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THE EASTERN ANTHROPOLOGIST

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Rohit Mutatkar

ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

Abstract

The human development approach has emerged in the development literature as a broad-based paradigm for development, with a focus on issues of poverty, inequality and deprivation, which are especially relevant in India. The academic literature and policy discourse on the human development approach is however largely dominated by economics and there is an immense potential and relevance for anthropology as a holistic science of humanity to contribute towards an understanding and advancement of the human development approach, both in theory and practice. In this context, this article discusses some of the key aspects of the interface between anthropology and the human development approach and its applications to the development discourse.

Keywords: Anthropology, Human Development, Poverty, Inequality, Public Policy, India

Introduction

Clyde Kluckhohn in his classic book 'Mirror for Man' stated that 'Anthropology holds up a great mirror for man and lets him look at himself in his infinite variety' (Kluckhohn 1949: 11). If we apply this perspective in today's global development context, we would see a world with uneven development, in which a large section of the human population is still struggling to meet their daily survival concerns. Issues of poverty, inequality and human deprivation are therefore predominant concerns of humanity today and may be regarded as an important research agenda for anthropology. This is especially so in the Indian context, as India is still considered among the poorest countries of the world in terms of the absolute magnitude of poverty, as well as ranked among the bottom countries in terms of various human development indicators and the human development index (United Nations Development Programme 27025).

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It may be argued however, that these development issues have still not moved to the centre stage of anthropological research and it is the development economics research on these issues, which dominates the academic literature as well as the policy discourse. Based on the writings of eminent development economists, the human development approach has emerged in the development literature as a broad-based paradigm for development, which in its programmatic form is also reflected in the United Nations sustainable development goals. Anthropology is known to be the only discipline which seeks to study humanity holistically in all its aspects. However, the rich potential for anthropology to contribute towards an understanding and advancement of the human development approach, both in theory and practice remains unfulfilled. In this context, the objective of this article is to discuss some of the key aspects of the interface between anthropology and the human development approach and its applications to the development discourse. The article is organized as follows - the next section outlines a brief overview of the human development approach, which provides the theoretical framework for the discussion; the following section discusses anthropological perspectives and methodological issues in relation to the human development approach; and the final section concludes.

Human Development Approach

The contemporary discourse on human development as reflected in the development literature needs to be understood in its historical context. After the end of World War II, a process of decolonization was initiated in which countries such as India, which had been under more than a century of colonial rule became politically independent and were faced with the challenges of addressing the development concerns of its citizens in the immediate post-colonial period. At the same time, Western countries which were ravaged during the war were faced with the challenge of post-war reconstruction. In this context, the newly independent countries needed to build the productive capacity of their economies so that the material requirements of its citizens could be addressed, while the task in the Western countries was to rebuild their economies from the aftermath of the destruction during the war. The development discourse in this period was dominated by economic growth as the major strategy of development, so that production of goods and services in the economy may be increased and at faster rates. In the countries coming out of colonial rule, economic growth was also envisaged as a major strategy for poverty reduction and increasing the average levels of living in society. However, the experience in India as well as other newly independent countries in the decade of the 1950s and 1960s was that though growth rates of the economy had increased, it had not made a significant dent on poverty. This led to a critique of national income as a major indicator of development (Seers 1969).

Following this, the development discourse shifted to 'redistribution with growth', which implied that economic growth accompanied by a reduction in inequality would bring about a faster reduction in poverty. The development strategies suggested however continued to focus on the economic aspects of development. In the late 1970s, the 'basic needs approach' to development became prominent, which suggested that developing countries should directly focus on meeting the basic needs of its people understood in terms of minimum levels of food, clothing, housing, safe drinking water, sanitation, public transport, and basic education and health care services (Streeten 2005). This especially applied to those countries, which were still heavily reliant on foreign aid and the donor governments and agencies could monitor how the aid was being utilised in terms of basic needs indicators. However, the basic needs approach did not materialise into development practice, the major reason being the foreign debt crisis faced by many developing countries, especially in Latin America and Africa, in the context of the oil price shock. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund advocated structural adjustment and stabilization policies for those countries, which approached them for financial assistance, in which the key aspect was a reduced role for the state in the economy and a corresponding greater role for the private sector and the market mechanism. This resulted in these countries cutting back on their government expenditures, including in the social sector and the focus of development strategies shifted back to macroeconomic aspects and economic indicators.

The decade of the 1980s also witnessed the beginning of the fall of communism in the Soviet Union and allied East European countries and movements for democracy in various parts of the world, including China. The human development approach emerged in the development discourse in this context through the writings of development economists such as Amartya Sen and Mahbub ul Haq and the institutional backing of the United Nations. Amartya Sen argued for a broader notion of development, in which economic growth is only a means to an end and not an end in itself (Sen 1988). He used the term 'functionings' to refer to the various components or activities in our life that we have reason to value, for example, to be well nourished, to have access to knowledge and to participate in the life of a community. The question then posed is whether the individual has the 'capability' to achieve these functionings and the notion of development is articulated as expansion of capabilities. This was also expressed as development as widening of choices, in which the question is whether an individual is being able to lead the kind of life that he or she would choose to lead. Another related perspective in Sen's writings is the notion of development as freedom (Sen 1999), which also focuses attention on the process aspect of development, i.e. the process through which particular development outcomes have resulted.

These writings by Amartya Sen, provided the philosophical basis for the concept of human development. Mahbub ul Haq in his related writings developed this concept further in which human development was understood as an improvement in the quality of people's lives. People and not income are regarded as the real wealth of a nation. Thus, a society does not have to be rich to be a democracy, to respect equal rights of women or to provide clean drinking water to its people. There is no automatic linkage between economic growth and human development and the quality and distribution of economic growth also matters in addition to the quantity. The objective of development is defined as creating an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives (Haq 1996). Human development is described as a holistic concept, in which all aspects of life – economic, political, social and cultural are incorporated. Haq describes the four pillars of the human development paradigm as equity, sustainability, productivity and empowerment and any policy action for human development should be based on these pillars and a people-centred approach (ibid).

The institutional backing for the idea of human development was provided by the United Nations, when Mahbub ul Haq joined the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as a special advisor. From 1990 onwards, the UNDP started publishing the annual Human Development Reports, in which countries are ranked according to their level of development, not on the basis of per capita income, as was the predominant development classification, but on the basis of a human development index, computed for the purpose. The human development index comprises indicators across three dimensions, viz. standard of living, education and health, and the index is computed as an average, in which each dimension is given equal weightage. Each human development report by UNDP has also focused on a specific theme beginning with the concept and measurement of human development in 1990 and then various other thematic development issues in subsequent reports such as poverty, human rights, gender, human security, democracy, climate change, inequality and international development cooperation.

India has consistently been ranked among the bottom sixty countries of the world in terms of the human development index. The government of India has also prepared two national human development reports in 2002 and 2011 respectively, which seek to focus on the human development issues and challenges at a national level and also rank various states in terms of the human development index. Within India, various state governments have prepared their respective state human development reports, which have sought to bring out the human development achievements and challenges at the state level and also rank various districts on the basis of their human development index. These reports and ranking have contributed towards a

statistical profile of human development and the uneven development within the country in terms of spatial and social group categories.

While the human development approach is now at the mainstream of the global development discourse, it has been observed that its depth and breadth remain to be fully understood in the development sector and in the policy discourse. This is so even within international organisations such as the United Nations, which has adopted it as its main intellectual framework in its domains such as international development, peace and security, human rights and sustainability (Jolly et al 2004). The human development approach is also often confused with related terms such as human resource development, or is understood only in terms of the specific dimensions of the human development index. The potential of the human development approach for development theory and practice therefore remains to be fully realised. Anthropological perspectives on the human development approach may be insightful in advancing understanding in this regard.

Anthropological Perspectives and Methodology

Anthropology has been described to be the most scientific of the humanities and most human of the sciences (Kluckhohn 1949). It is a science for understanding humankind in its totality and holistically. Thus, anthropology is in a unique position among all the sciences to reflect among the most pressing and deepest issues of humankind (Peacock 2012). Human development has been understood as an improvement in the quality of people's lives and the human development paradigm as conceptualized by Mahbub ul Haq understands human development not only as a concept but as an approach to think about development. From an anthropological perspective, the human development approach may be understood as having four key inter-related features, viz. holistic development, people-centred development, sustainable development and equitable development.

Holistic development implies that development is multi-dimensional and different aspects of development are inter-related with each other. Culture is a key concept in anthropology and as discussed in the anthropological literature, culture is understood to be an integrated whole. In the context of holistic development, this implies that all aspects of our life are interlinked with each other and together they contribute to our sense of well-being or ill-being. This holistic understanding of development is a key anthropological perspective which is relevant also for development practice (Cerneia 1995). Thus, while many development programmes and policies are based on a narrow sectoral or departmental approach, the anthropological perspective draws attention to the relevance of inter-sectoral coordination which recognizes the inter-linkages among different aspects of people's lives. For example, an improvement in

health outcomes in a community or region with high infant mortality rates will require interventions not only towards better health care, but also in other aspects such as food, nutrition, housing, drinking water, education, public transport and connectivity. A holistic understanding of development from an anthropological perspective also implies giving importance to the qualitative aspects of development, in addition to the quantifiable or measurable aspects. Thus, issues of human dignity, equality, and respect for each other as human beings may be considered as key components of human well-being, though they may be difficult to measure and quantify. This is especially relevant in the context of the mainstream development literature and development policy literature, dominated by economists, which is biased towards quantification.

Holism in human development may also be understood in the context of development enquiry and research, wherein it is important not to be bound by disciplinary boundaries. Myrdal (1975) in his Malinowski Award Lecture remarked that in dealing with a problem, it could never be an excuse that some economic, social or political issue lay outside one's domain of knowledge. He discussed the principle of circular and cumulative causation in the development process, wherein development was understood as an upward movement in the entire social system. Anthropology through its theory and methods is in a unique position to provide such inter-disciplinary perspectives. As expressed by Peacock (2012: 10), 'Anthropology encroaches on the territory of the sciences as well as the humanities and transcends the conventional boundaries of both while addressing questions to the distant past and the pressing present, perhaps with implications for the future'.

A holistic understanding of development also extends to understanding the evolution of humankind and the contemporary development patterns, both globally as well as within countries. Many development textbooks written particularly from a Western perspective start with the question about why some countries are rich, while others are poor and what the poorer countries should do to bridge the disparities with the richer countries. However, the historical context of colonialism and slave trade is often not given due attention leading to a largely ahistorical perspective, which is misleading in terms of its interpretations (Hickel 2018). This illustrates what Tylor (1871) has described as much learned nonsense, being due to attempting to explain by the light of reason, what must be understood in the light of history. For example, none of the human development reports published by UNDP have focused on discussing the global disparities in human development indicators, based on historical factors. Anthropology through its rich literature in the socio-cultural, biological and archaeological dimensions provides this historical understanding and helps us in addressing the question of why we are, what we are.

A key aspect of the human development approach is that development is about people and people are the real wealth of a nation. The term 'human' in human development is a sensitizing term, which draws attention to this aspect. But the operational aspects of the meaning of people-centred development and what it implies for development practice are not clear. From an anthropological perspective, the most important aspect of people-centred development is that an understanding of development should take into account the emic perspectives. For example, there is a rich development literature on the meaning of development, but this is largely academic in nature and may reflect the understanding of economists, sociologists, political scientists or philosophers. But the emic perspectives are largely ignored in these understandings. This is especially relevant for the most deprived sections of section whose concerns and priorities may not be reflected in the academic definitions of development. For instance, Amartya Sen's understanding of development as expansion of capabilities has been critiqued as being an individual centred understanding of development. Anthropology emphasises that individuals cannot be viewed in isolation, and thus the well-being of an individual may also be related to the well-being of others in society.

The neglect of emic perspectives is also reflected in various development policies wherein programmes and schemes are often formulated and implemented without taking into account the concerns and priorities of the people for whom they are intended. For example, the government scheme of public distribution system in India provides subsidised foodgrains and other rations for the population classified as below poverty line. But the dietary patterns and food requirements of the poor population are rarely taken into account in the uniform implementation of the scheme. Categories of 'poor' and 'non-poor' are itself based on criteria, which does not take into account the emic perspectives of the needy sections of the population, which would be based on their lived experiences.

