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**CONTESTING IDENTITIES AS ADAPTIVE STRATEGY:
A STUDY ON PANIKA OF MADHYA PRADESH**

Abstract

The criteria for identification of a tribe is always a debatable issue with the dynamic interaction of ethnic communities and the mainstream population. Population growth coupled with an expansion of agriculture led to the mobility of different ethnic groups across their ethnic boundaries and settled in fertile plain areas. As a result of prolonged contact with neighbouring groups, indigenous communities started emulating peasants' lifestyle, economy, belief systems, customs and traditions to avoid subjugation and to avail the benefits of the mainstream. In India, too, tribal communities are facing an identity crisis as some scholars are trying to assimilate them into the Hindu fold. At the same time, others argued in favour of a distinct identity based on cultural survival. The Panika community in central India was not exceptional as they face an identity conundrum of tribe and caste. With the impact of acculturation, Panika's cultural practices are in the process of transformation and integration with the beliefs and practices of neighbouring tribal communities such as Gond, Dhulia, Baiga, and caste groups such as Kewat, Thakur, Yadav, etc. The cultural emulation is evident from the worship of gao gossain (common village deity) and performance of agricultural festivals, that is, bidri, haryali, jawara, Lakshmi puja, Govardhan puja, Sant Kabir worship, and so on by the Panika.

Furthermore, social institutions such as Satsang (religious gatherings), Chaukarthi (ceremonial performances), gotra (caste-based clan and lineage), etc., are the outcome of their continuous interaction with neighbouring communities. The gradual peasantisation entices them to absorb the little and great traditions in local contexts, an adaptive strategy. Under these circumstances, the present study tried to understand the contesting identities of Panika based on their current socio-cultural, political and religious practices. It argued how this neo-identity assists in the social adaptation of Panika in the neighbouring dominant group's socio-cultural set-up.

Introduction

The external invasions since the advent of the Indus valley civilization led to the immigration of diverse cultural groups into India. The prolonged cultural contact of foreigners with the inhabiting indigenous population led to the emergence of complex regional systems, eventually spreading to various parts of the country. Thus, India has become a melting pot of diverse cultures and traditions. As a result of state formations, local customs get metamorphosed and assimilated into the invading or dominant cultures. In central India, state formation with the establishment of migrant settlements was encouraged by the Mughals and led to the development of trade routes through forests, the recognition of significant tribes as dominant communities, and the rise of new cities with tribal and non-tribal populations. This resulted in a claim of high status in the local hierarchy, such as Santhals with Kshatriya, Gonds with Rajputs and Bhils with Kshatriyas and Marathas (Singh, 1978, p.1228). The intensive acculturation led to the creation of new institutions such as private property, economy, patriarchy, conflict resolution and religion. This acculturation process was visualized as the absorption of tribes into the Hindu fold and treating them as a part of Hindus (Bose, 1941). Bailey viewed this change process as a tribe-caste continuum in 1970, whereas Surjit Sinha (1965) exemplified it during his study on Hill Maria and Bhumij of Central India.

In line with the established view, scholarly works undertaken by Bose (1967), Sachchidananda (1970), Mahapatra (1976), and Behura (1978 & 1983) demonstrated that the acculturation process among the tribes led to total assimilation observed through traditions, rituals, festivals, social hierarchy and lifestyle. Social norms and operating social institutions are not uniform as each group has its traditional style among different tribal communities.

Contrary to the assimilationists' view, Pathy (1992), Shah (1992), Xaxa (2005) and others argued that mere imitation of a few cultural traits is not sufficient to treat ethnic groups as castes. Besides their cultural emulation, the majority of tribal groups still depend on the forest for the collection of roots, tubers, and minor forest produce and retain cultural survivals such as principles of social organization, origin myths, customary law, etc. The characteristic features of castes, such as purity and pollution, hierarchy, and civic and religious disabilities, are not strictly adhered to by the tribal communities (Xaxa, 1999). In a discourse on the concept of tribe in the National Tribal Policy draft, Srivastava (2008, p.29) supported this argument by stating that assimilation is neither ethically correct nor empirically possible. However, it is a fact that among non-dominating groups, most of the changes occurred at the group as well as individual level as a result of acculturation. Unlike unidirectional change, Berry proposed different strategies of adaptations such as assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization that are resorted to by migrating groups to seek accommodation in plural societies for their survival (1992, p.1-17). Even the minor differences among diverse ethnic groups

can be overcome by sharing local customary practices and traditions to redefine their collective identities (Kumari et al., 2021, p.144). However, identity is viewed as a social, cultural, and political relationship that is often constructed to serve the interests of the dominant class, caste, and other social and cultural groups (Nayak, 2021, p.512).

These considerations are tested in the case of the Panika community, which migrated from Varanasi and Mirzapur of Uttar Pradesh and settled in various parts of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and parts of Odisha. Based on their settlement among tribes and castes, Panika adopted the cultural traits along with the mode of production, life cycle and annual rituals, food habits, dress patterns, etc. It is not obligatory on their part to rely entirely on caste communities, especially for socio-economic and ritual purposes that are characterized in the rural *Jajmani* system. They are more inclined towards absorbing tribal character into continuous association with neighbouring majority population groups such as Gond, Baiga, Agaria and Dhulia.

