

## From Historical Stigmatisation and Marginalisation to Cultural Preservation of the Sabar Tribe of Purulia District

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### Abstract

Tribal identity has always faced tremendous challenges since the colonial period. The Khaia Sobor tribe is one of the most exploited tribes of West Bengal, which comes under the PVTGs (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups). They faced an extreme kind of marginalisation. They didn't have access to the religious places in the village. Often, they were arrested and tortured, but we trace an important role in social upliftment and in the freedom struggle movement of the Manbhum district (Present day Purulia district). They tried to emerge from their social status and protect their culture, but miserably failed. From different facets of materialistic development, they were always considered to be 'low caste', 'Non- Aryan', 'dirty' and 'unfaithful people' by the upper caste people and the colonial government. The Kheria Sabar tribe of the Purulia district is such a burning example of caste-based violence and marginalisation. The Kharia Sabar was labelled as a 'criminal tribe' during British colonial rule in the colonial documents, and later they faced violence even from the indigenous people. The tribe has lost their soil and presently lives in a multi-ethnic society. Many Sabar activists started working for the development and preservation of their culture. Their cultural assimilation with the Hinduism in the rural society brings forth an interesting transition. Although, we will basically investigate the marginalisation of them along with the loss of culture and will try to investigate how they resisted to preserve it.

**Keywords:** Sabar Community, Tribe, Purulia, Marginalisation, Criminal tribe, tribal history.

The rural marginalisation of the tribes persists in the socio-economic realities of the tribal history. This paper will examine the marginalisation and vulnerability of the Sabar community in Purulia district and will elaborate on their role in the formation of a healthy society in comparison to their own cornered position. Sabar is no exception to this—mainly dwelling in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and West Bengal. The community lives along the lines of a traditional primitive lifestyle, mainly dependent on forest resources creating a lack of basic amenities such as shelter, sanitation & water supply. The Sabar tribe belongs to the Austro-Asiatic linguistic family, which is traditionally a forest-dwelling and hunter community.<sup>1</sup> The socio-ecological character of the tribes is under threat due to the process of different agents of transformation. The important factors behind the destruction of their culture and degradation of their position were industrialisation, globalisation, liberalisation, modernisation, politicisation, materialistic development policies, etc. These conditions have

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created ecological and social changes that affected the tribal communities of India in a negative sense. Orans (1958) made a study on the influence of industrialization on the Santhals. Orans argued that apart from the disintegration of age-old culture, the Santhals had adopted the rhythm of the modern ethics of an industrial society.<sup>2</sup> According to Hoselitz and Moore (1963), “in the process of economic growth of an under-developed society, the norms of social action take over the characteristic pattern of industrial society”.<sup>3</sup> (pp.11-13). Das and Banerjee (1964) also argued that industrialization had a role towards transition and transformation in the economic, social, and physiological life of the tribes of West Bengal. The Kharia Sabaras struggled a lot to assert their cultural identity, often misclassified or misunderstood by mainstream society.<sup>4</sup>

The oppression of colonial rule made their existence difficult and further led to oppression of them in the hands of post-colonial state and higher class people. Sabar tribe was stigmatised with the blame of criminality. Their exploitation and exclusion is discernable from all angles. They have no permission to enter the village temples. Their children are addressed in a derogatory language by the teachers; they have to sit a considerable distance apart from the other caste's children while taking mid-day meals. The village people consider them subhuman; keep them aside from all social interaction and assimilation. The word Khaida/Kheda has etymologically derived from rabbit. The people of Manbhum called them kheda ironically.

Earlier they were typically sons and daughters of the forest and remained in the deep jungle. They disguised themselves in the deep jungle, seeing any man (madas) they fled in the jungle. Later the word Kheda was modified and variously moulded to Kheria or Kharia. The ‘Kheda’ or ‘khedia’ means who are supposed to be ‘wiped out’ or ‘driven away’.<sup>5</sup> From the name of this tribe we can understand the critical positionality of them in the society. But Manbhumi Sabdokosh edited by Basuroy and Chattopadhyay (1990) also cites that Kheda is used in both terms as a community called Kharia (noun) and as rabbit (noun).<sup>6</sup>

According to Gopiballav Sinhadeo, Sabar are the people of Purulia district, which was previously known as Manbhum. Manbhum is the land of forest, home to Polash, Simul, sal etc. The Kharia Sabaras are mainly concentrated in the hilly and forested areas of Bankura and Purulia in West Bengal. Dixit Sinha (1984) mentioned that the Hill Kharia of Purulia (Fig. 1) and Singbhum district are a secondary Primitive Tribal Group (S-PGT). The roots of Kharia being stigmatised as deviant lay in the colonial period, when forests, the only source

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<sup>2</sup>Orans, M. (1958). “The Tribal People in Industrial Setting in Traditional India”. In M. Singer (Ed.), *Structure and Change* (pp. 216-239). Am. Folklore Soc.

