

Occupational Diversification of the Birhors in Purulia District, West Bengal (1956-2017 A.D.)

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Abstract

The present study seeks to unfold the different aspects of the occupational diversification of the Birhors, the only ‘Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group’ (PVTG) in Purulia district, West Bengal during the period from 1956 to 2017 A.D. mainly in the light of the information obtained from our extensive field investigations in the tribal villages concerned. Traditionally, the Birhors of the district, like other parts of our country, have been living in natural surroundings far away from modern advanced civilization with a stagnant population, very low rate of literacy and pre-agricultural level of technology for ages. Due to the long-standing nomadic/semi-nomadic nature of lifestyle, they had not been able to make any permanent attachment to the land in the past. They were attracted to hunting-gathering and rope making in the open forests and hilly areas as their traditional means of livelihood rather than agricultural activities. However, in the present era of industrialization, urbanization, globalization and modernization, with the change of time and circumstances, a great deal of occupational diversification, transition and adaptation has taken place among them, especially over the last few decades. Indeed, their age-old economy is witnessing the continuing influences of modernity, which is evident from the emergence of some new occupational variety among them. Thus, to a considerable extent, various types of internal and external factors are forcing the ‘poorest of the poor’ – the Birhors to modify their traditional occupations, which is diversifying their economic arena by shifting from antiquity to modernity.

Introduction

The Birhors¹, the only in Purulia district, one of the three in West Bengal and one of the seventy-five ‘Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups’ (PVTGs) in our mother India, are found to be distributed principally over a wide region of eastern and central India. Due to the lack of proper historical or ethnographic evidence, it is quite difficult to disclose an exact picture for determining the origin and early history of this ‘semi-nomadic’ hunter-gatherer and rope-maker ethnic group. The earliest explicit reference to the Birhors is found in Colonel Dalton’s Notes of a Tour in the Tributary Mahals published in 1864 in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Then many scholars and administrators like Paddington (1865), Depree (1868), Forbes (1872), Dalton (1872), Hunter (1877), Risley (1891), Roy (1925), Vidyarthi (1981), Adhikary (1984), Mukherjee (1991), Majumdar (2017), and others have expressed various accounts on the origin and nomadic lifestyle of the Birhor tribe (Majumdar 2017).

In the pre-colonial or colonial period, the Birhors had enjoyed a wandering life from the very beginning of their existence in the hilly and forest areas of the Chota Nagpur plateau. From there some wandering Birhor population migrated to the region of the present Purulia district near about one hundred and fifty years ago. After roaming the different inaccessible areas of this region, they eventually settled in the three police stations of the district- Baghmundi, Balarampur and Jhalda (Mukherjee 1991). The forest dwelling Birhor community of the district has for a long time been living in the same geo-natural region along with various other tribal groups like Santhal, Bhumij, Kora, Munda, Mahali, Oraon, Sabar, Lodha / Kheria, Lohara, Gorait, Baraik, Chik, etc. Their entire socio-economic life has indeed revolved and evolved in and around the forest. In fact, they have their own system of living with nature, without harming or destroying the forest. Even in the post-independence decades, they are intimately associated with forests for their habitat, ecology, survival, livelihood, occupation and employment. However, nowadays, deforestation, environmental pollution, etc. have severely damaged the core of their traditional forest-based economy, which has forced them to look for several occupational alternatives.

Introducing the Area and the People under study

Purulia or Puruliya, the proposed area of the present study, occupies a unique position in the ethnographic map of the entire State of West Bengal for having a variety of ethnic communities.

¹ The name ‘Birhor’ is derived from two words: ‘Bir’ means forest and ‘Hor’ means man. Hence, ‘Birhor’ denotes ‘man of jungle’. They are known by different names in different regions of India like Bircher, Birkut, Mankidi, etc.

It is actually a segment of the Chota Nagpur plateau and lies in the extreme west of the State, the western, northern and southern parts of which are bounded by the State of Jharkhand and the eastern part by the Bankura and Paschim Medinipur districts of West Bengal. Although the district lags far behind in terms of economic background, it is rich in amazing ethnic and cultural tribal entities. Purulia is the third tribal-centric district in the state after Jalpaiguri and Medinipur. According to the Census of 2011, in Purulia district, 5,40,652 people belong to the STs, which is 18.45% of the total population of the district and 10.21% of the total ST population of the state.² In the district, the Santhal is the most, and the Birhor, which constitutes only 0.05% of the total ST population and 0.01% of the total district population, has been identified as the 'PVTG' (as per the Census of 2011).

Purulia district is home to the Birhor tribe. Although traditionally they were a nomadic/ semi-nomadic tribe, as a result of various government development initiatives, it has been possible to prevent the nature of their nomadic life in the district. Presently, a total of five small villages in three blocks of Purulia district bear witness to their permanent residence. Now, the detailed list of all the Birhor concentrated villages surveyed in the district is given in the following table.

Table – 1: Location and Demographic Features of the Birhor Villages under Study

Sl. No.	Name of the Village	Distance from Purulia Town	Name of the Block	Total No. of Surveyed			
				Family	Male	Female	Person
1.	Bhupatipally	60 km.	Baghmundi	69	98	124	222
2.	Bareriya	63 km.	Baghmundi	18	37	34	71
3.	Bersa	42 km.	Balarampur	10	21	18	39
4.	Mahultanr	55 km.	Jhalda-I	9	20	17	37
5.	Dakai	50 km.	Jhalda-I	5	6	6	12
Total = 5 Villages				111	182	199	381

Source: Field survey, 2018-19.