In relation to this, people centred development also may be interpreted to mean a sensitivity to the human beings behind the development numbers and quantitative data. For example, development programmes and schemes are often monitored and evaluated in terms of the money spent and how many of the intended beneficiaries have been reached. But the human aspect of the monitoring and evaluation would also take into the survival experiences and concerns of those needy sections of the population who were supposed to be provided with social assistance but whom the scheme did not reach. In the development sector, people are often looked upon as 'beneficiaries' of programmes and schemes, but an anthropological perspective of people-centred development would focus on people themselves being active agents of change. People centred development from an anthropological perspective would also imply reaching out to people. The most deprived people such

as marginalized sections of society face constraints in accessing the social assistance programmes intended for their welfare and people centred development would also involve improving the capacity of the most deprived sections of society to demand and access such programmes.

In relation to this, in the human development literature, there is an emphasis on empowerment and participation being important aspects of the human development approach. But these are ambiguous terms, which have often been interpreted in different ways (Gardner and Lewis 2015). Anthropological perspectives can contribute towards deeper meaning of these terms and their potential use and misuse (Crewe and Axelby 2012). For example, a participatory research approach which seeks to capture the 'voices of the poor' may lead to rich qualitative data on this aspect (Narayan 1997). However, it would be misleading to then interpret this data from particular ideological perspectives. Similarly, while the notion of participatory decision making could lead to decisions by majority, a stronger interpretation of the same could also mean participatory decision making by consensus. Thus, while the notion of participation in people-centred development implies that people should be able to participate in decisions that impact their lives, the nuances of the term can be made clearer through anthropological understanding. With regard to the term empowerment, the literal meaning translates as giving power to. The development literature mentions different aspects of empowerment such as social empowerment, political empowerment and economic empowerment and also different mechanisms through which empowerment may be achieved. However, a deeper interpretation of the term empowerment requires an understanding of the various power relations in society operating at various levels as empowerment of someone may involve disempowerment of someone else. Participation and empowerment are also good examples of qualitative aspects of development and which are not easily amenable to measurement. These qualitative aspects are not the focus of the human development literature particularly in the economics domain and requires anthropological understanding at the field level.

In the human development literature, sustainable development has emerged as a key word. This is most commonly related to the environmental aspect of development, wherein it is understood that development today should not be at the cost of future generations. Global warming, climate change and related environmental concerns at the local level such as air pollution, water pollution, land degradation and solid waste management have become relevant issues for sustainable development policies and interventions. The development economics literature indicates the tensions between economic growth and the environment, as increasing production of goods and services may lead to increasing consumption and degradation of natural resources, which are finite in quantity. Anthropology challenges the fallacy in which

human beings can be regarded as separate from nature as any organism that destroys its environment destroys itself. The unit of survival is therefore not the organism, but the organism plus the environment (Peacock 2012). This anthropological perspective in this regard is akin to the ecological approach and is vital for survival of the planet (ibid).

Sustainable human development from an anthropological perspective would also include the challenges of global peace and addressing conflicts between and within countries. As expressed by Kluckhohn (1949) and which is still relevant in the contemporary context, 'Anthropology provides a scientific basis for dealing with the crucial dilemma of the world today: how can people of different appearances, mutually unintelligible languages and dissimilar ways of life get along together?' (Kluckhohn 1949: 1). Anthropology helps us to understand the common institutions found in all societies, the interdependence of cultures and the biological oneness of human beings, which are far more significant than the relatively superficial differences (ibid). An anthropological understanding of how to promote global peace through emphasizing on the basic unity of humankind would therefore be crucial in addressing the contemporary challenges in this regard.

The literature on the human development approach mentions equity as being among its key principles. The term equity has been interpreted in various ways, but a common meaning underlying the term is a notion of fairness. In the context of the human development approach, a focus on equitable development raises the question of whose development is implied by the term human development. There are two perspectives to address this question viz. the 'conglomerative' perspective and the 'deprivational' perspective. The conglomerative perspective understands human development to be improved quality of life for all, whereas the deprivational perspective is motivated by the concerns of poverty and inequality. The anthropological perspective would lay emphasis on the deprivational perspective, wherein it is the issues of the most deprived sections of society which would be considered the priority issues of human development. This is especially relevant in the Indian context where large sections of the population continue to be socially, educationally and economically deprived and India continues to rank among the bottom countries of the world in terms of various human development indicators.

There are various aspects of poverty and inequality in India that require anthropological understanding. In the last official estimates of poverty in India, which were available for 2004-05, it was estimated that more than 80% of the rural poor in India belong to either scheduled caste, scheduled tribe or other backward classes category (Radhakrishna and Ray 2006). Secondary data from government data sources indicate that there is a social group hierarchy across a range of development indicators for rural all-India,

with scheduled tribes at the bottom followed by scheduled castes, then other backward classes and then the category of others. Further, there are known to be ethnic group disparities within these social group categories. There are also social group categories such as de-notified and nomadic communities as well as sections of population among particular religious groups, where also one may observe issues of poverty and deprivation being related to social group identity. This indicates that poverty in India may be understood as not only an economic phenomenon, but also a social phenomenon.

The human development literature based on a development economics perspective has been unable to satisfactorily explain this group-level phenomenon of poverty and inequality in India. While the economics literature based on analysis of secondary data has been able to establish statistical patterns in the data, the causal mechanisms need more understanding. Thus, for example, why is it that being born in a particular scheduled tribe community may lead to a higher probability of particular socio-economic outcomes such as higher infant mortality rate, higher malnutrition rate among children, or higher maternal mortality rate has not been fully understood from the perspective of the development economics literature. Using the terminology of the capability approach, it may be asked, why is it that the capabilities of an individual with regard to various functionings may also be related to which social group category or ethnic group the individual belongs to. Addressing the policy research gaps relating to poverty and social group disparities in India requires a holistic framework of analysis, understanding of emic perspectives based on qualitative research and in-depth micro-level studies based on fieldwork, which are all the strengths of anthropological research. This is especially with respect to the scheduled tribe communities, who are the most deprived social group category in India across a range of socio-economic indicators and among whom there is a rich tradition of extensive anthropological fieldwork.

Anthropological research can also greatly contribute towards the larger literature on assessment of human development, which is largely based on quantitative development indicators and indices and on human development reports prepared at a global, national or sub-national level. Anthropology is the only discipline, which is based on fieldwork as its central methodology (Peacock 2012). It therefore has the analytical capacity and methodological strength to provide an understanding of the processes underlying various development outcomes, based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative data at the field-level and understanding the linkages between the micro and macro level. For example, while gender disparities in human development indicators are well documented in the literature in terms of secondary data, the processes underlying these disparities require an understanding based on anthropological research.

There are various other examples in this context relating to indicators with respect to multiple aspects of development, in which anthropological research can lead to a better understanding of the processes underlying the development outcomes. Many of these indicators are also represented in the global development discourse such as the sustainable development goals (SDGs). The seventeen SDGs as adopted by the United Nations are comprehensive in terms of the dimensions of development covered such as poverty, hunger, health, education, gender, water and sanitation, economic growth and decent work, infrastructure, inequalities, energy, environment and sustainability and peace and justice. However, the SDGs and their corresponding targets and indicators reflect a top-down approach and the micro-level aspects of the dimensions of development as reflected in the SDGs need to be better understood through anthropological perspectives and research. In this regard, it may be relevant to study what is the meaning of terms such as development, quality of life and the indicators of well-being as identified by the poorer sections of society, through their own lived experiences and emic perspectives.

Anthropology has a rich tradition of village studies in rural and tribal areas. In the contemporary development context, village studies based on anthropological fieldwork could incorporate development issues such as livelihoods, migration, food security, living conditions, health and nutrition, education, environment, socio-economic inequalities in various dimensions and the functioning of government programmes and schemes. Such studies could provide a voice to the development concerns of the most deprived sections of society and also capture the socio-economic changes taking place among various communities and different regions of the country as part of the development process. The studies may be presented in the form of village-level or gram-panchayat level human development reports, with the ownership of these reports being with the respective village or gram panchayat themselves and the anthropologists playing the role of a facilitator. Such reports could also incorporate a process of micro-level planning and contribute towards a greater role for anthropological research in policy planning and interventions for human development.

Conclusion

This article has sought to reflect on various aspects through which the interface between anthropology and the human development literature may be strengthened. This is especially relevant in the contemporary development context in India, as anthropological research on human development issues can provide insights, which would be extremely relevant for policy planning and interventions for human development. The potential for anthropological research in this regard has also been pointed out in earlier decades by social science review committees and by eminent anthropologists themselves.

The Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) in its review committee report on social sciences in India (ICSSR 1979) made the following observation with regard to anthropological research: 'In the field of applied anthropology, emphasis should be placed on the poorer sections of the community. In this context, the study of poverty - the concept of poverty, its socio-cultural determinants, levels of poverty, its manifestations and ways of banishing it -in the context of tribal culture and social structure should be given top priority' (ICSSR 1979: 38). The same report also provides the following observations about policy research in anthropology: 'Policy oriented research in anthropology is also much needed. Anthropologists particularly must turn their attention to studies intended to provide the much-needed information base to the government so that it can formulate and implement suitable policies' (ICSSR 1979: 39). A similar observation was made by S.C. Dube (1983), that in the years to come anthropology will have to be increasingly sensitive and responsive to the key problems of public policy, which besides being socially useful will also enrich the discipline both in theory and methodology.

The need for a greater engagement of anthropology in issues of human development and public policy is especially relevant when the government has a multitude of programmes and schemes, intended for the welfare and development of the people. The functioning and impact of these programmes and schemes need to be carefully assessed through anthropological field studies, wherein the role of the anthropologist should be understood as a social architect and not merely a project evaluator (Cernea 1995). For example, tribal development has always been a priority area for government intervention in India, based on constitutional provisions, resulting in large budgetary provisions and expenditures, including a separate tribal sub-plan and distinct administrative structures for implementation. Similarly, there have been legislations such as Forest Rights Act, Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act, and distinct programmes and schemes for tribal health, education and livelihood. However, inspite of such legislations, programmes and schemes for tribal development, various state human development reports indicate that the bottom ranked districts in various states with a notable scheduled tribe population continue to be the tribal districts. For example, in Maharashtra, the tribal districts of Nandurbar and Gadchiroli continue to be the bottom ranked districts respectively, in the human development index ranking, in both the human development reports prepared for the state so far. These may be considered as examples of important issues for anthropological research in contemporary Indian society, in which it would also important to have a systematic understanding of the micro-macro linkages and perspectives of policy makers and government functionaries, in addition to the emic perspectives of the tribal people themselves.

With the Indian economy having emerged as one of the fastest growing and largest economies in the world, the nature and direction of changes in the quality of life of the most deprived sections of society need to be understood towards strengthening equitable policies. A stronger engagement of anthropology with human development issues, based on its holistic theoretical framework and fieldwork methodology can therefore greatly contribute to the understanding of human development both in theory and practice and lead to a 'people's anthropology' (Xiaotong 1980), which is relevant to the most pressing concerns of humanity.

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CONSERVATION OF SACRED LANDSCAPE THROUGH VAN PANCHAYATS: A STUDY OF SARMOLI VILLAGE IN PITHORAGARH DISTRICT, UTTARAKHAND

Abstracts

The Himalayan forests are home to a variety of species, flora and fauna, and medicinal herbs that play a crucial role in the conservation of biodiversity. But climate change, global warming and anthropogenic factors are putting tremendous pressure on forests that led to the depletion of their resources ruthlessly. To protect forests, the concept of Van Panchayat or village forest committees were introduced. The committee undertake the conservation task which eventually entitles the rights over collection of fuel wood, minor forest produce, hunting and gathering, timber harvest, etc. In case anyone does not adhere to the rules of Van Panchayat are barred from claiming these rights. Under these circumstances, the present study highlights the management of forests through Van Panchayats, community beliefs and practices, and customary practices in the conservation of sacred landscapes. The beliefs and practices regarding forest operate as an agency to regulate the forest exploitation by the community, whereas Van Panchayat regulate the external interventions, prevention of illegal tree felling, and income generation through eco-tourism activities.