<sup>3</sup> Hoselitz, B. F., & Moore, W. E. (1963). *Main Concepts in the Analysis of the Social Implication of Technical change. Industrialization and Society*. Monton: UNESCO, pp.11-13.

<sup>4</sup> Banerjee, H. N. (1959). “The Kharia of Modhupur, Singbhum District and neighbouring regions”. *Bulletin of the Department of Anthropology*.

<sup>5</sup> Kharia Sabaras bearing the Stigma of Criminality and Social Exclusion: A Study in South-Eastern Purulia, West Bengal, India. Sarbajit Kumar Ghosh, Dr. Sanat Kumar Guchhai *Research Scholar, Department of Geography, the University of Burdwan, West Bengal, India Professor, Department of Geography, The University of Burdwan, West Bengal, India Corresponding Author: Sarbajit Kumar Ghosh*.

<sup>6</sup> Basuroy, S. & Chattopadhyay, N. (Ed.). (1990) “Manbhumi Sabdokosh. Chatrak Prakashani”. Purulia.

of the Kharia economy, were declared as protected areas. The influx of money lenders, Zaminders and Izzaraders from the Hindu peasant community brought a wide transformation of the region materially & culturally. The forests were to be fast denuded by the merchants, landlords and colonial government... Many forests became private property and various restrictions started to be imposed to control entry into them. Such devaluation and categorization were a mode of exercising power by the British Govt. Perhaps it was thus that the local administrative machinery brought Kharias under the preview of Criminal Tribes Act, 1924.<sup>7</sup>

Some elder Kharia Sabars still remember the pseudo romantic image of their past life:

“hām takhad , vad , e ruhinu vad , pākā yur pākā khātu |  
vad , e kāṭ kurātu vadar phad , khāi ruhātu |  
takhad , vad , a sov dhāre ruhi nāk|  
takhad , mād , bhāt khātu nāi kad mād , ā khāi hām ruhātu|  
takhad , vad , a sov dhāre ruhi hām ruhātu|  
gāor mād , as ṣange miṣitu nāi |  
vad , e hām vāghut pūjā kuritu |  
hām mād , saka d , arātu |  
takhar hām saha yāg ālu sonā emnā khātu |  
takhad kiso kaṣ ṭa ruhi nāk nāi|  
phad , ruhināk anek kichu|  
āj kāiltā vad , e phad , pāo nāi”.

(Then we lived in the forest, subsisted on forest fruits like ‘bor’ or ‘jo’. We cut wood in the forest. Then everywhere was forest. Then we didn’t eat ‘mar’ rice. We subsisted on jungle fruits like kad, mara etc. We were scared to mix with the villagers. We disguised ourselves in the forest. We adored the tiger deity, Baghut in the forest. We feared men. Then we got leaves, potatoes etc. from the forest. Then we had no sense of starvation. We got different fruits. Now we don’t get enough fruits from the forest.).

We get a very interesting observation of the psyche and mentality of this tribe here. It is showing that they distinguished their culture and nature from the plain people. They had fear in the complex nature of the plain people. In general, we are more afraid of animals than human beings but they are more afraid of human beings. So, we can come to conclusion that they were not accepted, loved or helped by the plain people.

<sup>7</sup> Sinha, D. (1984). The hill Kharia of Purulia: a study on the impact of poverty on a hunting and gathering tribe (Vol. 59). Anthropological Survey of India, Govt. of India. p.64.

After the enactment of the Forest Act (1892), the Kharia Sabar tribe was restricted from entering the forest.<sup>8</sup> So, they could neither return to their traditional forest life nor possess the adequate capacity to assimilate into the mainstream. Subsequently, they faced multi-dimensional exploitation. Their exploitation had different dimensions like those of economic, social, political and religious parameters. With the reduction of forest resources, they have suffered a crisis not only in the economic spheres, but it has also created a vacuum in socio-religious and cultural life.<sup>9</sup> According to Gopiballab Singhdeo, an activist of the Sabar movement, the Sobor tribe were the residents of Manbhum district. Manbhum, or the present-day Purulia district is very beautiful. Various types of flowers and animals are found here. Most of the time, the scenic beauty of the Jungle is extremely beautiful, and this tribe lives in these regions. He argues why they are marginalised. He stated that they could not be settled in the cities like the so-called civilised people, and that is the main reason why they are considered to be ‘uncivilised’. In local language they are called ‘Bon Digar’ or ‘Khediya’ (বন-দিগার/ খেড়িয়া) he farther stated that the present day Purulia district is not that much green and prosperous.<sup>10</sup> That's why we can see an account of degradation in the culture of forest people caused by the exploitation of the dominant class and the colonial government. The colonial government snatched their inherent right to collect food from the forest while cutting the psychological bond between them and the forest. The Identity of most of the tribes in India is intrinsically linked to the idea of the forest, and like others, they lost their identity. [1] I believe that the perception of civilised and uncivilised is highly problematic and manipulated. A tribe cannot be criminalised based on their class, caste or status. The dominant sections and the colonial government used the ‘White Man’s burden theory’ to exploit them, and didn’t care about their welfare or future consequences. Dr L.P. Vidyarthi (1988) in the forwarding section of a book named “A Study in Cultural Ecology and Tribal Dynamics” written by Dr Ramakant Prasad writes: “The Hill Kharias are facing considerable difficulties and feel helpless because of the devastation of their forest wealth. A large number of them were brought out of the forest in 1962 – 63 and were resettled in 8 villages. According to our latest case studies, out of 36 families rehabilitated at Kesharpur near Ghatshilla, only 19 families survived, while at Darishali, out of 44 families, only 6 families were located. It is reported that most of them died of smallpox, and some left the resettlement and went back to lead a jungle life. These Hill Kharia tribe, living in the forest, are exploited by both the forest officers and the advanced tribe, the Bhumij, living in the cleared patches. Some Hill Kharia people, however, under the desperate situation, have turned to be criminals and several of them are in jails for dacoity cases”. They virtually had no idea of hunger for mar rice as they now feel. Their life and economy had a strong semblance with nature and the natural world. Everything was abundant in the forest. Being an ecological people, they enjoyed boundless freedom. They had no idea of exploitation. They had no idea of the stigma. They had no idea of profit. They had