In search of an accurate idea about the economic life of the Birhors of Purulia district, all five Birhor inhabited villages had been selected for field survey. These villages are covered with small to large but dense forests and hills. The first one is Bhupatipally under Baghmundi block, which is located 60 km. far from the Purulia district town. Of the five Birhor inhabited villages, Bhupatipally has the highest population and is advanced in all aspects in comparison to the other four villages. Its villagers enjoy the facility of communication with their nearby markets by bus, having the nearest bus stop at Nimtal which is only 500 meters far from their village. The village

² District Census Handbook: Purulia, 2011, Series-20, Part-XII (B), Directorate of Census Operations, Government of West Bengal, 15, Retrieved from www.census.india.gov.in, Accessed on 09/11/2019.

Bareriya of Baghmundi block is the second most Birhor populated village in the district, which is located almost 63 km. far from the district town and 10 km. from Ajodhya hill. The village Bersa under Balarampur block is situated 42 km. far from the district town. The poor communication system has certainly made the life of its villagers more difficult. Mahultanr (55 km. far from the Purulia district town) and Dakai (almost 50 km. far from the Purulia district town) villages both under Jhalda-I block are inhabited by very few Birhor families. The last one, i.e., Dakai is the least populated and most backward Birhor village in the district.

Occupational Diversification of the Birhors: From Antiquity to Modernity

The Birhors of Purulia district were involved in various economic activities at different times. However, under the changed circumstances, they are now being forced to modify their traditional economic way of life a lot. Therefore, in the current situation, the economic or occupational activities of the Birhors of Purulia district can be discussed by classifying them into two broad categories. These are – (A) Traditional, and (B) Modern. Traditionally, the economic activities of the semi-nomadic Birhors were basically confined to hunting-gathering or forest collection and making rope (Manna 2000: 44). Their modern economic activities can be further classified into settled agriculture, agricultural labour, day labour, animal husbandry and very rarely government service.

The Factors behind the Changes, Transitions and Adaptations

The economic way of life of the indigenous peoples, including the Birhors of Purulia district, has undergone considerable changes, transitions and adaptations in the current rapidly changing modern circumstances, especially over the last few decades. The principal factors or reasons responsible for those are as follows: The increase in population, especially in the 2001-2011 decade has influenced the economic transformations of the Birhors in the district to a lesser extent. It has resulted in extra pressure on the normally existing natural resources such as land and has created a lot of problems like poverty, shortage of housing, poor health, etc. The spread of modern education has definitely played a vital role in bringing about various socio-economic changes among them. Through awareness raising, gaining self-confidence and skills and developing appropriate attitudes, education has sown the seeds of modern ideas and ideals, especially among their younger generation, which have indeed made them transformative in all aspects of life.

The proximity and prolonged contact of the Birhors with the majority of Hindus and other neighbouring tribal/non-tribal communities have significantly changed their traditional socio-psychological and economic spheres. Industrialisation, urbanisation, globalisation and modernisation, to some extent, have affected their socio-cultural and economic world.³ The implementation of different government development plans and initiatives in the tribal inhabited areas has brought about considerable changes in the socio-economic life of all the Birhors in the district. Deforestation and different forest policies implemented by the government at various times have deprived them of their natural rights over forests, which has forced them to make many changes in their traditional occupations. The application of modern advanced technology in health, agriculture, etc. has helped them to bring significant economic variations. Now, the traditional and modern economic or occupational activities of the Birhors in Purulia district can be portrayed in the following ways:

Occupational Distribution: Interpreting Traditional Occupational Activities

Earlier, the Birhors of Purulia district used to lead a semi-nomadic life with hunting-gathering and rope making. But now they have settled in 5 villages with changing patterns of occupation. The Cultural Research Institute (CRI) has conducted two surveys (Mukharjee et.al 2002: 12-13) on the socio-economic life of the Birhors of Purulia district during 1989-90 (published in 1991) and 2001-02. The findings of those two surveys certainly illuminate the changes in their occupational composition. For a better understanding of the changing pattern in the occupational structure of the Birhors in the district, two lists of month-wise (Bengali calendar) rotation of occupations among them can be exposed in the following table.

Table – 2: Month-wise Occupational Pattern of the Birhors

Month	Occupation in 1990 – 91	Occupation in 2001 – 02
Baishakh	Rope making, collection of Chihar lata, honey, wood, and tuber and hunting.	Rope making with Jute, Nylon, including Chihar lata, collection of Chihar lata, wood and tuber.
Jaishthya	-do-	-do-
Ashar	Cultivation in Bhupatipally and agricultural labour in the area near Matiyala.	Cultivation in Bhupatipally, share-cropping and day labour.
Shraban	-do-	-do-
Bhadra	Collection of Chihar lata, tuber and wood	Rope making with Chihar lata, Jute and

³ Mainly of the Birhors of two villages, namely, Bhupatipally and Bareriya of Purulia district.

	(within Birhor village).	Nylon and day labour.
Ashwin	-do-	-do-
Kartik	-do-	-do-, collection of Lac in Bhupatipally.
Agrahayan	Rope making, collection of honey and day labour (within Birhor village).	Agricultural work in Bhupatipally and day labour in Matiyala and outside.
Pous	-do-	Agricultural and day labourer in brickfield and outside.
Magh	-do-	Agricultural and day labourer in brickfield and outside, rope making, honey collection.
Phalgun	-do-	-do-
Chaitra	Rope making, collection of honey, wood, tuber, etc.	-do-

Source: Bulletin of the CRI, 2002, Vol. XXI, Special Issue, Kolkata, 12 (Chart-V).

