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## **Religious Transformation of the Birhor Tribe: An Anthropological Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

*The present study was conducted among the Birhor tribe in the Similipal Hill ranges of Mayurbhanj district. in the state of Odisha. The Birhor tribe is one of the 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) of Odisha. In terms of religion, the Bihors are polytheists, but well known for nature worship. The objective of the paper is to make a scientific analysis on the religious transformation of the Birhor tribe and to highlight the effects of religious change on the life of the tribe. Three Birhor settlements such as Durdura, Kendumundi and Chatani were selected for the collection of empirical data. Methods like observation, interview and voice recording were used. Key informants interviewed were priest, shaman and aged sections of the tribe to understand the traditional religious belief and practices. In the later phase, younger generations were also interviewed by selecting randomly from three settlements to understand the perception on the traditional religion as well as the newly adopted Christianity. The findings of the study reveal that, about 85% of the Birhor have adopted Christianity, whereas remaining 15% population still hold on to the traditional beliefs system. The factors of adopting the Christianity are to improve their socio-economic, health and educational status to enhance the social position in the locality amidst other tribal neighbors.*

**Key Words:** *Religion, Transformation, Nature Worship, Christianity, Indigenous Knowledge.*

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**Introduction:** Religion is one of the vital components of each and every culture, be it primitive or modern. According to Galloway (1914, p.184) “religion is man’s faith in power beyond himself whereby he seeks to satisfy emotional needs and gain stability of life and which he express in acts of worship and service”. Looking in to the early anthropological definition, British Anthropologist Edward Burnet Tylor (1971) defined religion as the “belief in spiritual beings”. Emile Durkheim (1912) in his “The Elementary Forms of

Religious Life” defined religion as “ a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden- beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them”.

According to M.J. Herskovits (2012), “no living society is static. Neither smallness in numbers, nor isolation, nor simplicity of technological equipment produces complete stagnation in the life of a people. Rules of conduct may be rigid; the strictest sanction may be invoked to enforce these rules; acquiescence in them may be unquestioning. Yet the observer of a society where even the greatest degree of conservatism obtains will, over a long enough period of time, find that changes have taken place. They may be minute, but they will be there”. Different social scientists have studied religious transformation of the tribal communities from sociological, anthropological, religious and psychological perspectives.

Looking at the contemporary scenario, different tribal communities in India are gradually adopting the religious beliefs and practices of usually Hinduism or Christianity. Citing examples from Odisha, the tribes like Bhumij, Bathudi, Juang, PaudiBhuyan, Gonds and certain groups Kandh have adopted certain elements of Hinduism. The other tribal groups like Oraon, Kisan and Munda in Western Odisha have been converted into Christianity. These new developments in the religious arena among the tribal societies have certainly raised the matter of identity catastrophe among the tribal groups. This paper makes a humble attempt to highlight the religious transformation of Birhor tribes (One of the PVTGs in Odisha) from nature worship to Christianity in Similipal hills of Mayurbhanj district and how this change has an effect both positive and negative on the life of Birhor tribe.

**Review of Literature:** S.K. Chaudhuri (2013) stated that, “initially Christianity faced very strong resistance from both the people and the state machinery, and there were large number of cases where such resistance led to violence. The agenda of conversion and the complete negation of indigenous religious faith and practices and the creation of negative stereotyped notions about indigenous or traditional ways of tribal life created a huge culture shock that culminated in violent acts of resistance wherever missionaries tried to introduce Christianity”. But gradually, dalits and tribal communities have adopted or been converted into Christianity despite time to time resistance from different corners. Sharma (2002) argued that “socially deprived sections (dalits and tribals) often converted to Christianity or other religions in the desperate hope of better life, access to modern education and a dignified social status”. The socio-economically marginalized sections look for opportunities to improve their living conditions. Joshua Iyadurai (2014) discussing on the people’s experience said that “the immediate effects of the religious experience are happiness, peace, and joy; converts experience well-being. The outcome religious experiences in conversion are psychological well-being, behavioral changes, having a sense of closer to God, and surrendering the self”.

Changes due to Christianity in tribal societies can be understood in “both positive and

negative ways”. Riba (2003) citing the case of Adi society and culture said, “among the positive changes are the encouragements of unity among the Christian fraternity, the creation of common fund that can be used for common causes, including the discarding of socially evil practices, the inheritance of moral values of life and the providing of free education and financial aid to the needy converts. On the other hand, the social distancing of traditional socio-religious ceremonies and the creation of misconceptions about non-converts are among the negative changes caused by Christians”.