Keywords: *Van Panchayat, forest, resources, community management, beliefs and practices, sacred landscape*

Introduction

Himalayan forests are famous for their majestic views, biodiversity hotspots, rare medicinal herbs, and the source of all perennial rivers. It has been a sacred abode for centuries to the people of India. Traditional Hindu philosophy reveals that people in the *Sanyas Ashram* used to visit to spend time for peace of mind and salvation. These high mountainous ranges are inhabited by many tribal and non-tribal populations who are known as *Pahadis*

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and subsisting on difficult terrains. They depended on Himalayan forests for food, fuel wood, and medicinal herbs and harnessed them while protecting the natural surroundings. The earmarked natural biodiversity hotspots are conserved in the form of sacred landscapes and are worshipped from time to time. But this symbiotic relationship was affected by the deforestation drive led by colonialists with the establishment of British rule. With the defeat of the Gurkhas in 1815, deforestation in the Kumaon region began by declaring uninhabited or unirrigated lands under state control. The 1878 Forest Act destroyed centuries of forest use by the local communities, and all the useful forests were declared as state forests. Thus, the forests were exploited for commercial purposes, which led to widespread unrest across the Kumaon region for the protection of people's rights over the forests and their produce.

The *Pahadi* (hill) people resisted the British policies and started non-cooperation with the British government in the management of forests. As a result, the British formed a committee in 1921 under the chairmanship of Mr Wyandham, then commissioner of the Kumaon region, to investigate the grievances suffered by the people due to the introduction of scientific forestry. The committee, after making visits to several hilly villages, found that restrictions on grazing, collecting wild grass and fuel wood were creating problems of survival in such harsh climates. With their recommendations, the government is forced to frame legislative rules in the form of *Van Panchayats* or forest management committees that came into force after a decade. In 1931 *Van Panchayat* regulation was constituted under the District Scheduled Act of 1874, which paved the official way to the formation of *Van Panchayats* in British administered Kumaon division (Agrawal, 1999).

In practice, there exist two types of *Van Panchayats*, i.e., carved out from reserve forests and governed by the Indian Forest Act 1927 and made from civil *soyam* lands governed by the District Scheduled Act 1931. However, *Van Panchayat* Regulation 2005 have consolidated them into *Gram Van* (village forests). This consolidation vests more authority to forest department over all types of forests in Uttarakhand (Negi et al 2012).

The act made a provision of an elected *Sarpanch* (head) and five to thirteen *Panch* members elected by the local population who shall have resided in that area for not less than 10 years. All the adult members who have voting rights become members of it. The election is informal by raising hands, not by a secret ballot. *Sarpanch* is elected for a period of five years and is eligible to contest for three terms. The managing committee should assemble once every three months, and the general body once in six months. They are empowered to regulate the overuse of forest resources (Guha, 2001). Institutionalised in 1931, *Van Panchayat* has been adapted over time to the changing socio-political landscapes, including the introduction of the new

National Forest Policy of 1980, Forest Rights Act of 2006, and so on, aimed to restore local rights over the community forest with little interference from the State or Forest Department (Nagahama et al., 2016). Pande (2022), arguing against the Garrett Hardin's tragedy of the commons, stresses that the decadal increase in the number and area of *Van Panchayats* in Uttarakhand from 1947 to 2017 is testimony to the successful management of forests through democratically elected grassroots-level committees. Scientific studies carried out in the Indian Himalayan Region (IHR) underscore the significance of *Van Panchayats* in stimulating carbon sequestration, ecosystem resilience, and climate change mitigation (Routela et al., 2025), cultural ecosystem services in forest management (Bhatt, et al. 2024), ethno-medicinal values (Samal et al., 2008), conservation of high-altitude lakes (Kaur and Balodi, 2016), and so on. The three components of sustainability, namely social acceptability, technical feasibility, and economic viability, are all present in *Van Panchayats*. The study supports Elinor Ostrom's thesis of successful management of common, i.e., forests, by the community eliminates the free rider for sustainable community living (Pande et al., 2022).

The study Sarmoli *Van Panchayat* comes under the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve (NDBS) buffer zone. It is a confluence of three ecological zones, namely temperate broadleaf forests below 2,000 meters; coniferous forests between 2,000 and 3,000 meters; and alpine scrub above 3,000 meters, which makes it a biodiversity hotspot. The sole purpose of *Van Panchayat* is to ensure a sustainable utilisation of forest resources along with the conservation of biodiversity and rejuvenation of degraded forests. The *Van Panchayats* have the right to enshrine rules and regulations to conserve the forests in their boundaries. These rules are not uniform for all villages. Though rules may be different from one village to another, there are certain commonalities that prohibit logging, control of grazing, over exploitation of wild grass, and collection of fodder, and medicinal plants. Kapkoti et al. (2014) in their study identify a total of 28 ethno-medicinal plant species belonging to 18 different families, highlighting the ecological richness of the Gahelna *Van Panchayat* of the Kumaon region.

Nagahama et al. (2019) stated that the availability of forest resources, such as *Banji Oak*, is crucial for the local community, which depends on it for fuel wood and fodder for livelihood. It influences the *Van Panchayat* members to participate in forest management to reap the benefits of the *Banji Oak*. The *Van Panchayats* management committee endorse a bottom-up approach in decision-making by the local people, not a top-down approach by the higher authorities (Nagahama et al., 2022). However, there is a growing concern about the erosion of local forest council management rights and the impact of state policy interventions on community governance of forests (Stevens and Satterfield, 2024). The sustainability of these local institutions is currently

threatened by issues including rural outmigration, insecure forest land rights, the erosion of local authority in management rights, and global environmental change (Stevens and Krishnamurthy, 2022).

Agrawal's (1999) case study on Bharaki-Urgam *Van Panchayat* also mentions that the paucity of funds and insignificant women's participation led to the failure of sustaining and spreading *Van Panchayats* in many villages. However, the study highlighted that the women's leadership made a transparent working system of the management committee and more active, responsible governance that ensures fuller participation of people. Madhu Sarin's (2001) study observed that top-down interventions of a World Bank-funded Village Forest Joint Management (VFJM) in Uttarakhand marginalised women's participation, struggles, and achievements by transferring more power and authority to the forest department and local elite people. The case studies Holta, Bareth, Makku and so on in *Tehri Garhwal* region prove that the project is insensitive to the dynamic functioning of self-governing institutions. Thus, Sarin argued for the strengthening of gender equal democratization of such community organisations.

The present study uses Murray Ross's community organisation theory, which envisages how the social institutions balance the needs of the people and their resources. In this, people create grass root level organizations which address the issues of livelihoods through cooperative and collaborative practices in the community (Ross, 1955). The professional worker in this approach may come from within the community or outside the community, who assist these institutions in functioning well through people's participation. The community organisations like *Maati Sanghatan*, *Himal Prakriti* of Bhotiya of Munsyari trying to address their livelihood problems in the changing scenario through cooperative effort. The study tests Oslon's (1965) logic of collection action, which states that if everyone in the group has a common interest, then they will act collectively to achieve it. Then it may override the free rider problem to collective interest. Ife's (2002) progressive communitarian and empowerment approach is also used for the present study, which implies the potential of collective sharing of forest resources and decision-making to address the social and environmental problems.

Based on the above theoretical framework, the present study focuses on the communitarian management of forests by Sarmoli *Van Panchayat* through the collective beliefs and practices. This collective management, in turn, facilitates the people to reap the benefits of forests and ensure the conservative dictum for the cause of collective interest. Despite some issues in collective management, Bhotiya culture and traditional wisdom facilitate the people's participation in Sarmoli *Van Panchayat*, which eventually guarantees livelihoods and conservation.

Study Area and Methodology

An empirical fieldwork was conducted in 2025 in the Sarmoli and Sankdhura village *Van Panchayats* that comes under the Munsyari *tehsil* in Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand state. The study village is located in a high mountainous range with an elevation of 2200m (7200 ft). The Shauka Bhotiya, who are the predominant population which reside in Munsyari, are basically migratory pastoralists as well as long-distance traders between India and Tibet. With the closure of borders after the 1962 Indo-China war, Bhotiyas settled permanently in Munsyari *tehsil*. All households in the village are dependent on the forest for fuel wood, fodder, leaves, and medicine.

Rational of selecting the study area is purely based on purposive sampling, as the Sarmoli *Van Panchayat* got first prize from Uttarakhand state with regard to successful management through eco-tourism. Since it is a micro-level study, the data were gathered through informal interviews. Further empirical data was also collected through observation, structured interviews, focus group discussions and open-ended conversations with the *Sarpanch*, *Panch* and the villagers to understand the management and functioning of *Van Panchayat*, beliefs, and practices in forest management.

As a part of data collection researcher stayed in the villages physically and observed how the villagers are interacting the forests on a daily basis. The participant observation allowed the researcher to see how the people's participation facilitated harnessing the benefits of *Van Panchayats* in the study area. Transact walks in the village as well as forests assist in understanding the sacred landscapes, including sacred groves, trees and water bodies, to understand the efforts of *Van Panchayats* in forest conservation.

People's beliefs and perceptions of the forests and sacred landscapes are collected through oral histories, narratives, myths, and legends. Histories centred around Mesar Khund, Panch Chuli, Hansling, and so on revealed the symbiotic relation of the people to forests. Focus group discussions with *Van Panchayat* members reveals their organised activities in the village along with local dynamics in forest management. Visual and material documentation of *Van Panchayat* activities highlights the people's participation and cooperation in day-to-day activities.

Secondary data were accessed through academic platforms such as Google Scholar, Scopus, JSTOR, and Research Gate articles, books, and census records to understand the organisation and management of *Van Panchayats* in the Himalayas in general and Uttarakhand in particular.

Organisation of *Van Panchayat*

The Sarmoli *Van Panchayat* consists of elected members, including one *Sarpanch* and eight *Panch* members, who are responsible for the overall

management of the forest for a period of five years. Out of these nine, four members belong to Bhotiya, i.e., Scheduled Tribe as per *Uttarakhand Panchayat Van Niyamavali* 2012. Though *Van Panchayat* is different from the *Gram Panchayat*, its functions and operations often overlap. Strict rules and regulations are framed by the Managing Committee regarding the logging of trees, cutting of grass and collection of forest produce. Cutting of trees is strictly prohibited throughout the year, and let it regenerate. This untouched forest is open for ten to fifteen days in the month of October-November in a year for the collection of fuel wood, wild grass, and timber for domestic use.

Further, they are collecting various types of leaves as fodder for their cattle and sheep, collecting seasonal flowers (*Burash*), fruits, nuts, and medicinal herbs being members of *Van Panchayat*. The members were allowed to collect the same with strict adherence to the prescribed rules. As a rule, all the adult villagers are members of *Van Panchayat*. It is so that they firmly believe that without addressing the basic needs of local people, forest conservation is not possible. Hence, the villagers are allowed to collect the fallen dried branches of trees and shrubs for fuel wood during severe winters. In case anyone axes down a green tree will be fined heavily. The committee had already prepared the micro-plan in collaboration with the forest department, and afforestation was undertaken in the degraded forests of Sarmoli in the name of 'Farm'

The *Van Panchayat* regulation says that it should support at least two self-help groups. In line with this, the women members of Sarmoli formed into two Self-Help Groups (hereafter SHGs), which they named *Maati Sangatan* and *Himal Prakriti*. They are working on the principle of tribal cooperation and collective action. With the decline of migratory pastoralism, now villagers are earning their livelihood from tourism, i.e., homestay, marketing of handicrafts, native forest and agricultural produce. A bank account was opened in the name of each elderly woman of each homestay, and the income generated from the homestay was directly transferred to their account. The SHG of Sarmoli decided to contribute 2% of the homestay income to the corpus fund of *Van Panchayats*. This move helped in their conservation efforts to pay the wages of forest guards and watchmen to protect the demarcated village forests. Fund generated by the auctioning of caught wood, snow-flooded fallen trees, and minor forest produce collected from time to time. Local *chowkidars* or caretakers of the forest are appointed, where they patrol around the forest every day to prevent illegal cutting of trees and fuel wood collection. Fines are imposed on those individuals who are caught cutting trees and engaging in other illegal activities inside the forest. The *Sarpanch* of Sankdhura stated that all the funds for the management of the *Van Panchayat* are collected from the villagers only and receive no funds from the forest department.