Various names are known as Panika in different parts of India, i.e., *Pan* in Orissa and Chotanagpur; *Panika*, *Chik* and *Ganda* in central provinces. In Madhya Pradesh, the Panika community is recognized as a Scheduled Tribe in Chhatrapur, Panna, Rewa, Satna, Shadol, Umaria, Sidhi, Tikamgarh, Sevda and Datia. However, they were classified into other backward classes in other districts of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. According to Russel and Hiralal, Panika belonged to south Mirzapur and described themselves as emigrants of *Bahmandeva* from Rewa eight or ten generations ago. Later, they migrated to other parts of the country with various names such as *Pan*, *Panwa*, *Paur*, *Pab*, *Panika*, *Chik*, *Barika*, *Ganda*, *Mahant*, *Sawasi*, *Tanti*, etc. In Mirzapur, they are known as *Panka*, *Panika*, *Pankiya* and *Kotwar*. Out of these, the last name denotes their traditional occupation, i.e., village watchman. It means keeper or porter of a castle (Russel & Hiralal, 1916).

Panka or *Panika* is taken from '*Panik*', an elastic bow (Crooke, 1896). From their physical appearance, Dalton (1872) opined that they belonged to Aryans or Hindus rather than their Dravidian origins by stating that they were the remnants of the Aryan colonies. But based on their exogamous divisions or lineages, Risely (1891) stated that the *Pans* have convincing evidence of the Dravidian origin. Though they lost their totemic sept in Mirzapur, their appearance in central provinces indicates their connections with Dravidians like Majhawars. The folklore collected by Risely states that the first men of Panika were created from *Pani* (water) by *Parameswar*, and appointed him as a water carrier. One day, *Parameswar* sent him to bring the fire. While searching for it, he met Majhawars and shared their food. After returning to *Parameswar*, he taxed him for sharing food with degraded people. He denied the charge, but the Almighty gave him a blow on his back and vomited a significant amount of rice and pulse. Since then, Panika was thrown out of heaven and was lowered down in the social hierarchy went down in the social

hierarchy (Russel & Hiralal, 1916).

The present study divided Panika into two major groups based on territoriality and belief system. The first and original Panika who hails from Kashi and follows animism is Kashipuri or Sakat. Panika came from Mirzapur and followed Kabir's preaching, known as Kabirpanthi Panika. Traditionally, Panika people were engaged in water-carrying tasks and acted as village messengers. Due to historical reasons, every village consists of at least one Panika household to disseminate important information among villagers. The long association with the neighbouring communities has influenced them to imitate the cultural traits of other dominant groups, such as Gond's economic system, marriage pattern, fairs and festivals, folk music, dance, customs and traditions.

In this context, the study is based on Panika habitations, i.e., Bhejari and Thali *Gram Panchayats*, as these Panchayats are inhabited by both groups - Sakat and Kabirpanthi Panika. The study villages come under Pushparajgarh *Tehsil* in the district of Anuppur in Madhya Pradesh state. To locate their present identity, the study examined the worship of *Gaogossain*, *Thakurdeo*, and *Thakurain* and the performance of *Bidri*, *Haryali*, *Khajalayya*, *Kitcharahi*, *Jawaara* and also magico-religious practices to understand the Panika communities' specific cultural habits and how accommodative they are. Additionally, it also examines in what sense they can adopt these rituals and what are their social institutions, such as *Satsang* (religious gatherings), *Chaukarthi* (ceremonial performances), *Gotra* (caste-based clan and lineage), *Samaj* (intra-village council) and *Pal* (inter-village council), as well as the role of patriarchy and how they are played in the domain of socio-political context. The paper tries to understand these contesting identities based on the economy, social structure, ideological system and customary practices through historical and ethnographic analysis.

The study is a qualitative anthropological study and aims to understand the contesting identities of Panika based on their present socio-economic milieu. The primary data was collected through intensive qualitative anthropological techniques, mainly through observation, key informant interviews, questionnaires, and formal and informal interviews. Detailed focused group interviews with older people as crucial informants were conducted to elucidate historical narration such as myths and legends, traditional council and social and organizational structure. The focus was also on the traditional ritual performers and priests to understand the absorption of belief systems with the neighbouring religions.

Study Area and People

According to the 2011 census, the total population of Panika who are recognized as Scheduled Tribe in Madhya Pradesh constitutes 97,767,

representing 49,546 males and 48,221 females, with a sex ratio of 973. Whereas, Panika inhabiting in Anuppur (earlier part of Shadol) district with nearly 30% of the total State Panika population comes to 29,060 having 14,506 males and 14,554 females who live in close proximity with tribal as well as non-tribal caste groups. Keeping in view of their numerical preponderance, the Panika of Bhejari and Thali *Gram Panchayats* of Pushparajgarh *Tehsil* of Anuppur district in Madhya Pradesh was selected. Bhejari *Gram Panchayat* consists of three main villages, i.e., Bhejari, Behpuri and Nunghati, representing the mixed population of castes and tribes, including Sakat and Kabir Panika. Similarly, Thali also consists of three villages, i.e., Thali, Bharni and Sendurkhar. Out of which, Sakat Panika mainly inhabiting in Bharni. Bhejari main village is situated on the Amarkantak-Shadol main road, whereas Thali is situated within a two to three-kilometre radius of Bhejari. Rajendragaoon is the nearby *Tehsil* at 18 kilometres from Amarkantak, and the district headquarters, Anuppur, is at 50 kilometres. According to the 2016-17 village census, *Gram Panchayat* of Bhejari consists of a 3,790 population with 870 households, and Thali has a 1499 population with 794 households. The population details of the study *Gram Panchayats* are given in **Table 1**.