The table depicts a clear idea about different occupations pursued by the Birhors in twelve months a year. The Table reveals that during the year 1990-91, six months a year, i.e., Baishakh, Jaishthya, Bhadra, Ashwin, Kartik and Chaitra were a comparatively difficult period for them, as, during this period, they had to try hard to collect at least two square meals a day. Indeed, in the difficult period of those six months, they were completely dependent on forest collection only for their means of livelihood. The rest six months were relatively easier for them in terms of their occupational opportunities.

On the other hand, during the 2001-02 episode, some changes have been observed in the month-wise occupational practices of the Birhors in the district. Table 2 evidently reveals that on average, two months, i.e., Baishakh and Jaishthya can be considered as a very difficult period, as, during these two months, their occupations were basically forest-based and uncertain also. In the earlier period, they used to work as agricultural labourers or day labourers only within their own villages. However, in the next episode, it is seen that they would go to the outer villages in search of job opportunities. Now, the village-wise distribution of the labour force and working population of the Birhors in the district as per the above-mentioned survey report of 2001-02 is presented in Table No. 3.

Table – 3: Village-wise Distribution of Labour Force & Working Population of the Birhors in 2001-02

Name of the Village	No. of Family	Total Population			Labour Force			Working Population		
		M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
Bhupatipally	42	73	80	153	39	45	84	38	41	79
Bareriya	11	18	19	37	14	13	27	14	13	27

Bersa	8	14	16	30	8	8	16	8	7	15
Chhotabokat	10	20	18	38	14	13	27	12	10	22
Total	71	125	133	258	75	79	154	72	71	143

Source: Bulletin of the CRI, 2002, Vol. XXI, Special Issue, Kolkata, 13 (Table – V).

Table No. 3 explicitly displays that out of a total of 258 Birhors from 71 families in 4 villages of Purulia district, the total labour force was 154 (59.7%), and of them, 143 (92.9%) adults were working population. It has also been observed that on average, two Birhor persons in each family were included in the working category. During the year 2001-02, some new types of occupation such as sharecropping, lac cultivation, brickfield-oriented job, etc. emerged (Mukharjee et.al, 2002: 13). Significantly, the participation of the female workforce played a vital role in the economic sphere of the Birhors. Out of a total of 133 female population, 79 (59.4%) were included in the labour force, and out of the total labour force, 71(89.9%) were employed in various professional sectors.

Forest-based economy

Likewise, all other tribal peoples, the Birhors of Purulia district, relied heavily on the forests adjacent to their villages for several purposes in the past, and many of them still depend more or less on them. Indeed, the forest is intimately connected with their entire socio-cultural as well as economic life. ‘The linkage between the tribal and forests is traditional. Tribals are economically and ecologically inseparable from forests. Be it food, fodder or fuel needs, the tribal inescapably and assuredly depended on his surrounding forests for sustenance even during troubled time of droughts’ (Mondal 2017: 35).

The Birhors collect several types of edible floral items such as various kinds of leaves, fruits, mushrooms, seeds, undergrouned tubers, flowers, etc.; and faunal items like varieties of fishes (primarily during the rainy season), reptiles, mammals, etc. from their nearby forests, namely, Matha, Kukuburu, Lahariya, Kalabera, Sayate, etc. in regular basis. Those are generally used as curry. In addition to being taken as food, in many cases, they sell them to the non-tribal people of their villages or in the local hats if there is an excess collection. Although there was no tradition of animal husbandry among the Birhors in the past, now they are more or less involved in it. For grazing, suitable pasture lands are required. To meet the needs of pasture lands, they go to the

forest that never disappoints them. Usually, old or unemployed youth and sometimes housewives and very rarely younger boys or girls are engaged in grazing cattle.⁴

Traditionally, the Birhors live in huts, which require a variety of timbers and leaves to make. They build their huts by setting four wooden pillars at the four corners and then tying a few more pieces of wood horizontally and vertically. They also widely use different types of grass to cover the roofs of their houses, which are available in their adjoining forests. They collect a variety of house-building materials, agricultural equipment, parts of bullock carts, cots, etc. from their surrounding forests. Apart from their own needs, sometimes they sell those materials in the local markets or different neighbouring villages. Hal (body of plough), Ishi (beam of plough), Arar (yoke), Moi (clod crusher), Niga (axle of cart), Rola (beam used for making roof of house), Patri (Sal leaf plates), Firewood, Sal daton (pieces of Sal branches that are widely used and sold as brushes), fresh Sal leaves, honey, etc. items are generally sold by them. Procurement of fuel is a burning issue for the poor aborigines, including the Birhors. They need a lot of fuel for cooking and boiling paddy and are dependent on the forest for that. Thus, they are benefited economically by collecting fuel materials from the forest.⁵

The tribals, including the Birhors have a glorious tradition of making and using various kinds of folk medicines for ages. With different medicinal plants, shrubs and parts of animals' bodies collected from the forests, they make several kinds of medicines for the treatment of humans as well as their domesticated animals and birds. During our current extensive field investigations, we have learned about some of the rules and techniques of applying for their folk medicines. An interesting point in this context can be mentioned here that although very small in quantity, many non-tribal and other tribal people of their village or neighbouring villages often buy those folk medicines from them and use them to cure different diseases.

The Birhors of Purulia district collect a few special forest resources by which many domestic items are made. Those items are used in daily family life as well as have some financial value. They collect the seeds of Mahua and Kusum trees, which are a very important source of yielding oil. They also extract oil from the seeds of different plants such as Alkuti (*Argemone mexicana*), Eradom (*Ricinus communis*), Bherenda (*Jatropha curoas*), etc. The extracted oil is generally used as fuel to light up their lamps. Wooden cot, the sleeping furniture of the tribals, is basically made

⁴ Interview, Chunu Shikari, (age - 55 years), an experienced Cultivator, Vill - Bhupatipally, Block- Baghmundi, Dist-Purulia, date - 10/10/2018.