The minutes book of the Management committee reveals that the meetings are held once a month and the minutes are recorded in Hindi. Even the meeting minutes with the study team were written during the fieldwork. The Management Committee also pays a rewarding amount as remuneration to its members for carrying out various forestry works from the revolving fund. Two members of the SHGs are carrying out the work on a rotation basis to facilitate income opportunities equally distributed to all the *Van Panchayat* members. Even the governmental and Non-governmental organizations programmes, like the creation of poly-houses for vegetable cultivation, fencing material, and skill training, are being given to them.

The case of Ms Basanti demonstrates how the resilience of Bhotiya women epitomises their contribution in the creation of livelihoods and the conservation of forests, besides dealing with the prevention of domestic violence, prohibition of alcohol, and perpetuating their culture through handicrafts, etc. Ms Basanti Raut, a resident of Sankdhura, is 48 years old is a present Sarpanch to Sarmoli *Van Panchayat* now. This *Panchayat* consists of Sankdhura, Nanasem, Sarmoli and Tamadar. She belongs to the Bhotiya community and got married to Rajender Singh Raut. In 1994, Basanti, along with her friend Mallika Viridi, joined together to oppose the harassment of women in the rigid patriarchy. They organised Bhotiya women and led a movement to close the *Sharab Battis* (liquor manufacturing units). Since then, both women organised Bhotiya women towards entrepreneurs and conservation champions of village forests. As Bhotiya realised that forests are catalytic for their survival, as their destruction directly or indirectly burdens women. After becoming active members of *Van Panchayat*, they began offering voluntary *Shramdaan* for raising forests, sampling, while preventing illegal axing. *Mahila Mangal Dal*¹ is active in Sarmoli, which consists of active women organize meetings once a month. But since 2006 onwards, both women became independent entrepreneurs and are operating their own homestay tourism at the individual level as well as with Self-Help Groups. This women entrepreneurship become an agency of women empowerment in Sarmoli. Thus, they become successful in networking Bhotiya women for empowerment through homestay.

Since they are not getting any external support, members face financial constraints in the management of forests. Previously, they had plenty of *chowkidars* in their village, but now, due to a financial crunch, they do not have regular employed *chowkidar* for forest protection. To tide over the crisis, now one member from each household is assigned the duty of guarding the forest every day. Villagers also conducted afforestation by planting Oak, Pine, and other indigenous varieties of trees in a specific area locally known as the *farm*. The rights to the *Van Panchayats* were passed down to the family from father to son, not to the daughters, even if they reside in the village. In

Sarmoli, a resolution was passed that, though membership passed through the male line, all the women who are permanent residents are given access to the forests and their management. Since hunting is prohibited, tourists frequent the forest to witness a variety of birds with *Van Panchayat* members for bird watching.

Community Management of Forests

The forests near the villages are virtually managed by the concerted efforts of the village *Van Panchayat* for the collection of timber and non-timber forest produce. The collective management of forests not only provides usufructory rights of its resources but also relegates the duty of conservation.

Collection of Wild Grass

Bhotiyas collect different varieties of wild grass from the forest, which is used for domestic as well as commercial purposes. They are mainly *Tilli*, *Kassu*, *Timsu*, *Baaj*, *Koiral*, *Gaiti Kadeek*, etc. *Gaaju* grass is available in fields as well as forests. *Shaleem* is a wild grass used for thatching purposes. Apart from wild grass, they also collect different varieties of tree leaves like *Karsu*, *Timsuva*, *Baajva Gudul* that are given to the cattle as fodder. *Patela* (dried leaves) are such leaves used to spread in *goatpaan* (cattle home) and cleaned on a daily basis. The collection of wild grass is arranged through auction by the *Van Panchayat* at earmarked places during the peak season at nominal rates. Likewise, villagers are allowed to collect the resources in a limited way and thus avoid the free rider issue, which leads to the tragedy of the commons.

Payya (Prunus cerasoides) Leaves

It is popularly known as wild *jungli cherry* and is considered a sacred tree since it grows on the cracks of hill rocks in the mountains. Since it grows from the cracks of the stones, Bhotiyas attribute that it comes out by breaking the head of the *Naag Devta*, which reside in *Paathal* (underground or hill). Bhotiya consider this tree connects the *Dharti* (earth) to *Pathal*. As such, it is deeply rooted in Bhotiya folklore and mythology, as it is also referred to as *Dev Vriksh*. Its flowers blossom during winter in pink colour, and the leaves are used in all ceremonial activities. In all the temples of the study area, worship starts with *Payya* leaves. While doing *Noreth (Jagaran/awakening)* in temples, a *mantap* is made with leaves and branches of *Payya* and the *Hudka* (musical instrument) to get possessed and take part in worship. In marriage, a welcome arch is decorated with *Payya* leaves. Without the use of these leaves, no sacred activity can be accomplished.

The fresh leaves are spread in *goatpaan*, which gives protection from cold to the cattle and sheep. Afterwards, these dung-mixed leaves are

collected by womenfolk to prepare organic manure. Every day, Bhotiya clean the *goatpaan* and the dung mixed leaves are dumped at an earmarked place to convert them into *Passu* (organic manure).

***Thunair* (Yew or *Taxus Buccata*) Bark:**

Bark of the *Chikkali* or *Thunair* tree is collected for its medicinal properties. Bhotiya prepares a salty tea from the powder made from dried bark of *Thunair*, which is locally known as *Lwenta*. Thus, dried bark is pounded thoroughly till it turns into powder. This powder is stored in tin boxes. Whenever they feel like drinking, a table spoon *Lwenta* was mixed with boiling water and prepared as a tea, which is consumed along with tasting jaggery. They attribute that it keeps the body warm during cold weather and has medicinal properties of curing cancer tumours. It is popular as *Jya* in the study village.

Due to the economic significance of bark and wood, only a few trees are left in the study village as the poachers destroyed them ruthlessly. The high-temperature-oriented coal of this tree is used in the forge by the Lohar community for making iron implements. In the *Van Panchayats* of Chauna, Harkot, Matena, and Kiwri, women are growing the endangered *Thunair* trees and have developed a belief system by tying protective threads and pledged to safeguard them like their brothers (Voices of Rural India, 2024).

***Burash* (*Rhododendron arboreum*)**

There are mainly two varieties of *Burash* flowers available in the study area, i.e., dark red and pink-coloured flowers. It has multiple usages ranging from economic, medicinal, ritual, and culinary significance. They start collecting the flowers after the performance of the flower festival, wherein *Phool Devi* is worshipped. The flowering season starts from March and continues up to May (spring). The plucked flowers are dried in the hot sun, and the petals are dried after careful removal of their pollen. The dried petals are used for making juice by boiling them with sugar. The extracted thick juice was stored in cleaned jars (5 litres) and consumed throughout the year. Further, it is also used for making tea, dyes, and indigenous medicine.

***Jamar* (Wild Lemon or *Citrus medica*)**

It is bigger than a normal lemon, having the size of an orange. Bhotiya collects *Jamar* in large quantities (as it falls due to snowfall), which are peeled off and boiled to convert them into a juicy form. Thus, the extracted thick liquid is preserved in bottles and kept in kitchens. It is sour in taste and used while cooking curries. Another variety known as *Malta*, which is known as sweet lemon. It is consumed in raw as well as processed form. Sweet lemon

is peeled off and boiled to extract its essence and stored for consumption during the May-June months. Another variety known as *Chook* (Big size lemon) is found at the homestead. The citrus trees located in the homestead are considered private property, whereas trees available in the forests and mountains of the concerned village limits are common property, where *Van Panchayat* members have access.

Rithu (Sapindas mukorossi)

They are organic soap nuts used for washing the body and clothes. The fallen raw nuts are collected and dried in the hot sun for storage. A small quantity is taken for washing clothes, body, and hair, etc. It is widely used for dry cleaning in the present to wash silk sarees, as detergents affect the quality of the fabric. But *Rithu* nuts keep the fabric intact and remove the dirt and stains. Elderly Bhotiya women prefer to bathe by using *Rithu* instead of modern soaps and shampoos.

Fuel Wood Collection

In Sarmoli, it is observed that every household has a huge collection of fuel wood to cope with the exigencies of nature, as Munsyari goes to minus degree temperatures during the winter season. During heavy snowfall, even electricity is not available to cope up the extreme cold. Water also freezes at such a temperature. Hence, they depend on such fuel wood as an adaptation strategy. Wood was burnt to heat the water, cook food, etc. The dried fuel wood is collected from the *Van Panchayats* auctions², some are through community-raised village forests, i.e., farms, and some are collected during the summer season. To meet their fuel wood requirements, women made afforestation near their village, which is close to the forest. For the collection of wood, they must perform the duties of conservation and obtain permission from the *Van Panchayats*.

Collection of Keera Jadi: (*Cardyiceps sinensis*)

It is a kind of rare medicinal fungus appear as a mushroom on top of a caterpillar and in brown color that grow in alpine meadows above 3500 meters above the mean sea level (Maikhuri et al 2013). It is available only at glaciers of *Johar Valley*, *Milam Valley*, and *Galeswar*. It grows naturally in very cold regions where the temperature is below -5 to 10 degrees Celsius. It is very expensive and used in the Chinese and Tibetan traditional system of medicine. The cost of one kilogram now ranges from 10 to 15 lakhs. If the family size is larger, can able to collect 1 kilogram during the season. But due to climate change and overharvesting, its availability has come down. At present, Bhotiya is able to collect 250 grams, and in one season, people's

earnings range from 10,000/- to 1 lakh rupees. Collection is dependent on pure luck, as some families may collect more than a kilogram.

During the first migration, i.e., mid-April, snow starts melting at the hill tops. At this point in time only, *Keera Jadi* is available. It is a very risky collection as every year one or two individual death cases are reported from *Milam Valley*. *Milam Valley* is situated at a height of 14,000 feet above the mean sea level (4,268 meters) and is named after the *Milam* glacier. Almost all the able members/households visit these steep valleys during the season (May-October) and collect them using their knowledge. A skilful Bhotiya can collect more *Keera Jadi* than others, as they were accustomed to mountain ecology for generations and passed it on to the younger ones orally. Now the shops and businessmen are available during the season who arrange groceries, meat, vegetable on horses, mules to the visiting Bhotiya for collection.

Natural Dyes

Bhotiya make natural dyes from the powder made from grinding the dried barks and flowers of wild medicinal trees. Bhotiya extract the barks of *Kirmoli*, *Dolu*, *Okhad* and *Seema* trees. Further, they also make powder from the dried *Burash* flowers for dyeing purpose.

***Bugyals* (Alpine Pastures)**

The study village is situated at an elevation of 2,200 meters (7,200) AMSL, and the picturesque valleys are historically renowned for the trade corridor between India and Tibet through ancient *Milam* and *Unta Duara* passes. Bhotiya had their ancestral villages popularly known with clan names such as *Milam*, *Laspa*, *Burphu*, *Martoli*, *Sumdu*, *Rilkot* in *Malla Johar* valley. The names probable originated from *Milam* glacier, and hence it is popular with *Malla Johar*. These villages are seasonally inhabited by Bhotiya, especially during the summer months.

Families living in, i.e., *Talla Johar* (lower valley) including the study village Sarmoli, visit this *Malla Johar* (upper valley), where animals were rested and taken to *Bugyals*. From there, every day, Bhotiyas take their stocks to *Bugyals* under the care of a herdsman. The Bhotiya engage in trade, cultivation and collection of medicinal herbs, indigenous crops, along with herding of stocks. With the onset of snow, they come down to *Talla Johar* (permanent settlement), where they engage in terrace cultivation and weaving the woollen items. In the present context, it was considered their permanent settlement since many Bhotiya showing less interest towards visiting *Malla Johar*. Surrounding Munsyari, alpine pastures are also available at Khalia top and its adjoining steep hills. Where Bhotiyas of the study area take their stocks for grazing on a rotation of caretakers. They used to live along

with their herds in tents and prepare food. Such pastures often have access to resources where transhumance has more exclusive rights than the *Van Panchayat*, since they are engaging such areas for grazing their sheep.

