifices of Hen, pigeon etc. Manasa Puja is observed on the last day of the month of Sravan (july -August). Manasa puja is worshipped by all the people of kharia tribe on their own Tulsi Than. The branches of the 'sid Manasa' tree are to be worshiped. Ingredients of worship are milk, khai, molasses, honey, Vermillion, kolai. On this day, luffa, pumpkin and corn are worshiped. Ducks are sacrifices in this puja. Everyone eats meat and liquor in this puja. Karam festival is an importance festival of the Kharia tribe. It is celebrated on generally on the eleventh day of the moon in the Bengali Bhadra month. It is a traditional festival among them. The karam branch is the worship by these festivals.

In each of these festivals trees, leaves, flowers, fruits and forests are associated with the kharia tribes.

Life Cycle Rituals (Rite de passage)

The forest is also deeply involved in the three life circle ceremonies Births, marriages and death of the kharia tribes.

Birth: Kharia tribe women are not allowed to wear new clothes during pregnancy time. This time they are can't wear any new ornaments and can't eat fish. One day the nine month pregnant woman was allowed to eat as much as she wanted. This day is ceremonially called 'Namasi'. On that day, the pregnant woman is given a variety of foods, such as- fruits, sweets, chal pitha (rice cake) etc. Their baby is usually born at home. The midwife (Dhai) of their community helps to give birth to the child. The midwife (Dhai) does all the work for the women during child birth. After the baby is born, the midwife cuts the baby's umbilical cord with some kind of sharp blade. Then the umbilical cord is buried in a hole in the floor of their house. That day the mother could not eat anything. After the baby is born, babys mother is allowed to eat fired and salted tea for five or seven days. On the day of 'Narata', the house is cleaned with cow dung. The midwife cleans all the dirty clothes of the women. On the day of Narata the baby is bathed with turmeric oil. After bathing the child, midwife put some rice, seven gethiya turmerin on the shal leaves. Then the baby was laid on the towel. Then the midwife (Dhai) handed the baby over-to her father. The midwife and the elders name the child.

Marriage: Kharia tribes are not married to the same clan. Their clan has various symbols. The people of the Tessa clan do not kill that or do not eat this bird meat. Thus all clan have some or the other prohibition. The women of the bride's house sing and go to the pond of fetch bathing Water. Going to the pond, they drew water marks on the head of the arrow and fetched water for bathing. They got married on the Chamratola in front of the Tulsi floor. Chamratala comprising a square plate from made of earth and roofed with leaves and branches. The Chamratala is decorated with mango leaves. The bride and groom 'Akan flower' garlands are exchanged each other on the floor of Tulsithan. Then the groom took the vermilion and put it on the bride's head. Thus the marriage completed. The parents of the groom bless the bride and give her dowry on the Tulsi floor. When the rules are over, the groom takes the bride to bathe in the pond. The wife takes a bath and brings water in a clay pot in wet cloth. The groom is handed a bow

and arrow in the Street and said to hunt birds with arrow. When all the rituals are over everyone eats together.

Death: When one of the kharia people dies, the man of the house first informs the neighbors, then the relative. The body is then taken to the yard and smeared with oil and turmeric. The soil of the Tulsi floor and the soil of house are kept in the bed of the dead bodies. When the body is taken out of the house, the house and the Tulsi floor are cleaned with cow dung and water. They have a crematorium under a big tree in the forest. They do not cremate the dead bodies. The dead body is buried under the ground. The body is laid out by digging a hole in the ground and buried with one rupee coin, khai, Tulsi soil. After burial, a hen is left there and donated. After buried everyone, comes home after bathing. After bathing, hugs the Aswatha and Bot tree and comes back home. On the third day all the members of the family first take bath and then take 'Tita Bhat'(rice mixed with neem leaves). Rice and water are offered to the soul. They do not eat non vegetarian food for ten days. Other man of society does not touch them. On the tenth day morning, the house is cleaned, almost all family members fasting. The ceremonial bath is done of this day. On next day, a community feast is arranged by the family of the deceased in which all the Village community people and relatives take part. The feast is made more attractive by drinking Handia. With this mourning is over the family is considered fit to join in any rituals. The deforestation has changed the life circle rituals of the kharia tribes. They are not able to procure the required flowers, fruits and leaves as per the need. Many babies are being born in the hospital, so they can't make the rules they want. The rules of marriage are also change. Not all crematoriums can be buried under a tree.

CONCLUSION

The Kharias life is deeply associated with forests. The forest is intertwined with their souls. Their eating habits, culture, social customs are all related to the forest. The impact of forests on their daily lives is very profound. Forests also play an important role in their life circle rituals. But due to declining forest cover area, they are not able to procure forest products as per their need. The Kharia tribes worship the gods and goddesses of the forest so that they can hunt well. There is also a forest relationship between the kharia tribes socio- cultural life. The people of kharia tribe live in the slope and limited in the forest area of Purulia district. Their village is very small in size. They build the houses themselves with the materials collected from the forest and other locally available creation.

The Kharia tribal area of Purulia district was usually far away from the locality. At present this distance is reduced but Kharia tribes live in separate areas. This is known as 'Kharia Para'. The Kharia tribes have faced a very critical situation. Even after the nineties, they were isolated from society. They lived on the edge of the forests far from the village. At present, some social workers have returned to the society with their best efforts. Now days Both the Central and State Governments takes necessary steps for their development in different aspects and also providing special provision for the particular vulnerable people like special school and hostels for both girls and boys. In the village of Damodarpur have a modern school and modern hostel for the kharia children. Government is also thinking about the preservation of their culture and how to preserve the forest and minor product of forest area which are strengthened their social life.

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