⁵ Ibid.

of Sal wood and the ropes made from various types of vegetable fibres. To them, the Mahua flowers are of special importance, because from them they make 'Paura', the favourite drink. All of the above items are mainly collected from the forests adjacent to their locality (Chakrabarty 2012: 114-117).

Hunting

The Birhors of Purulia district, earlier, were largely dependent on hunting as their traditional occupation. Adhikari says, 'The hunting and gathering economy of the Birhor is regarded as a specialized adaptation within the fold of regional agrarian economy' (Adhikary, 1984: 3). The early settlements of the Birhors in the district were situated in the hilly and forest areas like Ajodhya-Baghmundi, Balarampur and Jhalda range, which were covered by deep forests. Those were the main habitats of various kinds of wild animals and fowls. Such a geo-natural environment was ideal for hunting for the semi-nomadic Birhors of the district.

The Birhors hunt mainly for food collection, and they have no other motive behind it. The animals and birds they hunt are rabbits, deer, monkeys, pigs, rats, jungle fowl, etc. They use two types of nets: the small variety of net is known as 'Tur Jhari' and the big variety as 'Gari Jhari'. Literally, 'Tur' means mice and 'Jhari' means nets. This type of net they use for trapping mice. On the other hand, the word 'Gari' means monkeys. The net called 'Gari Jhari' is basically used to trap monkeys from the forest. The smaller types of nets are used to catch smaller games, including mice (Adhikary 1984: 32).

Generally, the Birhors go hunting in groups in the forest. Sometimes one or two men and even children of a family catch mice or squirrels in a very easy way only by hand. For hunting small birds or rats, they don't need more manpower. But it is a little bit of difficult job to trap a monkey. To that end, they go out in a group taking the net called 'Gari Jhari'. Trapping monkey is a matter of joy because the meat of monkeys is very tempting food to them. Besides nets, they hunt with many other weapons like sticks, axes spears, and sometimes bows and arrows (Adhikary 1984: 32). They use 'Askan Khandi' (loops made of thin bamboo sticks and yarn) to hunt wild chickens whose meat is also a very favourite food to them (Mukherjee 1991: 27-28).

The Birhors have no specific date or place for hunting. They go out to hunt when they need food and have no work to do. Generally, there is no special leader for their hunting expedition. A person who is brave and has practical knowledge about hunting and the hunting place usually manages the team. They don't have any religious rituals before the regular hunting expedition,

but they remember ‘Sendra Bonga’, their hunting God, before entering the forest. They go out to celebrate ‘Gori Sendra’, their big annual hunting festival along with other indigenous peoples to the Ajodhya hill under Baghmundi block of the district in the month of Baishakh (April-May) on the day of Buddha Purnima every year (Mukherjee 1991: 28). Indeed, to all the tribesmen, that is the most desirable day to show their bravery and masculinity. In the past, the Birhors used to procure a large portion of their daily food through hunting. Since they had no arable land, and no other permanent source of income, they were largely dependent on the collection of forest products and hunting.⁶

Rope Making

Earlier, rope making was one of the major traditional occupations of the Birhors of Purulia district, and at present, it has become a principal source of income for many of them. According to the Census of 1981, almost 90% of the main Birhor workers in the district were involved in this profession. In 1988-89, a survey was conducted by the Cultural Research Institute on the socio-economic condition of the Birhors in Purulia district. The survey reveals that each of the total 62 Birhor families was engaged in that occupation (Mukherjee 1991: 23). Our study evidently discloses that out of the total working population of the Birhors in the district, almost 37% have chosen rope making as their primary occupation. Interestingly, about 56% of the main Birhor women workers are involved in it, whereas the percentage of inclusion of the Birhor men is only 17.35%.

The Birhors of Purulia district make various kinds of ropes from ‘Chop Dora’, the fibres of different creepers and plants, which are collected from their adjacent forests. The stem bark of ‘Bauhinia Vahlii’ (‘Chihar lata’ or ‘Chop’), a giant creeper, is a very popular raw material for the Birhors for making their ropes. They also use many other creepers such as Sisi lata, Khumbhi, Barui, Mochara, Udal, Cheka karul (all are their local names), etc (Chowdhuri 2006: 632). Those creepers are usually gathered from their nearby forests. Since all those forests are well known to them, they can easily collect the barks they need from there.

The search for suitable creepers and plants in the forests for making ropes, and collection of them is one of the major occupations of the Birhors. The Birhor men, women and sometimes the children are also engaged in this work. The men and women get out of the house very early in

⁶ Interview, Putun Shikari (age – 58 years), Naya, the headman of the Birhors in their village, Vill – Bhupatipally, Block – Baghmundi, Dist – Purulia, date –14/12/2019.

the morning to collect those. Chihar lata, the widely used creeper by them, grows as parasites on large trees. Those are generally cut from the trees and brought home. The other fibrous creepers and plants are also brought from those forests. Thereafter, the necessary fibres are extracted from them and dried in the sun. Overall, all these are not difficult tasks at all, but of course, quite time-consuming.⁷

The Birhors have great specialization in the profession of making ropes. All the family members work together, and no special kind of equipment is required to make those. The work of rope making is done by hand only.⁸ During this endeavour, they use two pieces of wood, which are known in their local language as ‘Chuteli’ and ‘Dhar Kathi’ (Mukherjee 1991: 23). The ropes made by the Birhors of the district are varieties of types- (1) ‘Collar ropes’ are used for tying cattle, (2) ‘Draw ropes’ are used for pulling water from the well, (3) ‘Dhauri’ is a very long type of rope for tying several cattle at a time, (4) ‘Joti’ is one type of narrow rope which is very useful in domestic chores. The Birhors also make a kind of small basket made of the bark of various plants, which is commonly called ‘Topa’. ‘Shika’, another kind of rope-made net, is extensively used to hang household earthen pots (Adhikary 1984: 21).