Table 1: Demographic Details of Bhejari and Thali *Gram Panchayats* 2017

Village	Households	Population	Thali	Households	Population
Bhejari	470	2276	Thali	169	822
Behpuri	170	675	Bharni	608	608
Nunghati	230	839	Sendurkhar	17	69
Total	870	3790	Total	794	1499

Source: *Gram Panchayat* Census, 2017

The Panika of Behpuri follows the Kabir sect, which prohibits the consumption of alcohol and non-vegetarian food; the rest of the Panika live in Bhejari and Bharniare. Sakat Panika follows the lifestyle of tribal and other caste communities such as Gond, Baiga, Dhulia, Chandravamsi, Ahir, Nayak, Baniya, Baniya and Brahmin communities. The Panika hamlets are located in a radius of one to three kilometres. Living close to other tribal and non-tribal families has greatly impacted Panika beliefs and customary practices, ultimately leading to the imitation of great traditions of Hindu and religious sects.

Table 2: Distribution of Tribal People and Caste Communities in Study Area, 2017

Village	Tribe		Village	Caste	
	Name of the Community	No. of Households		Name of the Community	No. of Households
Bhejari	Gond	500	Bhejari	Chandravamsi	70
Thali	Gond	200	Thali+Bhejari	Thakur	07+03
Bhejari&Behpuri	Panika	220	Thali	Yadav	04
Bharani	Panika	50	Thali+Bhejari	Chamar	02+06

Bhejari	Dhulia	25	Bhejari	Baniya	14
Bhejari	Baiga	14	Thali	Baniya	07
Bhejari	Agaria	03	Bhejari	Dwivedi	04
Bhejari	Ahir	20	Bhejari	Rajaka	
Bhejari	Manjhi	04	Bhejari	Julaha (Tylor)	01
Bhejari+Thali	Banjara	03+10	Bhejari	Nai (Barber)	02

Source: *Gram Panchayat* Census, 2017

Based on fieldwork observations, no one from the Panika community converses in their mother tongue; instead, they could speak the local language admixture of Hindi and Chhattisgarhi. They use the *Devanagari* script for inter-group and intra-group communication. They can understand the *Gondi* and *Baigini* due to their proximity to Gond and Baiga for several years, but they cannot speak fluently like the natives.

Panika's social organization consists of clans, family, marriage, economy details and political organization of two groups that are mentioned below to understand the present status of the community under study.

Social Organization

Historical antecedents, inhabiting geographical conditions and intermingling with neighbouring ethnic groups and cultures make the distinct social organization of tribal communities. Thus, every tribe constituted several units and institutions (Das, 1953). Similarly, Panika from the study area is divided into consanguine and affinal clans. They follow clan exogamy strictly. For example, *the Sonvani* clan had three consanguine clans, i.e., *Sone*, *Kowra*, and *Kartaha*, where inter-caste marriages are strictly prohibited. They should select marriage partners of other clans, such as *Tandiya*, *Parwar*, *Gwaal*, *Mongri*, *Sooti*, *Baajra*, *Kulariya*, etc., but not of their consanguine clans. Similarly, for the *Bhaghel* clan, *Tendro* and *Bakshal* are consanguine and select spouses from *Sonvani*; for *the Tandiya* clan, *Holkar* and *Alamsahi* are consanguine and select spouses from other ones.

Table 3: Inhabiting Clans of Panika in the Study Area

Village	Existing Clan Groups
Sakat Panika of Bhejari	<i>Sonvani</i> , <i>Tendro</i> , <i>Tandiya</i> , <i>Parwar</i> , <i>Bhaghel</i> , <i>Dhariya</i> , <i>Kasture</i> , <i>Karayat</i> , <i>Pitaniya</i> , <i>Dharwe</i> , <i>Panadiya</i> , etc.
Kabir Panika of Behpuri	<i>Mongre</i> , <i>Bhaghel</i> , <i>Bhimte</i> , <i>Kewara</i> , <i>Parwar</i> , <i>Pandiya</i> .
Sakat Panika of Bharnai	<i>Bajra</i> , <i>Mongre</i> , <i>Panariya</i> , <i>Sarivan</i> , <i>Sonwani</i> , <i>Tandiya</i> , <i>Parwar</i> , <i>Karayat</i> , <i>Bhaghel</i> .

Source: Fieldwork, 2017

Marriage with the maternal uncle's daughter was common earlier, but now there is less inclination towards such alliances due to awareness of inbreeding. Levirate and sororate marriages are minimally practised. Widow remarriage is allowed with the permission of the traditional council. This

principle of social structure is the same in the case of other tribes such as Gond, Dhulia, and Baiga. No intra- and inter-community hierarchy is practised. Sakat is considered slightly superior to Kabir Panika since they have converted to other religious faith and do not strictly follow clan exogamy. Kabir Panika accepts the Sakat girl, but it is not vice-versa. They gather in formal council meetings, marriages and other ceremonial occasions and exchange food. They observe parallel-cousin and cross-cousin marriages. Joint family is on the decline among the Panika. Though they live in nuclear families, cultivation is undertaken jointly. The rule of residence is patriarchal, and monogamy is the predominant form of marriage. Primogeniture is the rule of inheritance in the study area.