Conservation of Sacred Landscapes

They believed that the forest and hills are their sacred landscape since they are the abode of gods and goddesses, along with their ancestral spirits. Plucking of flowers, axing down the trees, and collection of forest products without the appeasement or sacrifice to those deities or spirits results in suffering to the individual and family. These kinds of beliefs and practices are functioning like checks and balances for environmental conservation. The deities of the study village are *Chalo Devi*, *Yedi Bhagawan*, *Bhumyal Devi*, *Narsing Devi*, *Ulka Devi*, and *Kaali* or *Durga Devi*. All these deities have abodes in forests and high hills. They used to appease them prior to the collection of seasonal forest produce. For example, the sacrifice of a calf (Kattera), known as *Asur Bali* (animal sacrifice), is offered to *Narsing Devta* by the villagers of Shankdura.

Further, Bhotiya also appease forest spirits that exist in hills, plains, and earmarked places like burials. *Pari*, *Chal*, and *Kala Baan*. Villagers believe that if anyone plucks the flowers in such places may affect the curse of the forest spirits, and the condition of spirit possession is expressed in the form of illness. *Pari* is the spirit reside on the hills, and if anyone, especially girls and women, sings songs, plucks flowers while going to this place will get *Pari*. In case anyone got ill due to this, *Pari* are tabooed to visit the forest on such earmarked places on hill tops. They were allowed outside only after the performance of the propitiation ceremony.

Inside the forest, many small sacred spots/landscapes are present where stones are structured in an ordered fashion in the form of small indigenous shrines. They are known as *Ban* or *Devbhumi*. Further, Bhotiya also consider *Bhugyal* (Alpine tree) as a sacred landscape, and hence no one dare to malign it. In some places, people put their ancestors' deity, called *Kul Devta*, under a tree and offer worship on auspicious occasions. In case anyone mistakenly crosses such places with a *Chappal* or commits any unwanted acts are attracted to *Chal*. It is resided on the lower valley plain homestead areas and village boundaries or outskirts. People who get *Chal* also suffer ill-health and undergo treatment along with offerings to the concerned spirit. *Kala Baan* is possessed by individuals when they visit prohibited places like burial, sacrificial spots, sacred spots, etc. In such a case, *Kala Baan* demands a sacrifice of a goat.

The trees located at temples are symbolised as sacred ones as they tie red, black, yellow, white, and saffron colours to cloths and people are not

allowed to carry on any unbecoming activities. People offer fruits, flowers, and food to these deities to please them during ceremonial occasions. Animals and chickens are also sacrificed as a promise to the deity when their wishes are fulfilled, and feasts are also organised with the distribution of cooked sacrificial meat and *puri*. Bhotiyas perceive that such belief systems help in the preservation of the forest as well as the sacred landscape and hence treat them with utmost respect and decorum.

People also believe that the forest is the source of joy and happiness, and hence believe in the idea of *Jal Jangal Jamin* where forests provide land for home, water for survival, and forest products for their livelihood. Without forests, their social and cultural identity will be lost forever. In the temple of *Maheswar Devta*, every year, villagers offer worship to the deity, where a buffalo is sacrificed at a stroke on the forehead and thrown into the forest. Villagers avoid consuming it; rather, it was left over to wild animals and birds as a part of propitiation of the *Devta*. However, in case anyone's vow is fulfilled in the village, Bhotiyas visit *Maheswar mandir* along with invited guests and offer a goat or sheep and consume it in the form of *prashad*. Women are not allowed to enter the *Maheswar* temple and its premises. The temple and its precincts are considered a sacred point, and hence the forest around it is treated as a sacred landscape and is prohibited from collecting any wood from it. In case anyone resorts to tree felling in the sacred area, they may invite the wrath of the deity. These community beliefs are systematically arranged in the form of narratives by the *Van Panchayat's* community organisations to conserve the forests. Some of the narratives are uploaded in website of the Himalayan Ark, voices of rural India, etc.

Himal Prakriti: An Institutional Mechanism to Promote Van Panchayats

It is a non-profit organisation founded in 2006 at Munsyari to ensure nature conservation and sustainable livelihoods for its members. They can also be accessed through a web portal referred to as the voices of rural India. It is a kind of cultural platform wherein the villagers place their stories/voices with respect to the significance of forests and their resources. It was created during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, where stories were collected from rural people and documented in proper order by relating them through written words, metaphors, photographs, videos, etc. At present, they have documented more than 80 such stories representing 11 states in India. One such story from Sarmoli belongs to *Timul* (fig) or *Angira* leaves narrated by Ms Bhavana Thakuni. She is also intimately called Bhanu by all the villagers. She is a very young and active member of *Maati Sangatan*. She narrated that the leaves of *Timul* are used as receptacles and cups by their forefathers and

place very sacred place in their socio-economic and religious life. Tourists are now throwing plastic plates and bottles in the Himalayas, posing challenges to the environment. In marriages and worship, the use of *Timul* leaves is considered sacred. Through a video message, she was creating awareness of using *Timul* plates and cups for environmental conservation (Voices of Rural India website, 2025).

In the name of *Himal Kalasutra*, a festival also organised since 2017, wherein all Sarmoli villagers cook traditional foods and share among themselves and with the tourists. It is part of reviving the tradition of *Shaut Shamal*, wherein food is prepared and gathered for long journeys, especially during their visit to *Johar* valley as a part of migratory pastoralism and the collection of medicinal herbs.

Management of Water in Forests

Conservation and maintenance of water sources are the collective responsibility of the villagers. The water springs in the forest are known as *Shrout*, and a cement structure was arranged, and pipes are connected to it for its effective management. The study villages have a big water tank constructed by the administration under *Sarmoli Peyjal Yojana (Jal Jeevan Mission)* near the *Shrot* (water spring), and thus, collected water is treated and supplied to each household through a pipeline for consumption. This *Shrot* directly comes from *Mesar Kund*, where all people in the village organise a *mela* and make offerings. It was being popularised by *Van Panchayat* members through their website (Himalayan Ark, 2025). Recently, the government also constructed a new reservoir under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) just beside the traditional *Mesar Khund* for the collection of water from the *Shrout* and supply water to the villages and the neighbouring villages. The natural water reservoir known as *Mesar* or *Maheswar Kund* provides water to Sarmoli, Sankhdura, and the other neighbouring villages.

According to Bhotiya folklore, two sisters of Barniagao regularly visit *Mesar Kund* for the collection of water. After seeing their beauty, Lord Mahesar was fascinated and took them into the *Kund* while the sisters were taking a bath. Worried by the non-return of girls, the family consulted with the family priest, and the priest told them they were taken by the *Devta*. The family, along with the priest and the villagers, went to the *Kund* to persuade the *Devta* to release their daughters. Instead, the *Devta* promise them gold, ornaments, wealth, and other wishes as he has fallen in love with the girls. Despite this, the family does not agree to the *Devta's* proposal and insisted for their return. Then the *Devta* has taken the whole soul of these two sisters and thrown the skeletal remains of the girls out of the pond. This act enraged the

concerned family members and villages. They broke the *Kund* in vengeance, and the water from the *Kund* started flowing in two directions. Then, the *Devta* got angry and cursed the villagers that no two brothers in a family can live together, and their family will not increase or decrease. To please the *Devta*, the villagers offer prayers and sacrifice animals to prevent water scarcity. Every year, people from the neighbouring villages come together to please the *Devta* for the well-being of their family and offer fruits, flowers, feasts, and animals to the *Devta*. It is said that priests, shepherds, and women are not allowed to enter the *Kund*. By the year 2003, the women folk of Sarmoli, Jainti and Sankdhura *Van Panchayats* came together for the restoration of dried-up parts of *Kund* and by 2006, the whole work was completed with the help of volunteers and men of the villages. Since 2006, every year a festival called *Mesar Van Kautik* is celebrated by worshipping the *Devta* along with other cultural activities.

Eco-Tourism as Alternative Livelihood

Due to climate change, snowfall has become very low in the last two years in Munsyari. Due to overheating, the Himalayan glaciers melted away, resulting in the drying of rivers early. Eventually, this scenario impacted the livelihoods related to terrace cultivation, livestock rearing, and the collection of forest produce. Villagers stated that prior to 2025, snowfall was expected to fall in November and December, but in the current year, it started in March due to climate change. With the uncertain traditional livelihoods, tourism has become a source of alternative livelihoods for *Van Panchayat* members. In turn, it has become an agency to manage the forests in the study area. Sarmoli and Sankdhura are famously known as villages of homestays in Munsyari for the seasonal tourists, bird watchers, hill trekking people, and adventurers. The part of the income (2%) generated from the homestay also contribute for the cause of forest conservation. The village women come together for personal as well as forest rights and runs homestay in the village under the banner of *Himalayan Ark*³. The *Maati Sangthan* also provides entrepreneurship and training programmes to the other village women in handicrafts, where shawls, sweaters, and carpets made from sheep and rabbit wool are produced. Besides homestay, they are also able to generate livelihoods in the form of tourist guides, taxi drivers, and petty business. Tiwari (2023) conducted a study on the empowerment of women through eco-tourism by Himalayan Ark that provides community-based homestays and initiatives for the conservation of Himalayan biodiversity as an example of successful eco-tourism in Uttarakhand. Sarmoli has been awarded for “*Best Tourism Village*” by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India in 2023 (PTI, 2023). It gave a fillip not only to *Van Panchayat’s Maati Sangthan* but also to women from other villages.

Challenges

From the above-mentioned empirical data, *Van Panchayat* can be seen as a role model for the conservation of sacred landscape in the Himalayan region of Uttarakhand. Most of the *Van Panchayats* are self-financed ones run by the community, and they generate income from the auctioning of grass and forest products. However, this income was not sufficient for the payments of forest guards, vigilant staff, and management of *Van Panchayats* and other forest restoration work. Most of the *Van Panchayats* are unable to pay the mandatory 20% income generated from the forest to the Forest Department. Negi et al. (2012) pointed out that the *Van Panchayat* are given a secondary status to that of *Gram Sabha*, thus hindering the decision-making in forest-related conflicts. The *Van Panchayats* face a continuous threat from illegal cutting of trees and grass by the neighbouring villagers. As such, there is a need for rigorous patrolling inside the forests.

Conversion of Munsyari *Gram Panchayat* to Municipal Council instils the fear of loss of indigenous rights over land and control over the forest. The tourism also generates huge chunks of plastic waste that pollute the Himalayan environment and the water streams on which most of the villagers' livelihoods depend. *Tamri Kund* is a hot water spring located nearly 10 kilometres away from the study village. Tourists frequent this place in large numbers and pose problems by throwing plastic, junk food pouches, bottles, etc. This kind of garbage is found even at Nanda Devi temple, Maheshwar temple, and in forests also. The concept of eco-tourism has become a challenge for the villagers to make the insensitive tourists about disposal of plastic in the mountains and forests. With the perceived benefits of homestay, the real estate business is growing rapidly in the hills, and local people are proceeding to the plains for the sake of education, health, and employment. More forest and cultivable lands were converted to build homestays by the local as well as outside population. If the trend is continued, the local Bhotiya population will be replaced with plain people, which will affect the forest conservation efforts, as they do not bother about the beliefs and practices associated with forests and hills.

Though institutional efforts like *Himal Prakriti*, *Himalayan Ark*, and *Maati Sangatan* are making efforts for forest conservation but in vain. The Bhotiya youth are not interested towards traditional livelihoods. After completion of their basic education, they are attracted towards tourism related works as they perceive they could earn a good amount of money without any hard tasks like cultivation and animal husbandry. The rich folklore associated with forests, hills, and other natural resources is wading away from the younger minds as they are obsessed with smart mobile phones and digital platforms. As such, unlike their parents, they are not bothered about

the conservation of forests and sacred landscapes. All these challenges should be taken care of by the *Van Panchayats* and use eco-tourism responsibly for the creation of sustainable livelihoods to lessen the dependence on forests.