Traditionally, the Birhors of the district make different types of ropes and rope-made articles, which are prepared only with vegetable fibres of different creepers/ plants. Now, a few samples of ropes made by the Birhors of Purulia district, their length and selling price can be tabulated in Table No. 4.

Table – 4: Details of ropes made by the Birhors

Names of the Rope		Length (In Inch)	Price (per Piece) (In Rs.)
In English Language	In Birhor Language		
Cattle tying Rope	Pakha/Jora	63	2.00 – 2.50
Rope for Drawing water	Dalu Banrhi	200 – 300	1.50 – 2.00
Rope for Carrying article	Shika	72	2.50
Goat tying Rope	Meram Jora	36	0.25
Plough tying Rope	Adha Jora	18	1.00
Rope for Making cot	Parkam Jora	270	1.50 – 2.00

Source: Arunkumar Mukherjee, 1991, Birhor, Calcutta: the CRI, Special Series No. 36, 24.

In the current changing situation, a number of changes have been observed in the economic condition of the Birhors of Purulia district, especially in the context of their rope making. The

⁷ Interview, Shyamchand Shikari (age - 45 years), an experienced Rope Maker, Vill - Bareriya, Block - Baghmundi, Dist- Purulia, date - 12/10/2018.

⁸ Ibid.

above-mentioned sample of ropes was prepared in 1988-89 by the Cultural Research Institute, Government of West Bengal. At that time the price of those products was relatively low. But our current study (2018-19) discloses that currently a lot of meaningful changes have taken place in the materials used, and quality, quantity and price of the handmade ropes and rope-made commodities of the Birhors.⁹

Earlier, only fibres of different plants and creepers were used to make ropes, and those were available in large quantities in their nearby forests. However, now it has become quite difficult to collect those vegetable fibres due to deforestation and in many cases enforcement of forest protection laws and strictness of the forest workers. Hence, they are forced to choose alternative measures. According to Shyamchand Shikari, an experienced rope-maker of village Bareriya, 'In the past, we used to collect a lot of fibres from the nearby forests easily. However, nowadays, due to the declining trend of forest areas, we are forced to go to distant forests to collect them. Therefore, it takes more time and we get less of them than before. Consequently, nowadays, the use of nylon fibres instead of vegetable fibres has become quite popular among us.' He has expressed the current price value of some of the rope products they made. As per his calculation, the current market price of each Collar rope, Draw rope, Hanging-net, Dhauri, Plough tying rope and rope for making a cot is approximately Rs. 15, 100, 20, 10, 30 and 60, respectively.

The search for favourable plants and creepers in the nearby forests, collection of them and preparation of the ropes constitute a very important aspect in the economic sphere of the Birhors of the district. The Birhor men, women and even children are found to be engaged in the rope making profession throughout the year. They either sell their finished products like ropes, etc. or sometimes use the articles like nets, etc. themselves for hunting purposes. The ropes made by the Birhors have a great demand among the peasants of their surrounding villages.

Economic mobility: Interpreting modern occupational activities

The occupations of the people of each community as well as of ethnic group change with the changing times and circumstances. Our present study throws some significant light on the current workforce and occupational (primary) distribution of the Birhors, which is shown in Table No. 5.

⁹ Interview, Gurupada Shikari (age – 62 years), an elderly Rope Maker, Vill – Bhupatipally, Block – Baghmundi, Dist – Purulia, date – 23/11/2018.

Table – 5: Current Workforce Classification of the Birhors

Category	Birhors		
	Male	Female	Total
Total Population	182(47.77)	199(52.23)	381(100.00)
Non-Workers	84(22.05)	101(26.51)	185(48.56)
Total Workers	98(25.72)	98(25.72)	196(51.44)
Cultivators	13(13.27)	9(9.18)	22(11.22)
Agricultural Labourers	14(14.29)	4(4.08)	18(9.18)
Day Labourers	33(33.67)	14(14.29)	47(23.98)
Industrial Labourers	0(0.00)	0(0.00)	0(0.00)
Service Holders	1(1.02)	0(0.00)	1(0.51)
Forest Collectors	20(20.41)	16(16.33)	36(18.37)
Rope Makers	17(17.35)	55(56.12)	72(36.73)

Source: Field survey, 2018-19. (Figures in parentheses represent percentages)

From Table No. 5 above, it is evident that out of the total population of the Birhors, almost 51% are working population, of whom 20.40% are engaged in the agricultural sector. Of those agriculturist Birhors, only 55% are cultivators. The above table also explicitly discloses that rope making is the main occupation of the Birhors. Out of the total Birhor workers, 36.73% have chosen rope making as their main livelihood. 23.98% of the Birhor workers are involved in the profession of day labourer. Industrial labour has no direct effect on them. Only one Birhor man is employed in government service.

Another very promising aspect in the context of the workforce classification of the Birhors is the significant participation of their women. Out of their total working population, 50% of the Birhor women are now engaged in different occupations. Significantly, it has been observed that due to the deforestation, strict control of the government over forests, rude behaviour of the forest workers, etc., the dependence of those aborigines on the forest has been greatly reduced, and at present, they have become more interested in occupations like agriculture and day labour.