Rites of Passage

The social development of Panika is marked by ritual observances during birth, marriage and death. During childbirth, *Nagada*¹ is beaten to mark the birth of a girl or boy child in the Panika family. It is a practice observed in North India to express their happiness to neighbouring households or villagers. Since childbirth is considered a polluted activity, the expecting women are kept in separate rooms. On the eleventh day, the mother is given a ceremonial bath and can move into the main bedroom. On the 13th day, they observe *Baruha*.² Depending on the economic status, it is celebrated by inviting relatives. No ceremony is observed while naming the newborn child. However, the well-off families take the child to Amarkantak and celebrate the event or invite Brahmin to their residences to complete the ritual. It is a common practice in the area to invite Brahmin priests and recite the story of Lord Satyanarayana. For a male child, the first solid food is given in the fifth month, and for a female child, it is given in the fourth month. Both Panika groups are following the same procedure of inviting their respective priests, such as *Doshi* for *Sakat* and *Mahant* for Kabir Panika.

In betrothal, Kabir Panika follows tribal customary practices. Groom's relatives initiate the marriage proposal by visiting the prospective bride's house with five coconuts, *paan* leaves and betelnut, along with cooked food such as *Puri* and *Sabji*. The groom's parents, along with his *Jeeja* (paternal uncle) and elderly persons of their lineage, visit the bride's house and stay for a night for marriage negotiations. The acceptance of the marriage proposal is expressed by the consumption of cooked food brought by the groom's relatives; otherwise, as a symbol of rejection, the bride's relatives do not touch that food. In case of acceptance, the elders fix the bride price and the date for marriage in the presence of *Mahant*.³ there itself. Bride price is given in the form of clothes by Panika, i.e., generally, 15 to 20 *sarees* are demanded by the bride's side to distribute among their close relatives. Besides this, they also take rice, *dal* and oil to feed the groom's side relatives on *Baraat* (marriage procession). The Betrothal process is also similar in the case of Sakat Panika with slight variation,

wherein *Sian*⁴ and *Doshi*⁵ initiate the process and offer *mahuwa* as a mark of acceptance of the proposal, whereas Kabir Panika avoids alcohol.

The Panika marriage process resembles the Gond marriage ceremony which is officiated by their *Sians* (council members) and *Doshi* (priests). *Tel* (smearing of oil), *Mandap* (erection of pandal), *Baraat* (marriage procession), *Bhavat* (dance with drum beats) and *Vidhai* (farewell to the bride) are the main parts of marriage. *Doliya*⁶ assist Panika in completing the marriage ceremony through their traditional *Biraha*⁷ songs and music. On marriage day, Brahmin conducts only the main ritual in *Mandap*, whereas Doshi performs the remaining rituals. In the first instance, *Doshi* conducts a small ritual to test the bonding of the groom and the bride by dropping two paddy seeds in a water container. If they come closer, they believe that the nuptial bond is stronger; otherwise, it is considered inauspicious. The custom is observed by Gond, Baiga, and Dhulia also. Sakat Panika also invites Brahmin priests to conduct marriage rituals. For this, Rs. 250/- *Dakshina* (honorarium) is given along with two brass vessels, clothes, half kilogram *dal* and two kilograms of rice. Though Brahmin is invited, the presence of *Doshi* is essential from *Mangini* (betrothal) to *Bidhai* (sending bride to groom's home).

In the case of a funeral, Kabir Panika buries the dead body near their residence or field, irrespective of their age and sex. While burying, they keep the head towards the north, and the legs are kept towards the south. Pollution is observed for ten days. After ten days, they perform *Chaukarthi* at the burial ground wherein areca nut, coconut and incense sticks are offered to the soul and the same is performed at the respective house. This is known as *Mangaldahan*. After one year, they observe *Barakki*.⁸ for the peace of the soul. Sakat Panika cremates the older people and buries the children in the earmarked graveyard. Sakat also observe *Dasgatra*⁹ on the tenth day and invited Brahmin to *Gangasnan*.¹⁰.

Economic Interdependence

Historically, Panika has pursued the traditional occupation of carrying messages. However, with the growing population, they depend on agriculture, wage labour, animal husbandry, carpentry, and milk vending. All the Panika households in the study area have land and subsist on agriculture. They have also adopted cultivation methods of caste communities like making *Tarahdena* (nursery bed), *Rupai* (replantation), *Nidai* (weed-out), etc. Instead of mixed cropping like tribals, they have a penchant for mono-cropping. They depend on *Lohar* (blacksmith) for agricultural tools, whose services are reciprocated in kind during harvest time. Nowadays, they purchase iron tools in weekly markets by paying money. The cultivation of land is a joint family venture. Individual farming is undertaken in the event of separation of the family on account of marriage or dispute, wherein joint family cooperation is mandatory to execute significant works in the agricultural fields. For the sale of agricultural

produce, they depend on caste communities known as *Galla*, an informal buyer who generally belongs to Baniya, Gupta and Laman or Banjara. Panika approach them to sell part of their harvest whenever they require money.