Conclusion

Thus, the *Van Panchayat* system in Uttarakhand is a living example of the sustainable community-based conservation of forests and landscapes. The indigenous rights of Bhotiya are intertwined with their organisation and participation in the socio-cultural institutions. Uttarakhand is also known as *Dev Bhumi*, which means *Land of Gods*, where every community have spiritual, cultural, and political identity associated with the forest. Many shrines are built inside the forest and are worshipped and considered as the abodes of their gods and goddesses. Thus, they venerate trees, birds, animals, and lakes as sacred spaces and conserve the forests and landscape of the Himalayas. The data enforces Ross's theoretical framework that grassroots organisations like *Maati Sangathan*, *Himal Prakriti*, *Van Panchayat*, and so on are addressing the livelihood concerns of the villagers. The cooperation and collaboration were reinforced by the spiritual, cultural, and social activities, which are evident from the organisation and performance of rituals on auspicious occasions.

Since all the households of Bhotiya depend on forests for livelihood, fodder, medicinal plants, tourism, and water, there are checks and balances through *Maati Sangathan* to prevent the free rider issue. Thus, Oslon's collective action of *Van Panchayats* discourages people who indulge in forest theft and encroachments. But the role of traditional organisations got affected with acculturation, and the present generation is not interested in moral issues of protection and preservation of forests, thereby protection of heritages of the community has become challenging day by day. Furthermore, tourism-related livelihoods are at stake during the rainy season as tourists show less interest in this place, as the routes are blocked by landslides and road blockages on hill tops. Despite this, sharing of benefits of *Van Panchayats* of the study area reflects the Ife's progressive communitarian and empowerment approach, which in turn attracts the younger generation. Hence, there is a need to enhance supportive mechanisms from the governments to achieve the real empowerment of the local people and provide for the creation of an employment guarantee to the dependent population.

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Notes

1. Under the leadership of Ms Bauni Devi, the village mahila mangal dal had waged a struggle to uproot the coal-making kiln in Bharaki-Urgam *Van Panchayats*. With this inspiration, Sarmoli also constituted a group to prevent such kind of illegal activities in the village forests.
2. During heavy snowfall, the snow slide take place from the hilltops. As a result, many trees were uprooted and was flooded to the plains. Thus, washed-out wooden trees are pruned and sliced into pieces and auctioned to the public. The collected money goes to the corpus of *Van Panchayats* of the respective village.
3. A community-based tourism organisation located at Munsyari in Uttarakhand

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SUSTAINING LIVELIHOODS AND CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE KUTIA KANDHA IN ODISHA'S SHIFTING SETTINGS

Abstract

The Kutia Kandha, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) in Odisha, India, embody a unique biocultural identity shaped by their reliance on shifting cultivation and minor forest products (MFPs) within the forest ecosystems of Kalahandi, Kandhamal, and Rayagada districts. This review synthesizes the literature on their socio-economic poverty, food insecurity, limited access to healthcare and education, sustainable livelihood strategies and rich cultural practices, such as nature worship and millet-based traditions. Despite resilience, they face marginalization from small landholdings, deforestation, and ineffective external interventions like the Forest Rights Act and mining disruptions. The study highlights gaps in longitudinal, gender-focused, and climate-related research, emphasizing the need for inclusive policies to preserve their heritage while addressing vulnerabilities. Their story reflects a delicate balance between tradition and survival amid modern pressures.

Keywords: *Kutia Kandha, Shifting Cultivation, Livelihood, and Vulnerability*

Introduction

The Kutia Kandha, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) residing primarily in the Kalahandi, Kandhamal, and Rayagada districts of Odisha, India, represent a unique indigenous community with a rich cultural heritage and a deep-rooted connection to their natural environment. Recognized as one of the 75 PVTGs in India, the Kutia Kandha are a subgroup of the more prominent Kondh tribe, distinguished by their geographic isolation in hilly terrains and their reliance on shifting cultivation (locally termed “podu chaas” or “dongar chaas”) and minor forest products (MFPs) for subsistence.

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This tribe's socio-economic life revolves around forest ecosystems, which provide food, fuel, medicine, and income. Their cultural practices, such as nature worship and traditional social organization, underline their biocultural identity. Despite their resilience, the Kutia Kandha face persistent challenges, including poverty, food insecurity, illiteracy, and limited access to modern healthcare and education, compounded by their marginalization from mainstream developmental processes.

The significance of studying the Kutia Kandha lies in understanding how indigenous communities adapt to ecological and socio-economic pressures while preserving their traditional knowledge systems. Their dependence on forest resources and minimal technological intervention offers insights into sustainable living practices that contrast modern agricultural paradigms. However, their vulnerability stemming from small landholdings, lack of irrigation, and restricted market access highlights the need for inclusive development policies that respect their cultural ethos. This review explores existing literature on the Kutia Kandha, focusing on their socio-economic conditions, livelihood strategies, cultural practices, and the impact of external interventions. It aims to synthesize knowledge and identify gaps for future research.

Review of Literature

The Kutia Kandha have been subjects of anthropological and ethnographic interest since colonial times, with early accounts providing a foundation for understanding their social structure and cultural practices. Elwin (1950), in his seminal work on Indian tribes, describes the Kondh tribes, including the Kutia subgroup, as nature worshippers with a strong communal ethos. He notes that their practice of shifting cultivation and dependence on forests shaped their identity as "hill-dwelling Kondhs" distinct from their plains-dwelling counterparts. These early studies emphasize the tribe's patriarchal yet cooperative social organization, with nuclear families forming the basic unit and women playing a significant role in gathering and processing forest produce.

Post-independence, scholars like Bailey (1960) expanded on the Kondhs' economic life, highlighting the Kutia Kandha's reliance on podu cultivation of millets (e.g., ragi, kosala) and pulses like arhar. Bailey's work underscores the ecological sustainability of their practices, noting the absence of chemical fertilizers and the rotational nature of shifting cultivation, which allowed soil regeneration (Tripathy, 2022). However, he also points to the fragility of this system under population pressure and land fragmentation, a theme echoed in later studies.

The cultural fabric of the Kutia Kandha is intricately linked to their environment, a theme well-documented in the literature. Patnaik (2005)

describes their animistic beliefs, with nature worship central to their rituals. The Jani, a magico-religious specialist, conducts ceremonies involving animal sacrifices (e.g., buffalo, sheep), a practice that has replaced human sacrifice since the colonial era. These rituals reinforce community cohesion and their spiritual bond with forests, which they protect collectively.

The Kutia Kandha's livelihood strategies revolve around a dual reliance on shifting cultivation and MFPs. Mining and industrialization in Kalahandi, particularly by companies like Vedanta, have disrupted their livelihoods. Xaxa (2014) argues that land alienation and environmental degradation from bauxite mining have displaced communities, reduced access to forests, and exacerbated poverty. While the Forest Rights Act offers legal recourse, its enforcement lags, leaving the tribe between development and dispossession.

Recent literature focuses on Kutia Kandha's socio-economic challenges, painting a picture of persistent marginalization. Tripathy (2024) further explores the economic dependence on MFPs, such as mahua flowers, tendu leaves, and honey, which supplement their income. Mohanty estimates that forest-based activities contribute 30 % of their annual earnings. However, the lack of value-addition and market linkages restricts financial gains. The study highlights the gender dimension, with women predominantly collecting and processing MFPs, reinforcing their critical role in the household economy.

A study by the Down to Earth team (2021) in Lanjigarh block, Kalahandi, reveals that over 90% of Kutia Kandha households experience severe food insecurity, with every sixth household facing hunger. The study attributes this to small landholdings (averaging 0.8-1.2 acres), low agricultural productivity, and limited access to institutional credit or markets for MFPs. Despite their dependence on forests, the tribe refrains from using wood for fuel, reflecting their conservationist ethos, which does not translate into economic stability.

The oral health-related quality of life (OHRQOL) of the Kutia Kandha tribe, assessed using the OHIP-14, was found to be poor, with a high prevalence of both smoking and smokeless tobacco habits. This study serves as a foundational dataset for health authorities to design suitable programs for the tribal population of Kutia Kandha and potentially for other tribal groups across Odisha (Kumar et al., 2022).

Similarly, literacy rates remain low, with government reports (e.g., Ministry of Tribal Affairs, 2018) noting that remoteness and lack of schools hinder educational attainment, perpetuating cycles of poverty.

Agricultural traditions are associated with festivals, and during this celebration, the Kutia Kandha exchange millet seeds, symbolizing

their reliance on indigenous crops and communal solidarity. Such practices highlight their traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), which scholars (Gadgil et al., 1993) argue offers lessons in sustainable resource management. Their use of organic bunds in shifting cultivation, recognized by the FAO as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System, underscores this expertise. Tripathy (2019) highlights MFPs' economic value, noting firewood's existence and high-value items like tendu leaves and honey, but evaluates poor infrastructure and intermediaries' exploitation, limiting value-addition and fair returns. The Forest Rights Act (2006) aimed to secure tenure over MFPs, but implementation remains uneven, leaving the Kutia Kandha vulnerable to market fluctuations.

Tripathy (2023a) illuminates that Government policies and development programs have had mixed impacts on the Kutia Kandha. The Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) and PVTG-specific schemes aim to improve infrastructure, education, and health. However, their reach is limited, with remoteness and bureaucratic inefficiencies cited as barriers.

The Wadi project by NABARD, promoting orchard cultivation, has been piloted in tribal areas. However, its adoption among the Kutia Kandha remains low due to their preference for traditional practices (Tripathy, 2018b, 2020).

Tripathy (2024) suggests promoting pineapple-based industries in the Dongria Kondh region can boost local jobs and entrepreneurship, driving community growth. Industries producing pineapple goods like juices, jams, dried fruit, and bromelain for pharmaceuticals and cosmetics could create new income streams. Government and NGOs can support this by providing technical aid, training, and market access to improve output and profits. These efforts can make pineapple farming a key part of sustainable development for the Kutia Kondh, ensuring economic stability while maintaining their ecological harmony and cultural heritage.

The literature review on the Kutia Kandha reveals a resilient, nevertheless vulnerable community, balancing tradition with survival in a rapidly changing world. Their socio-economic life, anchored in forest ecosystems, reflects sustainable practices overshadowed by poverty and exclusion. From nature worship to seed festivals, cultural richness emphasizes their identity, while external interventions highlight the tension between development and preservation. Despite rich documentation, gaps persist, necessitating a study and the rationale for the study of tracking changes in livelihood patterns over decades and for policy implications.

Objectives

Assess the Kutia Kandha's socio-economic challenges and resilience, focusing on their reliance on shifting cultivation, minor forest products, and

livestock while analyzing the impacts of deforestation, limited irrigation, and policy interventions.

Explore the connection between their biocultural traditional practices and forest resources, material and land assets, identifying gaps in gender, climate, and longitudinal research for inclusive policies.

Evaluate livelihood sustainability and cultural preservation amidst external pressures, proposing strategies to enhance resource access and equity.

Methodology

The study focuses on the Kutia Kondha, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) under the Kutia Kondha Development Agency (KKDA) in Belghar, Kandhamal district, Odisha, which supports this marginalized tribe through infrastructure, income generation, and education, funded by special central assistance from the Government of India. Further, the study on Kutia Kandha in Tumudibandh block, Kandhamal, employed Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 100 households across six villages under KKDA, selected randomly for accumulating primary data through brief interviews. These villages-three near and three distant from the block headquarters (an urban proxy)-highlight the tribe's ecological bond and reliance on forest resources amidst challenges of poverty and limited access to modern amenities. Secondary data were sourced to supplement the study from published papers, Government reports, and KKDA records detailing population, literacy, and socio-economic conditions.