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<sup>8</sup> Census of India, 2001 and 2011: Office of The Register General of India, New Delhi.

<sup>9</sup> District Human Development Report Purulia (2012): Department of Planning, Govt. of West Bengal.

<sup>10</sup> Singhdeo, Gopiballab, (2018)“Sabar Parichiti” in book ‘Puruliar Sabar O Gopiballav Singhdeo’. Pp. 11-17.

They virtually had no idea of hunger for mar rice as they now feel. Their life and economy had a strong semblance with nature and the natural world. Everything was abundant in the forest. Being an ecological group, they enjoyed boundless freedom. They had no idea of exploitation. They had no idea of stigma. They had no idea of profit. They had no idea of personal ownership. They are found in absolute juxtaposition between traditional values and popular culture. With the dislodgement from forest resources, they started to move towards a ruined community. Labelled with the stigma of criminality, they lost their dignity. Their villages are small and consist of some houses.

Gopibhallab Singhdeo commented in his article ‘Sobor porichiti’ that some beautiful aspects of their life are that they are very much simple-hearted, and their culture is unique. It doesn't matter how the dominant class exploits and tries to destroy the culture of marginal groups or individuals; an individual has the tendency to resist the unjust behaviour and forceful attitude by resisting. The way they preserve and protect their individuality lies in personality, behaviour and culture. Culture presents the reflection of a group of people and answers against exploitation as rebellions. Although some of the people of the Kharia tribe used to be involved in crime. It reflects the poverty and unequal distribution of wealth in contemporary society, where the government didn't pay much attention towards their situation. Sabar activists like Singdeo pointed out that generally they didn't have any kind of unsocial behaviour, and in their society, we cannot see equality. In 1942, people of this tribe contributed to destroying illegal bars in Barabazar, Puncha, Potmoda, and Manbazar thana. Sobor leader Reboti fought in the freedom struggle of Manbhum district and was tortured by the police of the British government. Although the native society didn't give them enough respect, they contributed to nationalism. The addition of alcohol paralysed the marginalised of Manbhum district, but the people of this tribe destroyed many illegal bars to protect society from degradation. They were tortured from time to time by the colonial police, the Bihar Police. Manbhum district was part of Bihar at that time. The arrest of them without a warrant or evidence, and custodial torture was a common phenomenon.<sup>11, 12, 13, 14</sup>

### ***Kharia Sabaras bearing the Stigma of Criminality***

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<sup>11</sup> Singhdeo, Gopibhallab. “Sabar Parichiti” in book ‘Puruliar Sabar O Gopibhallav Singhdeo’. 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Roy, S.C. & Roy, R.C. *The Kharias*, Ranchi: Man in India office. 1937.

<sup>13</sup> Mukherjee, C. “Kharia: The Victim of Social Stigma. Calcutta: KP Bagchi & Co. 1998.

<sup>14</sup> The Revival of the Tribal Community by the Concept of S.M.A.R.T. Village: A Case of the Sabar Tribe of Jharkhand, India. 2020.



Fig. A Kharia Sabar of Damodarpur (tolla Khuditanr), P.S. Puncha showing his injury over head and back. He was attacked by villagers in case of alleged involvement in dacoity.

“āmra śavar jāti ār āndhāre pindāre thākī |

mare gele se ke kari ve piṭhā khukḍā janam liyā mor michā |”

Translation: We are Sabar community and we live in darkness If I die who would make sweets Our cursed life is meaningless. (Source:

### Conclusion:

These tribes are on the edge of extinction in modern society. The parameter of modernisation is not the domination and manipulation with the help of power, but the inculcation of a proper understanding of diversity in a society. Sometimes, the fear of criminality led people to harass them. But in some cases, deceit happened because the people of the dominant society were involved in it, causing the continuation of the downfall of their position in the society. The lack of education, sympathy, support and economic stability made them marginalised.

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