The service of Agaria is based on *barter* exchange, wherein all the villagers depend on them for making agricultural implements. Agaria repairs a plough butt before the onset of monsoon, and in return, wheat and paddy are accepted at the time of harvest. The charge for making one plough butt is 14 *Kurai*¹¹ wheat and one *Supa*¹² paddy or *kodo* or *kutki*. Other implements such as sickle, axe, adze and other carpentry tools are also made in exchange for money.

In Bhejari, Rajaka (laundryman) extends his services to all the villagers during the pollution period. During the birth of a child, a girl's menstrual cycle and the funeral, the laundryman cleans the polluted clothes and accepts money, rice, vegetables etc., in return. The services of *Nai* (Barbar) are also utilized during *Baruha* and *Dasgatra* in the form of shaving of head and beard by the bereaved family members and their nearest kith and kin. Furthermore, those who have made a vow to offer the first hair of the children at Amarkantak also hire the services of the *Nai* community. *Dhulia* (basket-making community) provides bamboo articles to the villagers, but cash is paid instantly after availing of their services.

The *Ahir* (Yadav) takes the villager's cattle for grazing. The charge for grazing one cow or buffalo for one year is one and a half or two *Khaadi*¹³ of paddy in Behpuri. If a Panika family has 05 cows, they must pay for 200 kilograms of paddy in a year. At *Kanyal*¹⁴, they give one and half *Supa*, *Kodo* or *Kutki* to *Kharighar* (Agaria), *Ahir* (Yadav), and *Vazir* (village messenger) instead of their services.

***Samaj* (Intra-Village Council):**

Panika adhere to their traditional council, which is known as Panika *Samaj*. There is no permanent headman at the village level; instead, they are governed by *Sians*. Generally, each village has five to six *Sians*, and their selection is based on heredity. They resolve disputes in the village. Panika, irrespective of age and sex, follow the word of *Sian*. Punishment is awarded by a person who breaches the council rule, ranging from arranging a feast to excommunication. If anyone breaches the rule of eating non-vegetarian food or consuming alcohol, they face the wrath of *Sian* in the form of a social boycott for one or two years. Later, the guilty are allowed to rectify their deed by offering a community feast only upon the mercy of *Sian*.

***Pal* (Inter-Village Council):**

A group of an average of 15 to 20 villages constitutes *Pal*, wherein the *Sians* of the concerned *Pal* villages are the members, and they elect one chief

known as *Bahuran*. Three *Pagbandha* (expert) *Sians* assist him. Currently, the *Sarpanch* of Bhejari officiates *Bahuran* of the concerned *Pal* and is assisted by *Pagbandha Sians* from nearby villages such as Bharani, Barasot (Harratola) and Bhejari.

Table 4: Composition of *Pal* in the Study Area

Sl.No.	Village name	Members
1	Bejhari	2
2	Harratola	2
3	Podi	2
4	Lalpur	2
5	Bijouri	2
6	Pamara	1
7	Bharani	2
8	Thali	1
9	Dunia	1
10	Dakiyatola	1

Source: Fieldwork, 2017

Another *pal* ranges from Medakhar to Aachalpur in Pushparajgarh *Tehsil* of Anuppur district. Panika inter-village council deals with inter-village disputes and resolves them through traditional mechanisms. The respective clients bear the expenses like *Mahuwa*, a feast for the present members of *Pal*. Otherwise, contributions are made on common ground issues such as the observance of village festivals. Generally, every year they assemble at one place and discuss the developments of their council. Collective decisions are mandatory for *Pal* meetings. Generally, adultery, elopement, organization of *Guddi puja*¹⁵ or any other matters involving more than one village come under the purview of the *Pal* council. They impose fines in cash, which is used for council maintenance and feasts.

Origin Myths

Though Panika has its origin legends of creation, the impact of Hindu mythology is evident throughout their narration. According to their verbal traditions, nothing existed in the universe in the beginning. Only the supreme god known as *Adipurush* was present. He was alone in the universe and started thinking of creating the world. He created seven continents of the earth through a divine lamp. Simultaneously, the Almighty also created his *ansh* (part) *Kalniranjan* and prayed for 64 *yugas* (age of the world) to create human beings, plants and animals. For this, a place at Mansarovar in Himalaya was selected and created another *ansh Ashtangi*, a daughter of *Adipurush*, for the creation of the world with *Kalniranjan*. As per the instruction of *Adipurush*, *Ashtangi* came to meet *Kalniranjan*. After seeing her beauty, *Kalniranjan* forgot his aim and swallowed *Ashtangi*. Inside the stomach, *Ashtangi* started praying

again for not fulfilling his vow of creation.

Then Almighty sent another *ansh*, *Jagjheet*, who fought with *Kalniranjan* and removed *Ashtangi* from the abdomen of *Kalniranjan*. After that, *Kalniranjan* did *tapasya* (penance) for 70 *yugas* for the *Beeja* (procreation seeds) to create the universe. The *Adipurush* said that the requisite seeds are with *Kurum* (divine turtle), who had 16 heads and 64 legs and resided in *Paatal* (underground). *Kalniranjan* destroyed three heads of *Kurum*, and from the fourth one, the universe with Sun, Moon, Stars, and the environment emerged. Then *Kalniranjan* decided to have intercourse with *Ashtangi* for creation. However, he could not find the genital parts throughout her body. Then he used his big toe and pressed the lower abdomen. From the hole made by *Kalniranjan*, nearly 27 lakh *Jeev* (organisms) came out along with several rivers, forests, etc.