The worldview of the tribal communities is changing with the advent of modern education and modernization. Especially the educated tribal youths are very much attracted towards modernity who has adopted the material and non-material aspects of the neighborhood cultures. This has an adverse effect on the traditional religious beliefs and practices. Koyu (2011) highlighted that how the tribal youth perceive towards Christianity. He said, “the youth find pleasure in the life style of a Christian whom they consider modern and westernized. The spread of Christianity adversely affected the traditional dance, music and festivals. The converts not only decline to participate in dance and music but also have abandoned most of the festivals like Solung, Etor, Aran, etc. They consider the traditional festivals as unsacred because they are against the preaching of Bible, as they include drinking of wine, eating sacrificial meat etc. Further they openly denounce the long cherished faiths and beliefs of the Adi in particular and of the tribal people in general. Many of the converts call the indigenous spirits and deities Satan (demon)”.

**Methodology:** Present qualitative study was conducted in the three Birhor settlements (Durdura, Kendumundi and Chatani) in the Similipal hill ranges of Mayurbhanj district of Odisha. All the households (80) were covered for empirical data collection to understand scientifically the issue of Birhor’s religious journey from nature worship to Christianity. In terms of population, Kendumundi settlement is larger than other two settlements. Anthropological methods like Observation (both participant and non-participant), semi-structured interview and voice recording were used for primary data collection. In the initial phase of data collection, traditional Birhor priest, shamans and aged sections including male and female were interviewed using semi-structured interview schedule to understand the traditional religious beliefs and practices. In the later phases of the data collection, both older as well as younger generations were interviewed which gave insight into the adaptation of Christianity and its impact on the traditional religious life of the Birhor tribe. Observation method (both participant and non-participant) was instrumental in the understanding of the extent of adaptation and acceptance of Christianity by participating in the Sunday prayer sessions in the Church which has been built in each of the three settlements. Voices were recorded and documented to visualize the perceptions from both sides in the settlements; the converts and non-converts.

### **Findings and Discussion:**

**Birhor Tribe:** The Birhor tribe is one of the 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) of Odisha found in Mayurbhanj, Kalahandi, Sundargarh and Sambalpur districts.

The literal meaning of the term Birhor means people of forest (*Bir* means forest and *Hor* means people) (P.K. Mohanty, 2004). Nomenclature of the tribes differs from area to area in Odisha. In the district of Kalahandi and Sundergarh, they are named as Mankidi whereas in Mayurbhanj and Sambalpur district they are called as Mankirdia (Ota and Mohanty, 2008). In the government documents, Birhors of Mayurbhanj are scheduled as Mankirdia whereas the neighbor tribal and non-tribal communities call them “Birhor” the people of Jungle or forest. In this paper, the nomenclature Birhor shall be used because now days they deny the act of hunting and eating of monkeys for which the name Mankidia had been bestowed. Birhor tribe in Mayurbhanj district is mainly hunting and gathering tribe. Therefore their economy is subsistence in nature with simple technology. They are experts in rope making from the *siyali* creeper (Lama Bayer). Different types of ropes which are used by the local communities such as *sika* (sling), *pagha* (halter for cattle), *barjao* (rope for drawing water), *panda chhati* (halter for buffalo), *chhelipagha* (halter for goat) and *jaunli* (rope used during harvest) are prepared out of silai bark and sold in the local weekly markets. Besides the knowledge to prepare ropes, Birhors used to make small basket (Tupa) out of *siyali* creeper which are used for oil pressing in a traditional way (P.K. Mohanty, 2004 p.104). Before resettling them in particular places (Durdura and Kendumundi) in Mayurbhanj by allotment of permanent houses by the government, they used to be semi-nomadic in nature, moving seasonally from one place to another in the Similipal hill ranges. They can speak Santali as well as Ho language very fluently because their immediate neighbors are Santal and Ho tribes. They are also well versed with local Odiya language. Almost everyone can understand and speak Odiya language.

**Traditional Birhor Religion:** Birhors are “polytheists” (Ota & Mohanty, 2008 p.25). The Birhor tribe is well known for nature worship. For survival they have been depending completely on the forest as a result of which they very well acquainted with different parts of the Similipal forest. They believe that forest is the abode of different supernatural entities both benevolent and malevolent. Birhor propitiate different supernatural entities around the year for their safety and wellbeing. The ingredients they use for the purpose are coconut, banana, vermilion, arua rice, incense stick, jhuna, chickens and goats, rice beer (handiya). Except animal sacrifice and rice beer, the use of other ingredients seems to be borrowed from the neighboring Hindu religion. The fundamental functions of Birhor religion for which they propitiate array of deities are: curing different diseases, solicit blessings for wellbeing, protection from wild animals, and protection from natural disaster, safety and success in hunting and finally safety from spiritual attacks in the forest.