Theoretical Framework

This study is primarily informed by the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF), complemented by Political Ecology and Biocultural Theory. The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework provides a holistic lens to analyse how the Kutia Kandha mobilise natural, human, social, physical, and financial capital to sustain their livelihoods amid structural vulnerabilities. Their dependence on shifting cultivation, minor forest products (MFPs), and livestock reflects adaptive strategies shaped by limited landholdings, ecological constraints, and institutional interventions such as the Forest Rights Act and PVTG development schemes. SLF helps assess how external shocks-deforestation, mining, market exclusion, and policy gaps-affect livelihood security and resilience.

Political Ecology further contextualises the power dynamics underlying resource access, highlighting how state policies, mining activities, and top-down development planning reshape traditional forest-based economies

and contribute to marginalisation. It draws attention to land alienation, environmental degradation, and uneven implementation of welfare measures.

Biocultural Theory and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) perspectives explain the deep interconnection between Kutia Kandha cultural practices, seed festivals, nature worship, and sustainable resource management. Together, these frameworks enable an integrated understanding of livelihood sustainability, cultural preservation, gendered labour roles, and the tension between ecological harmony and externally driven development.

The Kutia Kondha's Struggle and Resilience

According to the 2011 census, while tribes make up 8.6 per cent of India's population, they constitute 23 per cent of Odisha's, a significant share compared to states like Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, and Gujarat, which together hold over half of India's tribal populace. These communities, among India's most marginalised, grapple with relentless challenges, social exclusion, limited healthcare access, educational deprivation, unemployment, and displacement from their ancestral lands and forests, casting shadows over their daily existence.

Odisha stands out as a vibrant tapestry of cultural diversity, shaped by 62 distinct tribes, including 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), out of 75 nationwide, including groups like the Birhor, Bondo, Didayi, Dongria-Khond, Juangas, Kharias, Kutia Kondh, Lanjia Sauras, Lodhas, Mankidias, Paudi Bhuyans, Soura, and Chuktia Bhunjia, identified by stagnant demographics, pre-agricultural livelihoods, and isolated habitats. Among them, the Kutia Kondhas, a subgroup of the Kandha tribe in Kandhamal district, endure fragile living conditions marked by poverty, food insecurity, malnutrition, and health struggles, primarily in Kotagarh, Tumudibandh, and Belghar blocks of Baliguda subdivision. Nestled within the Eastern Ghats, Odisha's hinterland is a timeless refuge for ancient tribes, their lives interwoven with the forests, forming a vivid ethnic kaleidoscope that defines the region's heritage.

The PVTGs, a classification by the Government of India aimed at uplifting tribes with critically low development indices, often reside in remote forest enclaves where natural resources sustain their socio-economic and cultural fabric in harmonious balance. Their livelihoods hinge on collecting non-timber Forest Produce (NTFP) like honey, gum, bamboo, medicinal plants, and roots. They also practice shifting cultivation, horticulture, livestock rearing, and small-scale artisan work to build a modest existence.

Despite their rich traditions, the Kutia Kondhs face severe food insecurity-evident in Lanjigarh, where over 90 per cent are Kutia Kondhs and

every sixth household battles hunger compounded by illiteracy, inadequate healthcare, and scarce employment opportunities beyond the forest and farm labour. Their settlements, typically two rows of houses facing each other, embody a unified social structure. However, their patriarchal, nuclear families live day-to-day with little thought for the future, interacting minimally with outsiders or government systems.

In Lanjigarh block, where nearly a quarter of Kandhamal's Kondhs reside, hidden hunger and starvation-like conditions persist for eight months annually, with diets limited to carbohydrate-heavy mandia pej or rice with salt, tamarind water, and green chillies, offering little nutritional variety. Vulnerable groups include single women, widows, the elderly without caregivers, the infirm, people with disabilities, and children, chronic hunger and food insecurity for up to five months yearly, exacerbated by high anaemia rates, especially among adolescent girls and women (over 68 per cent). Child malnutrition in Lanjigarh is alarmingly prevalent, with 43.5 per cent underweight, 47.9 per cent stunted, and 20 per cent wasted. In comparison, nutritional anaemia affects 74.3 per cent of children under five and 49.7 per cent of pregnant women, highlighting a dire health crisis. Sanitation woes compound these issues, as most households practice open defecation, and drinking water shortages in summer due to drying tube wells plague tribal settlements across the region (Sharma & Mariakumar, 2023).

Belghar's eastern villages are motorable, yet the western side, encircled by steep ghats and mountains, remains accessible only by foot. It is situated on the northeast fringe of the Eastern Ghats at 2,500 feet above sea level amidst forests, hills, and rivers. The poorest households rely on government schemes that distribute rice at 1 rupee per kilo year-round to bolster food security. However, this aid barely offsets the nutritional deficits and environmental challenges these forest-dependent communities face.

Kutia Kondh women are crucial in collecting, processing, and selling non-timber forest products while managing household chores and childcare. However, the KKDA largely overlooks them, and no specific schemes are designed to meet their needs as beneficiaries. Life expectancy at birth for Kutia Kondhs in Tumudibandha, Phulbani district, is 46.49 years for males and 41.49 years for females. The gender gap is attributable to physiological stress and biological factors, compounded by women's shorter height and significant body weight deficits (Patel, 1985).

Health, an essential sector, receives shockingly low financial priority from the KKDA. While efforts to provide drinking water through tube wells exist in select villages, most remain defunct due to the Kondhs' lack of training

in maintenance or repair, highlighting a critical gap in sustainable support. The Kutia Kondhs acknowledge sporadic benefits from the KKDA. However, these are driven by agency decisions rather than community needs, with few initiatives reflecting Kutia's input, underscoring the need for stronger tribal representation on the KKDA's governing body.

This top-down planning approach has fostered indifference among the Kutia Kondhs, who, paradoxically, appear content with their lot, unperturbed by external development programs or the outside world, despite the evident shortcomings of KKDA interventions. When micro-projects were designed, planners prioritised physical infrastructure- roads, electricity, and drinking water. They recognised these as significant barriers to development, leading to substantial KKDA budget allocations for such projects over other pressing needs. However, irrigation infrastructure within KKDA areas has seen minimal funding and even less implementation, leaving agriculture vulnerable. At the same time, political exclusion and the erosion of tribal traditions have further hampered economic progress, education, and infrastructure, except in regions influenced by Christian missionaries. While neglecting health, women's empowerment, and community-driven schemes, the focus on physical infrastructure reveals a disconnect between KKDA's goals and the Kutia Kondhs' realities, perpetuating their marginalisation despite the agency's mandate to uplift this vulnerable tribal group.

Table 1: Sample Coverage

Sl. No.	PVTG Category	Villages	No. of Households	Distance from Block HQ (KMs)
1.	Kutia Kandha	Burlubaru	17	31.0
2.	Block	Deogada	17	23.0
	Tumudibandha	Germeli	17	35.0
		Guchuka	16	18.0
		Gunuspa	17	38.0
		Tidipadar	16	20.0
	Total		100	27.7 (Average)

Table 1 outlines the sample coverage of 100 Kutia Kandha households across six villages in Tumudibandha block, which is located at a distance from the block headquarters ranging from 18.0 km (Guchuka) to 38.0 km (Gunuspa), averaging 27.7 km. The even distribution of households (16-17 per village) ensures balanced representation, though varying distances suggest accessibility challenges, potentially impacting development interventions and resource access for remote villages like Gunuspa and Germeli.

Table 2: Main Occupation by Sex Category

PVTG Category	Main Occupation	No. of Persons Employed		
		Males	Females	Total
Kutia Kandha	Cultivator	57	52	109
Tumudibandha	Agricultural Labourer	3	10	13
	Wage Earner	44	2	46
	Salaried	3	0	3
	Business	9	0	9
	NTFP Collection	27	56	83
	Goat Rearing and Other Livestock	3	5	8
	Social Security Pensions	8	2	10
	Sub Total	154	127	281

Table 2 reveals that among the Kutia Kandha in the Tumudibandha block, cultivation employs the most individuals (109), with males (57) slightly outnumbering females (52), while NTFP collection is female-dominated (56 vs 27 males), reflecting women's significant role in forest-based livelihoods. Wage earning is predominantly male (44 vs. two females), and salaried jobs and business are exclusively male domains (3 and 9, respectively). Agricultural labour favours females (10 vs three males), and social security pensions support more males (8 vs two females), indicating gendered occupational patterns and economic vulnerabilities, with a subtotal of 281 persons employed.

Table 3: Household Composition of Kutia Kandha

Category	Sub-Category	Value
PVTG Category		Kutia Kandha
Number of Sample Households		100
Number of Household Persons	Males	216
	Females	200
	Total	416
Number of Persons per Household	Males	2.2
	Females	2.0
	Total	4.2

The Kutia Kandha community, based on a sample of 100 households, has an average household size of 4.2 members. This includes 216 males and 200 females, averaging 2.2 males and 2.0 females per household. The gender distribution shows a slight male predominance, aligning with the broader trend across the studied tribes. Compared to the average household size of 4.3 across all communities, Kutia Kandha households are slightly smaller. This

The marital status data across age groups for Kutia Kandha reveals distinct gender patterns: among males, 47% of married individuals are aged 25-40, while unmarried males peak at 43.2% in the 15-25 group, and widowed males (50%) are split between 40-60 and over 60. For females, 46.5% of married individuals are in the 25-40 range, unmarried females dominate the 6-15 group at 46%, and widowed females (66.7%) concentrate in the 40-60 age group. Notably, widowhood emerges later for females, and no unmarried individuals persist beyond 25-40, indicating earlier marriage for women and higher male remarriage rates, with totals normalised to 100% across categories (Table 5).

Table 6: Kutia Kandha - Educational Background of Household Members

Educational Background	Males	Females	Total	% Males	% Females	% Total
Illiterate	50	100	150	23.1	50.0	36.1
Knowing only signature	76	51	127	35.2	25.5	30.5
Read and write	64	35	99	29.6	17.5	23.8
Up to High School	23	9	32	10.6	4.5	7.7
Matriculate (HSC)	2	3	5	0.9	1.5	1.2
Intermediate/Plus Two	1	2	3	0.5	1.0	0.7
Sub Total	216	200	416	100.0	100.0	100.0

Beyond hunger, the Kutia Kondh face illiteracy, inadequate access to schools, healthcare, nutrition, employment, and land ownership, compounded by low agricultural output, limited credit, and shrinking access to NTFPs, despite government efforts to introduce primary schools with a coastal Odisha curriculum irrelevant to their environment. The KKDA has neglected to develop context-specific study materials or enhance teacher capacities. At the same time, ashram schools run by the tribal welfare department see erratic attendance and high dropout rates among Kutia students, reflecting minimal educational progress.

The educational background of the Kutia Kandha population (416 total) highlights stark gender disparities: 50% of females (100) are illiterate, compared to 23.1% of males (50), while 35.2% of males (76) can only sign, compared to 25.5% of females (51). Males outperform females in reading and writing (29.6% vs. 17.5%) and up to high school (10.6% vs. 4.5%). However, both genders show minimal higher education, with matriculation at 0.9% for males (2) and 1.5% for females (3) and intermediate levels below 1% each. Illiteracy dominates at 36.1%, reflecting limited educational access, especially for females (Table 6).

Table 7: Kutia Kandha - Main Occupation by Sex Category

Main Occupation	Males	Females	Total	% Share
Cultivator	57	52	109	38.8
Agricultural Labourer	3	10	13	4.6
Wage Earner	44	2	46	16.4
Salaried	3	0	3	1.1
Business	9	0	9	3.2
NTFP Collection	27	56	83	29.5
Goat Rearing & Other Livestock	3	5	8	2.8
Social Security Pensions	8	2	10	3.6
Sub Total	154	127	281	100.0
Total Household Members	216	200	416	
Work Participation Rate (%)	71.3	63.5	67.5	

The occupational data for Kutia Kandha (281 employed out of 416 total) reveals cultivation as the dominant occupation (38.8%, 109 persons), with males (57) and females (52) nearly equal. In contrast, NTFP collection (29.5%, 83 persons) is led by females (56 vs 27 males). Wage earning (16.4%, 46 persons) is male-dominated (44 vs. two females), and salaried jobs (1.1%) and business (3.2%) employ only males. Agricultural labour (4.6%) favours females (10 vs three males), and pensions (3.6%) support more males (8 vs two females). Work participation is higher for males (71.3%) than for females (63.5%), averaging 67.5%, reflecting gendered roles and economic dependency (Table 7).