As a result of this act, much bleeding was thereof blood started flowing from where *Kalniranjan* had placed his big toe. Then, He cut his nose and placed it there. Thus, he managed to stop the bleeding. Then, three sons, Brahma, Vishnu and Shankar *Bagawan*, were born out of their union. When the three children were educated, they asked about creating other things. *Ashtangi* did not reveal the secret but hinted about *Sindhumantan* (churning out the sea) for world creation.

Before the *Sindhumantan*, *Ashtangi* became a sixteen-year-old adolescent girl with divine powers. In disguise, she had intercourse with Brahma and gave birth to Gayatri. Similarly, she met Vishnu and Shankar and created Lakshmi and Parvati. She kept their origin a secret and hid them inside the sea. Afterwards, three sons initiated the task of ocean churning, and with this, the stomach of the divine turtle was broken, and first, the four *Vedas* came out. Subsequently, Gayatri, Lakshmi and Parvati also came out. Then *Ashtangi* advised her three sons to marry them accordingly. This origin myth reveals the combination of tribal myths and insurrections of *Sindhumantan* creation of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. The origin myths of Gonds also run on similar lines with variations of nomenclature and context. In Gond mythology of creation, it is Mahadeo and Parvati; in Baiga, Nanga Baiga; in Agaria, Lohgandi Raja is responsible for creating the earth, sky and human beings (Bhagvat, 1972).

Similarly, among Panika, it is believed that *Kalniranjan* and *Astangi* are responsible for the creation of the earth. In both legends, the prime god is venerated as Lord Shiva. However, still, Panika origin myths have retained some ideas or traits that are not related to Hindu myths.

Belief System

The Panika venerate *Adidadi* (*Ashtangi*) as their chief deity, followed by *Dhuladev*, *Dhulhadevi*, and *Raatmai*, besides village deities such as

Thakurdeo, *Thakurain*, *Jagjawara* on auspicious occasions. *Medwasi*¹⁶ is located on the outskirts of Bharani village. If the marriage procession reaches their outskirts, they offer a coconut to ensure the event's success. Further, praying at *Medwasi* before sowing to protect cattle from diseases is essential.

Gaogossain is a typical worship place located at the centre of the villages. The *gaogossain* is considered as *Thakurdeo* structured in erected *Sarai*, a wooden pole amid the combination of three *Ghari* trees. It is a typical village temple where *Kalash* (small earthen pots), oil lamps, small tridents (Symbol of goddess Durga), and *Chameta* (iron handlers) are kept at the base of the wooden pillars. All the villagers, irrespective of their social background, offer worship at this place on significant festive occasions. *Gaogossain* of Behpuri and Bharni also follow the same tradition.

In Bhejari, one cement altar is arranged close to *Gaogossain*, which is believed to be the abode of the village god *Bhaisasur*. During *Dusserah* and *Navratri*, they offer worship with coconut and incense sticks and perform *Hawan*. But in Behpuri, *Bhaisasur* is located on the border of agricultural fields. Once in three years, they celebrate a grand festival and offer animal sacrifice. However, Kabir Panika now offers coconut and incense sticks instead of animal sacrifice. At Bharni, it is *Bhagesur* worshipped similarly to *Bhaisasur*.

Choura or Madia (Sacred Zone):

This is a village sacred zone where different sacred spots, such as *Midley*¹⁷, *Katahi*¹⁸, *Baghesur* and *Thakurain* exist. Near this place, one megalithic stone is erected under the shadow of the Peepal tree. Several sacred objects like stools, *Chameta*, tridents, earthen pots, etc., surround it. During *Chait Navratri*, all the villagers collectively celebrate *Jawara* at *Choura*. For this, the villagers contribute cash and ingredients for *Prashad*. Two to three *gunia* or knowledgeable persons are allotted to look after the seeds sown on the surface of the *Midley*. They take care of the seeds by giving water, worshipping this nursery bed continuously, and protecting it against stray animals. Villagers take care of their food and other requirements during these nine days. On *Ashtami* (8th day), they offer *puja* and sacrifice a goat or cock; on *Navmi* (9th day) and carry all budding plants in a procession and immerse them in the nearby *Talab* (pond). Apart from this, other agricultural and environmental conservation festivals such as *Bidri*, *Haryali*, *Khajalayya*, *Kitcharahi*, and *Cherchera* are celebrated by both groups, along with other tribes and castes in the village.

Like Gond, Panika also worships their ancestors soon after harvesting their crops. It is popularly known as *Navakhai* or *Navakhana*. It is observed on the day of *Pitrapaksha* in August-September. On this auspicious day, they perform *Hawan* at their house. They also prepare *Roti*, *Puri*, *Sabji* (curry), *Dal*, and *Chaval* (rice) as *Prashad* and offer this to their ancestors.