**Pantheon of Gods and Goddesses:** The Supreme God of the Birhor tribe is the Sun God. The other supreme deities are Lugu Buru and Budhimai. Lugu Buru is a mountain range in Lal Pania area of Bokaro district in the state of Jharkhand. God *Lugu Baba* and goddess *Lugu Aiyo* are worshipped mainly by Santal tribe but other tribal groups like Munda and Ho also worship them. At present, this place in Jharkhand has become a prominent sacred centre where people (tribal) in large numbers from all across India visit once in a year. In every Santal sacred grove *Lugu Baba* is worshipped in Odisha. The Birhor tribe are living

now very close to the Santal, Ho, Munda and Bathudi tribes. Worshipping of *Lugu Buru* might have been adopted from the Santals.

The other deities who are represented by stones are *Pachokpandua*, *Rajaram* and *Buri Mata*. The next category of deities worshipped without any symbolic representation are *Hapram Bonga* (ancestors), *Sengel Sing Debta*, *Tel Gora*, *Dhorom Bonga*, *Cheurasi*, *Goram Thakurani* and *Guru Goren*. The purposes of worshipping the ancestors are for good health, success and safety during hunting and at the time of collection of forest produces (Ota & Mohanty, 2008).

**Different sections of Hill/Forest Worshipped:** Birhor worship different forests/hills usually in the respective forest for safety and success at time of collecting Siali bark and on the occasion of hunting. These are sections of hills or forests in the Similipal hill ranges. They believe that hill or forests are the abode of supernatural entities both benevolent as well as malevolent. The names of the forest they worship are *Katkata Buru*, *Dindanari*, *Chatom Buru*, *Similipal* (rojobonga), *Gargaria*, *Korma-Dorma*, *Kuta Buru*, *Valuhuri*, *Sirda Buru*, *Satkisia*, *Paroa Buru* and *Koladiha*.

**Worshipping Waterfall:** In the Similipal two well-known waterfalls known as *Barehipani* and *Joronda* always been the attraction for the tourists not only from the state of Odisha but also from other neighboring states. Birhor tribe worship Joronda water fall which they call *Jorokda* (jorok means falling/dropping and dah means water) in the native term. The purposes of worshipping Joronda waterfall are success and safety in hunting and protection from natural disaster. Looking at the above data, in the Birhor religion, the element of animism, animatism, nature worship, supernaturalism, fetishism and also little reflections of Hindu religion can be traced.

**The Birhor and Christianity:** Looking into the 'history of Christianity in India, the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the crucial transition period' (C. Cavallin & J. Kuhlin, 2014). Religious conversion in India is a very sensitive matter. In terms of the issue of religious conversion of tribals in Odisha, many incidents have taken place in the recent past. The case of Kandhamal as well as killing of Graham Stains and his two children in the district of Mayurbhanj are well known to the world. The situation of religious transformation of the Birhor tribe was studied in three settlements as mentioned in the methodology. Out of the total households, 85% have adopted Christianity and remaining 15% households are still practicing traditional religious beliefs and practices. Each settlement has a Church built in a very traditional Birhor house design where they pray every Sunday. In the Chatani settlement, all the households have adopted Christianity and completely given up their own religious practices. But in Durdura, all the younger generation have adopted the Christianity whereas few older generation still very strongly hold on to the traditional one.

Looking into the structural changes in terms religion is concerned, they have built Church in each settlement. The structure of the Church was simple with mud wall and thatched with paddy straw. Everyone came with the Bible and the male and female were separately seated. They have musical instruments like madol and khanjani and other modern

instrument as it is in every church. They were dressed little different than their daily outfit. All the married women and girls had their heads covered with veil (Odhona). One person among them was reading out the Bible and making them understand in the native language. It was required because, majority of the Bihors are non-literate, and so they cannot read by themselves. In the process, the person chosen to coordinate the session asks everyone to share their day to day activities in their families. The experiences good or bad are shared which are usually not shared in public. They share their happiness and sorrows with other in the session. At last every woman give a little rice to the big bowl and money usually coins. If anyone is suffering from any health problem, the priest tries to solve by praying for him or her. These developments are completely different from what the Birhor tribe used to.