Agriculture

The primitive Birhors of the district although were not cultivators in the past, their interest in agriculture has increased fairly since 1959-60, after the allotment of some amount of agricultural land to the Birhors of Bhupatipally village under Baghmundi block by the State Government of West Bengal. According to a survey report conducted by the Cultural Research Institute in the year 1988-89, a total of 25 Birhor families in Bhupatipally village were engaged in agriculture

(Mukharjee 1991: 24-25). Our study reveals that at present, almost 20% of their total working population is involved either in cultivation or agricultural labour.

In order to change the traditional nomadic or semi-nomadic habits of the Birhors of Purulia district and to settle them, 2 rehabilitation colonies were established, one at Bhupatipally village of Baghmundi block in 1959-60 and the other at Chhotabokat village (now known as Mahultanr) of Jhalda-I block in 1975-76 (Mukharjee 1991: 12). For economic development through the expansion of agriculture of this depressed tribal community, some land has also been distributed in different years by the Scheduled Castes and Tribes Welfare Department. Now, the year-wise distribution of vested land to the Birhors of Purulia district is placed in Table No. 6.

Table – 6: Year-wise distribution of vested land to the Birhors

Year	Block	Village	Mouza	J.L. No.	Area (in Acre)
1959-60	Baghmundi	Bhupatipally	Matiyala	101	24.23
1980-81	Baghmundi	Baredi	Baredi	84	2.00
1981-82	Baghmundi	Tantan	Tantan	99	10.41
1982-83	Baghmundi	Bareriya	Bareriya	103	2.62
1988-89	Baghmundi	Bhupatipally	Matiyala	101	22.41
1990-91	Baghmundi	Bhupatipally	Matiyala	101	3.34
1990-91	Baghmundi	Bhupatipally	Matiyala	101	3.21
Total Amount of Vested Land Distributed =					68.22 Acres

Source: M. K. Chowdhuri, 2006, 'The Birhors in Transition', in P. Dash Sharma, (ed.), Anthropology of Primitive Tribes in India, New Delhi: Serials Publication, 633,636.

Initially, 24.23 acres of land were distributed to the Birhors of Bhupatipally village in the year 1959-60. Of the total land, 1.82 acres were allotted for rural development (establishment of a school, well, road and digging a pond), and the rest was given to the 25 families. Of the allotted 22.41 acres of land, 0.25 acres were for homestead land, and the remaining 22.16 acres were for agricultural land. On average, each family got 0.90 acres of arable land (Mukharjee 1991: 22). It was recorded that based on the availability of land in and around the colonized villages, lands were distributed to the Birhor families of Bhupatipally, Bareriya and Baredi¹⁰ villages.

Our study shows that, apart from Bhupatipally and Bereriya, land has also been distributed to the Birhors of Bersa of Balarampur block, and Mahultanr and Dakai villages both under Jhalda-I block. It is to be noted that the Birhors of Bersa, Mahultanr and Dakai villages and except only

¹⁰ The village Baredi is situated in Baghmundi block of Purulia district. Earlier, a very few Birhor families lived there. However, now all those families have shifted to Bhupatipally. Hence, currently no Birhor lives in that village.

two families of Bareriya village possess no land of their own for cultivation purposes. Therefore, it is only Bhupatipally where cultivable land has been allotted to the Birhors. However, most of those lands are high and unfertile type, which is known in the local language as 'tanr' land. This type of land cannot retain rainwater sufficiently.

Acquisition of land is directly related to agriculture. Among the Birhors, a lack of accurate idea has been observed about the quantity of land allotted to them by the government. That is why there is often a complication about the actual amount of land under them. With these factors in mind, the actual land holding of each household of the Birhors surveyed has been calculated on the basis of discussions and interviews with the indigenous people concerned. From these, it is quite clear that there is no landless household in the villages under study. Most of the Birhor households (70 out of 111, i.e., 63.06%) possess land up to 10 kathas (half of a bigha). No Birhor household has been found to possess more than 5 bighas (100 kathas) of land. Interestingly, two Birhor households have above 3 bighas (60 kathas) of land, which is only 1.80% of their total households in the district.

The aborigines of Purulia district in general and the Birhors in particular have two types of land: Patta and Inherited. Some households also have both types of land. The nature of the lands is, of course, not the same in all cases. Likewise, in other parts of the district, many of their plots are unsuitable for agriculture, as the general topography of their local areas is highly undulating and gravelly. Our study reveals that 106 Birhor households have received patta from the government at 95.50% of their total 111 households. Out of their total households, we have found such 5 households that have both types of land: patta and inherited, and these constitute only 4.50% of their total households. Our study also shows that 59.46% of the Birhor households possess arable land. However, it is unfortunate that about 41% of their households have got such patta that are inappropriate for agriculture, which is, of course, one of the main reasons for their backwardness in agriculture as well as in the economy.

The Birhors are now differentiated into three major classes of cultivators: (i) cultivators who have their own land, (ii) cultivators who do not have any land and work as sharecroppers, and (iii) some are landless agricultural labourers. Even we have found such Birhor households who have chosen the profession of sharecropper despite having their own land because the amount of their land is less, but the number of family members is more. Besides paddy, various crops and

vegetables such as jondra (maize), turi (mustard oil), eggplant, potato, pumpkin, a type of pulse called ‘kurthi’, etc. are produced by the Birhors in different seasons.

Labour

Labour is regarded as one of the main sources of livelihood for the Birhors of Purulia district just like other tribals. Those who do not have much arable land and cattle or have not got any job opportunities in either government or private sectors, generally accept labour as their means of profession. Since agriculture is heavily dependent on rainfall in the district, in most cases, only the monsoon season provides scopes for cultivation. The development of the industry is also not very significant here. In this situation, labour has undoubtedly opened up a wide avenue for the tribals of the district.