Panika does believe in the existence of spirits. In case of accidental or unnatural death, such as suicide, the soul becomes a spirit for up to twelve years, known as *Bhoot* or *Pret*. In such cases, *Mahant* or *Doshi* controls them through worshipping *Thakurdeo*. *Jaaduphuke* (beating with a broomstick) is a local magico-religious practice wherein betel nuts, betel leaves and coconut are offered to *Thakurdeo*, and chantings are recited to get rid of such spirits. Kabir Panika practises no animal sacrifice for magico-religious practices. Worship of *Thakurdeo* during magical practices is common among Gond and Baiga too. Even Panika approach *Baiga Gunia* for magical treatment, but they pay money to purchase liquor and chicken.

Besides their beliefs in tribal deities and spirits, Panika also worships Hindu gods and goddesses such as Kali or Durga, Lord Shiva, Bhagawan Ram, and Ganesh and observe Ganesh Chaturthi, Ramnavmi, Holi, Dussehra and Diwali. They also worship cows during Lakshmi and Govardhan *puja*.

Lakshmi Puja:

All communities from the study area observe it on the next day of Diwali. For this, one adult member of the family keeps *upavaas* (fasting). In the evening, when the cows return to the village, they offer worship to Goddess Lakshmi and light the lamps in front of the houses. They also distribute the *Prashad* made with *Saklakaanda* (wild tuber). Family members prepare *Diya* (lamp) with wheat dough and pour oil to lighten the lamp before their clan deity, i.e., Baba Maharaj and Goddess Lakshmi. The next day morning, those who have been fasting eat that left-over *Diya*.

On the same day, all the villagers assemble at the earmarked place, burning dried cow dung cakes and offering *puja*. It is a very auspicious day. Villagers both go outside the village and are willing to do any work. On this day, a unique bath is given to the cows, and their horns are decorated. The *Ahir* (cattle herder) inaugurates the *puja* by offering worship to their *Kuladevta* (clan deity) by keeping *Chahur*.¹⁹ Later, they dibble the cow dung cake and prepare their cattle for the event.

During this festival, two children aged 5 to 6 years and above from each family keep *vrat* yearly (vow) and complete 12 such *vrat* in twelve years. From the thirteenth year, the *vrat* is intended to guide the younger ones towards a better future. On this auspicious day, women and children observe a fast. The women and men of the village assemble at one auspicious place, known as *Khari Khadaad*, with a glass of cow milk, a bowl of rice and incense sticks on a plate, and rice incense sticks on a plate. At first, they offer worship to the dried cow dung cakes. The selected calf is brought to this place, and the two *Ahirs* hold the legs in a stretched manner. The boys who are doing *vrat* carry a coconut and *Noi*²⁰ and are asked to come one by one and crawl under the calf. After crossing for the first time, the boy whispers in the calf's ear,

'*bolo*'. 'The boys in the queue perform this act three times. Once they cross under the body of the calf, they start *Maun vrat*²¹ and are not supposed to talk to anybody, including their parents. The women feed the raw milk to the boys following the *vrat*. Soon after, villagers keep the coconut, rice and coins in one place and take their respective cows and oxen for grazing. Ahir collects the *puja* material. The event is attended by many people where *Ahirs*, in their traditional attire, entertain the villagers through dance and songs.

After completion of this task, the children take the cows for grazing at the nearby place. On this day, they should not beat the cow and only use *Noi* to control them. In the evening, when they return, the same calf is brought there, and they are asked to cross it twice in another place. Later on, the children proceed to their respective houses. Before entering the concerned house, their elder or younger sisters wash their feet and take their blessings. Then a special *Kichidi*²² is prepared by their family members and kept in front of the cow so that one side is for the cow and another is for the children.

When the children venture into the forest to graze cattle, both men and women sing songs of *Karma* and *Dadaria* while dancing in tune with the drum beats. In the evening, *Ahir* goes door to door and entertains the villagers with anecdotes and jokes. On this occasion, each household offers one *Supa Dhaan*²³ and cash as a token of gift. The children who complete twelve years of *vrat* visit Amarkantak or any other pilgrimage site for a sacred dip. On their return, family members invite Brahmin priests to recite the story of Lord Satyanarayana in their house to achieve future peace and prosperity.

Chaukarthi (Ceremonial Performance)

It is a kind of ceremonial gathering practised by Kabir Panika during *Janmanti Chauka* (birth), *Bihadra Kankan Chauka* (marriage) and *Chalwa Chauka* (death), where *Bhajans* are sung to remember Sant Kabir. At *Chaukarthi*, *bhajans* are sung with simple musical instruments such as *Tabla*, *Harmonium*, *Jhaanj*, *Shank*, *Vijayghanta* (bell), etc. People from outside the village also participate in it. People offer voluntary donations in the form of money, and thus collected money is spent for tea, snacks and *Dakshina* to *Mahant*. It is similar to the collective observance of village festivals by the neighbouring Gond and Baiga. *Chaukarthi* is very cost-effective and organized with minimum expenditure.

Chaubisa

In case of a happy event or success, Kabir Panika organizes *Chaubisa* at their house. It is a continuous process of singing folk songs day and night. It is followed by *Bandara*, where *Prashad* is distributed to all the participants. The *Prashad* is being prepared by the concerned persons holding *Chaubisa* at their house and distributed to all the villagers irrespective of caste or creed.