In every Sunday, all the Bihors including man, women and children attend the prayer session which starts at early morning and continues up to 1.00 P.M. Many prayer songs have been translated into Santali and Ho language which the Bihors understand and communicate in day to day living. Summarizing the contents of song which is sung at the prayer session reveals interesting findings. The first one emphasizes on the adverse effects of alcoholism and chewing tobacco on the Birhor health and wellbeing. Through this process, participants are being motivated to give up all the above mentioned habits which have an effect on the health of the people. The second one was on the boycotting traditional leaf shelter of the Birhor community. Birhor tribe was semi-nomadic in nature and they used to seasonally move from one place to another in the Similipal hill ranges.

**Transition from Nature Worship to Christianity:** Birhor tribe was living inside the Similipal forest for generations. As mentioned in above sections, they used to move seasonally from one area to another in the Similipal hill ranges. They lived in leaf hut which is called as *Kumba*. Their religious beliefs and practices revolved around the worshipping of the nature. Micro-Project in the nomenclature of ‘Hill-Kharia and Mankirdia Development Agency (HK&MDA)’ headquartered at Jashipur in Mayurbhanj district was established in the year 1987 for all round development (Ota & Mohanty, 2008). Two Mankirdia settlement colonies (one at Durdura village of Jashipur Block and another at Kendumundi village Karanjia Block where two bands of Mankirdias have been rehabilitated. The neighboring tribal groups near the settlements are Santal, Munda, Kolha and Bathudi tribes. Through the process of acculturation, Mankirdia tribe adopted certain cultural traits and complexes like dress pattern, religious practices, dance and music, clan names and also language of the Santals, Munda and Kolha tribes. In the process of acculturation, they have also adopted certain elements of Hinduism which can be seen when one analyses the ingredients they use while worshipping. The socio-economic positions of the Birhor among the neighboring tribal communities did not improve. The stigma attached to Birhor tribe that is eating monkey meat lowered the position among other neighboring groups where they have been resettled. Now days they completely deny the practice of eating monkey flesh. The other tribal groups are settled agriculturists and the Birhor continued their traditional occupation of hunting and gathering. Few of them also worked as daily wage labours in the nearby locality. Even after resettling them, not much development took place and as a result of

which they remained at the marginalized sections. In the meantime, they came in contact with Christianity. Probable reason for accepting the Christianity is to improve their educational as well as social economic status.

**Emic View on the Christianity:** According to the emic impression on the adoption of the Christianity, praying Lord Jesus help them in leading healthy life with happiness. They added in saying that, people who consume handiya (rice beer), mohuli (local wine) and chew tobacco will be attacked by harmful spirits. They are of the impression that harmful spirits are everywhere and those who consume above mentioned elements will not be spared. Through the process, they have been convinced that those who worship Lord Jesus will cure from the diseases and from other problems as well and remaining others who believe in the traditional religion would continue to encounter and experience the problems. They also reveal that, they do not have to buy coconut, incense sticks and flower for worship in the Christianity. Only prayer is sufficient to resolve the tribulations. But in the Birhor rituals, sacrifice of the animals is an essential component to propitiate the deities and sometimes, it is difficult for a poor Birhor family to meet the expense required for worship. This is important because, the Birhors are financially very backward. Their economy is purely subsistence in nature. It is very difficult for them to afford the ingredients required for worshipping deities which are bought from the market by payment of cash. They are also told to give up their traditional religious beliefs and practices. For them Christianity is beneficial because it helps them in saving. According to Wankhede (2009), “the Christian missionaries have provided the dalits and the tribals primary educational facilities, healthcare, and a cordial social relationship. These initiatives lead to steady growth of social and political consciousness among these people, especially among dalits”.

Speaking to the persons who are involved in the process of transformation expressed that their main intension is to eradicate alcoholism, addiction to tobacco and other related materials which are deteriorating the health of the people. When we talk of alcoholism, two different types are involved. The first one is called *handiya* (rice beer) which is offered to the deities by the Birhor in different rituals and ceremonies. The second one is locally brewed wine (*matkom parua*) which is only consumed and is not an element of sacred offerings. Giving up rice beer will have direct impact on the religious offerings. On the other hand, it is also a fact that alcoholism in the tribal areas not only affecting adversely to the health but also a cause of intra-family as well as inter-family tensions in the locality.

**Religious Transformation and Its Impact on the Birhor's Life:** Religious transformation has resulted into drastic changes in the traditional beliefs and practices of Birhor tribe. Drinking handia or any kind of liquor is not allowed to the Birhors who have been converted. Gradually, consulting the shaman at the time problems has reduced. They now visit to the Father, who brought them to the Christianity whenever they fall sick or on spiritual attack or on natural disaster. This change has a directbrunt on the positions of the traditional magico-religious functionaries in the Birhor community.