According to the nature of labour, the Birhors can be divided into two broad categories – agricultural labourers and day labourers. For them, agricultural labour is an alluring occupation, in which the men and women are employed from the end of June to the first few days of August and thereafter from the end of October to the first few days of December. Their working hours are generally from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., and there is a short break for lunch in the middle. In most cases, they cook very early in the morning to carry food with them to their workplaces. In rare cases, they are provided food by their employers. Their daily wages are Rs. 150 and Rs. 200 for female and male labourers, respectively. Earlier, they were often paid through rice or paddy. However, nowadays, the practice of paying wages in cash is more prevalent. Their wages are generally paid daily or after completing all the agricultural operations or sometimes as an advance. 9.2% of the total working population of the Birhors has expressed interest in working as agricultural labourers.

Day labour, as per our study, is the main occupation of almost 24% of the Birhors. They are often engaged in digging the earth, making ponds and houses, etc. under the direction of the local affluent Hindus or others, and are generally paid Rs. 150-300 daily as per their performance of work. Sometimes jobs under different government schemes like Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, Mission Nirmal Bangla, etc. come to those poor ethnic people as opportunities to earn some money. Our study has revealed that the tendency to be employed as unskilled industrial labourers in different factories is totally absent among the Birhors.

Animal husbandry

The Birhors of the district have shown interest in rearing various animals and fowls like cows, bullocks, buffaloes, goats, sheep, pigs, dogs, chickens, pigeons, ducks, etc., specifically in recent years. To increase the economic self-reliance of this backward tribe, several animals and birds have also been provided by the Scheduled Castes and Tribes Welfare Department at different times. However, the schemes of supply of livestock to the Birhors have not been quite successful for a variety of reasons.¹¹

Animal husbandry continues to make a significant contribution to the socio-economic life of the Birhors. Various animals and fowls are sacrificed in several socio-religious ceremonies and festivals. Animals and birds like goats, sheep, pigs, chickens, ducks, and milk of cows, eggs of ducks, etc. are eaten as delicious food. They sometimes sell goats, sheep, fowl, eggs, milk, etc. to the non-tribals or in the markets, and earn some money to survive. Although very few in number, the Birhors sometimes earn a lot of money by selling agricultural animals like bullocks and buffaloes to individuals or in the markets. Bullocks and buffaloes are widely used for agricultural and transportation purposes. The excrement of different animals and birds is hugely used as fertilizer in agricultural fields.

Traditionally, dogs are found in almost all Birhor households. Dogs are their favourite animal, which comes in handy in two ways – performing the role of ‘watchman’, especially at night and assisting them during their hunting expeditions. The bird partridge is quite effective in catching other birds with the help of a special kind of trap, which they use very tactfully. They use several animal bodies and their products as medicines, which have sometimes proved to be quite fruitful for them. For example, they use sheep’s milk for measles and tongue ulcer. In the case of boils, cow’s urine and mud from cowsheds are widely applied as medicine (Aditya & Chatterjee 2001: 34). The Birhors of the district like to live a cheerful and juicy life. Sometimes cock fights are seen as very enjoyable to them. Our field investigations have explicitly disclosed that about 19% of the total 111 households in the Birhor community have their cattle. On the other hand, almost 51% of their total households have taken possession of their livestock.

¹¹Interview, Taheruzzaman, Project Officer-Cum-District Welfare Officer, Backward Classes Welfare Department, Purulia, Government of West Bengal, date– 12/09/2019.

Artisans and Crafts

Traditionally, different indigenous communities from different parts of our country have been practising several crafts over the ages. Although they do not rely solely on those crafts for their livelihood, they take it as their subsidiary occupation. They often follow it as a supplement to their daily income (Hasnain 2004: 286). The Birhors of Purulia district are no exception in this regard. They make different items with their traditional skill, primitive devices and locally available raw materials which are mainly collected from the nearby forests. The objects made by them are useful enough not only to themselves but also to the people from other communities, and even those are sometimes exported to different parts of West Bengal.¹²

The semi-nomadic way of life of the Birhors of Purulia district was the major obstacle to the development of any craft among them in the past. However, the only craft, which continues to carry the artistic identity of this primitive tribe from the past to the present, is rope and rope-made products. They are experts in making ropes from different types of fibres collected from the local forests. The Birhor men, women and sometimes even the children make beautiful and durable ropes of different sizes from those fibres. They also regularly prepare 'Topa', a kind of small basket made from the bark of different trees, and 'Shika', a kind of rope-made net. Those handmade crafts of the Birhors, of course, have a huge demand, especially to the different neighbouring farming communities of the district.¹³

Participation in the marketing system

The marketing system plays a vital role in the economic development of the people of any caste or community. Indeed, it is quite a real fact that due to extreme economic backwardness, the aborigines of different regions are ultimately deprived of the local produce and sell the same to the outside markets. For selling the merchandise, a group of middlemen come forward to take a large share of the profit (Sarkar 1982: 128).

In the past, the Birhors of the district did not and could not have any marketing transactions among themselves or with others. Instead of selling or buying any product in cash, they usually preferred the barter system (O'Malley 1910: 104). For example, in exchange for four pairs of rope made by a Birhor, an agriculturist Santhal/Oraon might give one 'paila' (slightly less than a kilogram) of rice. Again a Santhal can get the clothes he needed for his handmade oil, etc

¹²Interview, Jaladhar Karmakar, (age – 52 years), Teacher, Folk - Culture Researcher and Writer, Amdiha, Purulia, date – 03/12/2020.

¹³ Interview, Shyamchand Shikari, op. cit.