Satsung

It is a holy gathering to commemorate Kabir sect norms of behaviour. It is observed once a week, fortnight, or month. Altogether 15 to 20 *Satsungs* are organized every year. *Satsung* lasts for two to four hours. The youth organize the event as per the directions of their *Sians*. The items such as coconut, *betel* leaves, betel nut, incense sticks, *Kalash* (a small earthen pot filled with water), lamp and *Prashad* are offered during *Satsung*. Nowadays, they keep *Satsung* every Monday evening, and it continues till 10'o clock at night.

Mahant is a religious practitioner for Kabir Panika, assisted by *Diwan*, and His presence is essential in performing life cycle rituals such as birth, marriage and death. Besides that, they also perform the village festivals, *Satsung* and *Bhajans*. The sects headquarter is located at Dawakeda near Raipur, which is presided over by Head Priest. The sect's Head Priest selection is already mentioned in their *Granth*. They read sacred verses such as *Kabir Sagar* and make the community aware of their rules and regulations from time to time. Due to their sacred status, they play a vital role in council meetings and dispute resolution. *Prakat Diwas* (Kabir Jayanti) is a chief festival for Kabir Panika. Mahant maintains the link between Kabir followers and the community. He is a custodian of the religious texts and performs their *puja* before they are taken out for *Satsungs* and other auspicious occasions.

Like *Mahant*, *Doshi* performs marriage ceremonies, *Dasgatra*, worshipping gods and goddesses at *Gaogossain* for Sakat Panika in the presence or absence of a Brahmin priest. *Pathari*²⁴ do visit Sakat Panika once in three years and perform *Akhadrar*²⁵ praising their glory and accepting gifts in the form of cash or kind.

Conclusion

From the above data, it is clear that with the impact of the acculturation process, Panika has adopted their cultural traits from neighbouring tribes and castes, which is evident from the worship at common village sacred centres, i.e., *Gaogossain*, *Choura*, *Kharikhadaad*, tribal deities such as *Thakurdeo*, *Baisasur*, *Thakurain*, *Jagjawara* and village festivals like *Bidri*, *Haryali*, *Khajalayya*, *Kitcharahi* and *Jawaara*. They worship Hindu gods and goddesses such as Kali or Durga, Lord Shiva, Bhagawan Ram, and Lord Ganesh are worshipped, and Lakshmi *puja*, Govardhan *puja*, Dussehra, Diwali, Ram Navami, Chait Navratri, etc., are celebrated.

With the impact of the Kabir sect, new social institutions such as *Satsung* (religious gatherings), *Chaukarthi* (ceremonial performances), *Mahant* (priesthood), etc., came into existence among Kabir Panika. However, some of the Panika are practising their traditional occupation, evident from at least one Panika household in each village who works as a village messenger.

However, the gradual growth of the Panika population led them to resort to other allied occupations such as agriculture, carpentry, masonry, wage labour, etc. Thus, gradual peasantisation forces them to share the minor as well as significant traditions of their neighbouring tribal as well as caste communities to enjoy the fruits of development and modernity.

Out of four theoretical propositions Berry (1992) put forward, Panika from the study area embraced the integration option by maintaining cultural integrity with the original society and utilizing every option to become an integral part of the larger societal framework. Thus, Panika has developed a new identity by adapting to the local traditions for their survival. Adopting cultural traits is also extended to non-dominant groups such as Dhulia, Ahir, and Agaria. For example, *Sians*, *Samaj* and *Pal* exist in almost all the villages with little variations in nomenclature. Similarly, *Gaogossain*, *Medwasi*, *Thakurdeo*, *Thakurain*, and *Bhaisasur* are familiar to all the villagers. *Doshi* and *Gunia* in the village render religious services to other communities along with Panika. Tattooing on the bodily parts, the practice of local dance forms like *Dadaria*, *Karma*, *Suva* and *Saila*, worship of Hindu gods and goddesses, festivals, customs and lifestyle led to crucial new identities for socio-cultural adaptation. Finally, Panika from the study area demonstrates Naik's (2021) theoretical assumption that identity is not static. However, a social, cultural, and political relationship is often constructed as an adaptive strategy for survival.

Notes

- 1 Big-size musical drum
- 2 Also known as *mundan*, where the first hair of the child is removed
- 3 Priest of Kabir Panika
- 4 Headman of the village
- 5 The Priest of Sakat Panika
- 6 Chamar caste people who carry drums and play on a payment basis during auspicious occasions in the village
- 7 Knowledgeable singers commonly sing native marriage songs
- 8 Annual rite in memory of dead ancestors
- 9 Funeral rite observed on the tenth day after death
- 10 Bathing in flowing waters to remove death-related pollution
- 11 It equals two kilograms
- 12 Winnowing fan
- 13 Equaling 20 *khurai* or 40 kilograms
- 14 Thrashing platform

- 15 The local version of Gudi Paduva practised by Gonds to mark the beginning of the new year
- 16 Familiar sacred spot worshipped by all villagers
- 17 A kutch house at a sacred place where seeds are sprouted as a part of the Jawara festival
- 18 Iron nail-ridden swing used by possessed individuals
- 19 Flowers brought by Ahir to purify the houses during no moon day, i.e., Deewali
- 20 Made with the tail hair of the cow
- 21 Silence vow
- 22 A kind of dish made with rice and lentils
- 23 Winnowing pan full of paddy
- 24 Traditional singers
- 25 Recitation of clan songs

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