Now belief in Christianity dominates over the traditional Birhor religion. A settlement called Chatani, where all the Birhor families have adopted Christianity. In the other two settlements namely Durdura and Kendumundi not all the habitants have adopted Christianity. Religious rituals and celebrations are important in terms of maintaining unity and solidarity among the members of the community. Religious transformation in the

Birhor community brought marked changes in the life-cycle rituals, worshipping nature (forests and mountains) and beliefs in magico-religious practices. Changes in other aspects such as intra-group differences and threat to traditional knowledge on forests which includes knowledge on ethno-medicines have been discussed below:

**Genesis of Intra-Group Differences:** One old man in his statement said that, we the Bihors are “Handiya Khia Luko” which means rice beer is important in terms of our religion and also as a beverage. But on the other hand after adopting Christianity, drinking liquor is a sin and invites the problem of attack from the supernatural powers.

Sukurmoni Mankirya, a 50 years old lady who still believes in traditional practices expressed that;

*“When an individual from Christianity dies, we do not cry. It is a shame for us. She also added in saying that now days they (who adopted Christianity) are getting married but not wearing traditional bangles, nose ring and vermilion (symbols of marriage)”.*

Subhas Mankirya (age 45) from the Birhor community and is the head of the Church says that;

*“If somebody comes with a problem like diseases or illness, I do prayer for them. No coconut, incense sticks and rice beer required. Only faith in Jesus will cure them. No mantras chanted but only prayer. People who come to me must have faith in Jesus to solve the problem”.*

Comparing these two statements indicates that the Bihors have been divided into two groups. They live in the same settlement, but do not participate in the rituals of each other. They do not share sorrows and happiness which they used to have when there was one religious beliefs and practices. Intra-groups hatred have increased in the Birhor settlement. Religious rituals are observed separately. There is also rift in the clan relations. The second statement is advocating the benefits of Christianity and criticizing own religion.

Now the ‘Kumba Goro’ where they worship their supreme deity is non-existent. The people who have not adopted Christianity are also not observing rituals as per traditional beliefs because their number is very less. In the village, there is a shal tree which was being worshipped by the Bihors. But at present it is not done as a result of change.

**Changes in Traditional Knowledge System:** Tribal communities living in the lap of nature amidst hills and mountains have in-depth knowledge on their surroundings. As mentioned earlier, Birhor tribe used to move seasonally from one area to another in search of Siali bark in the Similipal hill ranges. Their knowledge on the different sections of Similipal forest is reflected in their religious performances when they worship different sections of the forests by name. After settlement in their new colonies provided by the government, seasonal movement of the Birhor has totally stopped. Only grown up male members go to forest for collection of siali bark in particular and other forests produces in general. For younger generations, knowledge on the different sections of the forests is being



transformed through active participation in the collection as well as in the religious performances. This mode of socialization is changing by influx of new religious beliefs and practices. Other important changes in the long run will be threat to the traditional knowledge on the ethno-medicines. Shamans in the Birhor community are the store house of ethno-medicines. Now as mentioned in the above section, people who have adopted new religion are not consulting traditional shaman or medicine man for illness. Though the cause of threat to the ethno-medicinal system is not only for the reason that people have adopted Christianity but also access to modern health services and modern education.

**Concluding Remarks:** Above discussion clearly highlight the religious transformation of Birhor community and its effects on the life of the people. Religious beliefs and practices have an intimate relationship with surroundings when we talk of tribal world. Birhor tribe started changing their religious beliefs and practices when they were resettled in new settlement and came in contact with immediate dominant tribal neighbors. At the same time government's efforts through micro-projects to improve the socio-economic, health and educational status of the community. In the place settlements, govt. has given them only the place of residence, not the any extra land for cultivation. Therefore, there is no question for changing hunting and gathering economy to agriculture. In the meantime, forest rules and regulations for Similipal National Tiger Reserves restricts Birhors in particular and other tribal communities general to access and use forest resources which they have been since time immemorial. On the one side they have been trying to improve their social status amidst tribal neighbors by adopting certain religious and socio-cultural elements. On the other side their struggle to sustain their life depending on the forests with certain imposed restrictions. Probably, in both ways they failed and they searched for the alternative options. Therefore, they adopted Christianity in the hope to improve their educational status of their children, better health and wellbeing as well as better economic conditions. But this religious transformation as also directly responsible for changes in the traditional beliefs and practices, rituals and ceremonies, indigenous knowledge system of the Birhor community.

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