(Vidyarthi & Rai 1976: 110). An important point should be mentioned here that before the introduction of the metric system in Purulia district in 1961, the standard units of weight for buying/selling were based upon the ‘ser’ of 80 ‘tolas’ weight, each ‘tola’ weighing 180 ‘grains’. Moreover, measuring bowls known as ‘paila’ (about one ser) were used for selling and buying paddy or rice at retail rates (Sen 1985: 221).

‘Hat’, the weekly market, plays a crucial role in the economic life of the tribals of Purulia district in general and the Birhors in particular. Our study reveals that the Birhors go to different weekly markets like Baghmundi, Balarampur, Jhalda, etc. for buying/selling their necessary commodities, which although relatively small, facilitates their way of earning some money. They usually sell various forest products like firewood, Sal leaves, Sal datan, honey, and their only handicraft rope and rope-made articles. They also buy their daily necessities from the markets. In earlier days, they used to go out to different local markets for vending/ buying, which were located approximately 3 to 10 km. away from home, on foot. The women sometimes used to go to the nearby villages and markets for those purposes and the men to the markets relatively far away. However, nowadays, in most cases the men use bicycles, and even the widespread use of local buses, trackers and autos to reach relatively distant markets can be noticed.

Conclusion

History teaches that the economic or occupational activities of every society, including the tribal, have undergone a gradual change from the ancient period to the modern one. Similarly, with the change in time, space and environmental peculiarities, a lot of variations and differences are noticeable in the economic opportunities of the Birhors in the district. Massive deforestation and various wildlife conservation and forest acts and policies implemented by the government nowadays seem to be an extreme blow to their traditional forest-based profession of hunting and gathering. Therefore, defeated in the conflict with modernity, forest collection and hunting have nowadays virtually disappeared as their reliable occupations. On the other hand, because of the scarcity of raw materials in their nearby forests and lagging behind in the unequal competition with other kinds of ropes in the local markets, the age-old rope making occupation of the Birhors is in a deadly crisis today.

According to the Census of 1981, about 90% of the total working population of the Birhors in Purulia district were engaged in the profession of making rope, which as per our current study, has come down to almost 37%. Their youths are currently showing a negative attitude towards

getting involved in this profession due to its consistently less profitable feature and, of course, increased opportunities to work as labourers. Our study reveals that out of a total of 104 Birhor persons between the age-group of 15-29 years, only 17 women are currently engaged in the rope making occupation. Notably, no Birhor man of that age-group has taken up that occupation at present, which is quite indicative of the change in the Birhor economy of the district, especially over the last few years.

From the aforesaid two surveys conducted by the Cultural Research Institute in 1989-90 and 2001-02, it has been found that in 1990-91, the Birhors were primarily involved in making rope, but after a decade, that scenario has changed drastically. Instead of rope making, some of them have emphasized agriculture. Besides, due to the combined effect of changed circumstances and the supply of cultivable land and agricultural implements by the government, some Birhors have adopted the settled agricultural economy in recent years. Although cultivation is not considered very profitable in a drought-prone district like Purulia, our study evidently discloses that 11.22% of the Birhors are engaged in this occupation. The percentage of agricultural labourers is 9.18%. Hence, it is quite clear that the Birhors of Purulia district are in a transition phase from nomadic hunting-gathering to a settled agricultural economy.

Various tribal development initiatives undertaken by the Central Government, the State Government and different NGOs¹⁴ have also been playing a significant role in the occupational diversification of the Birhors. The implementation of the government reservation policy for Scheduled Tribes has been instrumental in improving their education and employment. Different government development schemes and programmes¹⁵ such as MGNREGS, AMSY, formation of SHGs, distribution of forest patta, construction of canals, wells, roads, culverts, etc., especially in

¹⁴ Different NGOs or Non-Governmental Organizations become increasingly significant as very grass-root level agencies of social mobilization and development of the deprived sections of our society, especially the tribals of our country. In Purulia district, various NGOs such as Bharat Sevashram Sangha, Kalyan, Centre for Environmental and Socio-economic Regeneration, Manbhum Ananda Ashram Nityananda Trust, Paschim Banga Vigyan Mancha, Professional Assistance for Development Action, Development Research Communication and Service Centre, etc. have been working extensively in the function areas of education, health and nutrition, women and child development, spreading socio-economic-environmental awareness, vocational training, etc. for the welfare of the marginalized indigenous people, including the Birhors. Their relentless humanitarian activities have really become a beacon of hope for the helpless and destitute tribals of the district.

¹⁵ Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), Adivasi Mahila Sashaktikaran Yojana (AMSY) and Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are the three main Government 'Employment Generation Programmes', which have been providing the scope to earn some additional money, especially to the rural tribal women, including the Birhors in Purulia district as in the entire country.

Birhor concentrated areas, distribution of livestock, arrangement of self-help training, etc. have surely made a very significant impact on bringing about the occupational diversification of the aforesaid tribal folk. Thus, to a considerable extent, various types of internal and external factors have forced and are forcing the Birhors to modify their traditional occupations, which is certainly diversifying their economic arena by shifting from antiquity to modernity and showing them the dream of a better future.

The Birhors of Purulia district lead a very ordinary and innocent life in the midst of nature. Due to the very small size of their population, extreme socio-economic backwardness, lack of adequate socio-cultural awareness and strong communal unity and solidarity, apathy towards political issues, etc., no movement has ever been formed among them to realize any economic, socio-cultural, political or other demands and to protect their ethnic identity. Consequently, it should be mentioned here that only through the goodwill and sincere efforts of the policymakers, executives, leaders, anthropologists and social workers at the district, state and national levels and, of course, people from all walks of life will it be possible to real socio-economic upliftment of the ‘poorest of the poor’ – the Birhors of Purulia district, and to integrate them with the mainstream of the larger society.

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