Table 8: Kutia Kandha - Household Subsidiary Occupation by Sex Category

Subsidiary Occupation	Males	Females	Total	% Share
Cultivator	47	41	88	44.0
Agricultural Labourer	5	11	16	8.0
Wage Earner	27	1	28	14.0
Salaried	0	0	0	0.0
Business	1	0	1	0.5
NTFP Collection	22	32	54	27.0
Goat Rearing & Other Livestock	3	9	12	6.0
Social Security Pensions	1	0	1	0.5
Sub Total	106	94	200	100.0
Total Household Members	216	200	416	
Work Participation Rate (%)	49.1	47.0	48.1	

The subsidiary occupation data for Kutia Kandha households (200 employed out of 416 total) shows cultivation as the primary activity (44%, 88 persons), with males (47) slightly outnumbering females (41). In contrast,

NTPP collection (27%, 54 persons) favours females (32 vs. 22 males). Wage earning (14%, 28 persons) is overwhelmingly male-driven (27 vs. one female), and agricultural labour (8%) leans toward females (11 vs. five males). Goat rearing (6%) also sees higher female participation (9 vs. three males), while salaried jobs are absent, and business and pensions are minimal (0.5% each). Work participation rates are close, at 49.1% for males and 47% for females, averaging 48.1%, indicating balanced but gendered subsidiary roles (Table 8).

Table 9: Kutia Kandha - Details of Housing

Sl.	Type of Dwelling Condition	% Households
1	House Ownership	
	Own house	100.0
	Sharing house with father	0.0
	No house	0.0
	Overall	100.0
2	Type of House	
	Kacha	62.0
	Pucca	5.0
	Semi Pucca	30.0
	Hut	1.0
	Mancha (Stage House)	2.0
	Overall	100.0
3	Existence of RoR with the owned house	52.0
4	Constructed house with Govt assistance	26.0
5	Govt. schemes through which benefitted	
	PMAY	40.0
	Micro Project	0.0
	IAY	60.0
	Total	100.0
6	Possession of ration cards	98.0

The dwelling condition data for Kutia Kandha households reveal universal household ownership (100%), with no cases of shared or homeless households. However, 62% live in kacha houses, 30% in semi-pucca houses, and only 5% in pucca houses, indicating a predominance of rudimentary housing. Huts (1%) and mancha houses (2%) are rare, while 52% possess a Record of Rights (RoR), and 26% received government-assisted construction. Among beneficiaries, 60% used IAY and 40% used PMAY schemes, with no micro-project aid, and 98% held ration cards, reflecting widespread access to basic welfare but limited improvement in housing quality despite government support (Table 9).

Table 10: Kutia Kandha - Details of Housing Structure

Sl.	Details of Housing Structure	Measurement Unit	Value
1	Built-up Area of the House	Average in Sq. ft.	373.4
2	Number of Rooms in the House	Average No.	1.5
3	Number of Storeys in House	Average No.	100.0
4	Type of Wall (% of HHs)		
	Mud	% of HHs	10.0
	Brick with Mud	% of HHs	38.0
	Bamboo or Wood with Mud Plaster	% of HHs	33.0
	Brick with Cement	% of HHs	19.0
	Total	% of HHs	100.0
5	Type of Roof (% of HHs)		
	Thatched	% of HHs	50.0
	Asbestos	% of HHs	45.0
	Concrete Roof	% of HHs	5.0
	Total	% of HHs	100.0
6	Floor (% of HHs)		
	Earthen	% of HHs	75.0
	Cement	% of HHs	25.0
	Total	% of HHs	100.0
7	Current Use for Own Accommodation	% of HHs	100.0

The housing structure data for Kutia Kandha households shows an average built-up area of 373.4 sq. ft. with 1.5 rooms and single-storey homes (100%). Walls are mostly brick with mud (38%) or bamboo/wood with mud plaster (33%), while only 19% use brick with cement, and 10% use mud alone. Roofs are predominantly thatched (50%) or asbestos (45%), with concrete rare (5%), and floors are primarily earthen (75%) versus cement (25%). All houses (100%) serve as personal accommodation, reflecting modest, traditional construction with limited modern materials despite full ownership (Table 10).

Table 11: Kutia Kandha - Facilities Available in Living Houses

Sl.	Details of Housing Condition	Measurement Unit	Value
1	Water Facility Inside House	% of Households	1.0
2	Type of Water Facility Inside House	% of Households	
	Handpump		0.0
	Open Well		100.0
	Total		100.0
3	Source of Water (No Facility Inside House)	% of Households	
	Public Borewell Run with Solar Power		53.5
	Stream Water		41.4
	Public Tube-well/Handpump		2.0
	Common Well		1.0

Sl.	Details of Housing Condition	Measurement Unit	Value
	Supply Water to the Village		0.0
	River Water		2.0
	Total		100.0
4	Distance to Water Source (Max/Min/Avg)	Metres	500/10/255
5	Toilet Facility Inside House	% of Households	32.0
6	Separate Place for Animals	% of Households	53.0
7	Electric Connection to Their Houses	% of Households	37.0
8	Separate Poultry Shed	% of Households	40.0
9	Households Received Solar Light Support	% of Households	27.0
10	General Practice if No Cattle/Poultry Shed		Sharing, open space, backyard, living house, free moving, baskets

Table 11 depicts Kutia Kandha housing facilities, revealing minimal indoor water access (1%), with open wells as the sole internal source (100%). In comparison, most (99%) rely on external sources like solar-powered borewells

Table 12: Kutia Kandha - Details of Second House

Sl.	Details of Houses	Measurement Unit	Value
1	Households Possessing Second House	% of Households	4.0
2	Built-up Area of Second House	Average Sq. ft.	230.0
3	Number of Rooms	Average No.	1.0
4	Single Storeyed Building	% of Households	4.0
5	Wall Type of Second House	% of Households	
	Mud		25.0
	Brick with Mud		25.0
	Bamboo or Wood with Mud Plaster		50.0
	Brick with Cement		0.0
	Total		100.0
6	Roof Type in Second House	% of Households	
	Thatched		100.0
	Asbestos		0.0
	Total		100.0
7	Floor Type in Second House	% of Households	
	Earthen		75.0
	Cement		25.0
	Total		100.0
8	Use of Second Building	% of Households	
	Own Living		50.0
	Business Purpose		25.0
	Cattle Shed		25.0
	Total		100.0

(53.5%) or streams (41.4%), averaging 255 meters away. Only 32% have indoor toilets, 37% have electricity, and 27% have access to solar lighting, indicating limited access to modern amenities. Over half (53%) have separate animal spaces; 40% have poultry sheds. Households lacking sheds use shared spaces or backyards, reflecting basic living conditions with partial infrastructure development despite external water dependency.

Table 12 indicates that the second houses of Kutia Kandha have only 4% of households that own one, averaging 230 sq. ft. with one room, all single-storied. Walls are predominantly bamboo or wood with mud plaster (50%), followed by mud or brick with mud plaster (25% each), with no cement used; roofs are exclusively thatched (100%), and floors are mostly earthen (75%) versus cement (25%). Usage is split evenly, with 50% for living, 25% for business, and 25% for cattle sheds, indicating that these modest, traditional structures serve multiple purposes despite their rarity and basic construction.

Table 13: Household Possession of Material Assets – Kutia Kandha

Sl.	Material Assets	% of Households	Value per Household (Rs.)
1	Television	9.0	4944.4
2	Radio	0.0	—
3	Cooking gas	16.0	2750.0
4	Cot	51.0	805.9
5	Chair	42.0	428.6
6	Table	0.0	—
7	Cycle	64.0	2469.8
8	Two-wheeler	15.0	33400.0
9	Three-wheeler	0.0	—
10	Gold & Silver Ornaments	15.0	5166.7
11	Utensils	100.0	1408.0
12	Mobile phone	43.0	2565.1
13	Other material assets	41.0	318.3
Total Value			Rs. 54,256.8

The material assets data for Kutia Kandha households illustrates universal ownership of utensils (100%, Rs. 1,408), while cycles (64%, Rs. 2,469.8) and cots (51%, Rs. 805.9) are standard, reflecting basic mobility and furnishing. Mobile phones (43%, Rs. 2,565.1) and chairs (42%, Rs. 428.6) indicate moderate modern adoption, but televisions (9%, Rs. 4,944.4), two-wheelers (15%, Rs. 33,400), and cooking gas (16%, Rs. 2,750) are less prevalent, with high-value items like ornaments (15%, Rs. 5,166.7) rare. No household owns radios, tables, or three-wheelers, and the total asset value averages Rs. 54,256.8, suggesting limited wealth and prioritisation of essentials over luxury goods (Table 13).

Table 14: Livestock Assets - Kutia Kandha Households

Sl.	Livestock Assets	% of Households	Number of Assets/ Household	Value of Assets/ Household (Rs.)	% Share
1	Cow	38.0	1.4	4740.8	
2	Bullock	50.0	1.6	6586.0	
3	Buffalo	28.0	2.2	9107.1	
4	Calf	11.0	1.1	2454.5	
5	Goat	32.0	3.0	6900.0	
6	Sheep	17.0	3.8	4882.4	
7	Pig	27.0	5.0	5437.0	
8	Poultry	74.0	4.6	1001.2	
	Total			Rs. 41,109.00	100.0

The livestock assets data for Kutia Kandha households displays poultry as the most common (74%, 4.6 birds, Rs. 1,001.2), while bullocks (50%, 1.6 units, Rs. 6,586) and cows (38%, 1.4 units, Rs. 4,740.8) dominate more extensive stock, reflecting agricultural reliance. Goats (32%, three units, Rs. 6,900) and pigs (27%, five units, Rs. 5,437) offer higher numbers per household, while buffaloes (28%, 2.2 units, Rs. 9,107.1) are the most valuable. Sheep (17%) and calves (11%) are less common, with total asset value averaging Rs. 41,109, indicating diverse livestock holdings skewed toward poultry and draft animals for sustenance and income (Table 14).

Table 15: Other Livelihood Assets -Kutia Kandha Households

Sl.	Other Livelihood Assets	% of Households	Number of Assets/HH	Value of Assets/ HH (Rs.)	% Share
1	Dog	3.0	1.3	466.7	3.6
2	Duck	0.0	—	—	—
3	Hunting gun	4.0	2.8	1833.3	14.0
4	Iron Plough	0.0	—	—	—
5	Poultry cage	3.0	1.0	300.0	2.3
6	Pump set	4.0	1.0	3950.0	30.4
7	Solar light	1.0	1.0	5000.0	38.3
	Total	—	—	Rs. 11,550.0	100.0

From the data, pump sets, and solar lights dominate household asset values, contributing 30.4% and 38.3%, respectively, despite being owned by only 4% and 1% of households. Hunting guns, held by 4% of households, have the highest assets per household (2.8) and a significant value share (14%). Dogs and poultry cages, owned by 3% of households, have minimal value shares (3.6%. and 2.3%). Ducks and iron ploughs are absent, indicating no ownership or value contribution (Table 15).

Table 16: Operational Land Holdings – Kutia Kandha Tribe

Sl.	Land Particulars	% of Households	Land Holding per Farmer (in Acres)
1	Agricultural land owned	100.0	1.26
2	Podu land	99.0	0.67
3	Dangar land	98.0	0.21
4	Garden land	98.0	0.02
5	Low paddy land	97.0	0.30
6	Jholla (Terraced land)	97.0	0.08
7	Land area with ROR	100.0	0.45
8	Irrigated land	45.0	0.10

The Kutia Kandha tribe relies heavily on land-based livelihoods, with all households owning agricultural land, though holdings are marginal. Nearly all practice Podu cultivation, reflecting dependence on traditional forest-based farming. Landholdings are fragmented into small parcels, indicating low productivity and limited adaptation to diverse terrains. Limited irrigation access and insecure tenure, due to poor legal recognition, further heighten their vulnerability, underscoring the need for targeted support in irrigation, land rights, and sustainable agriculture.

Shifting cultivation, known to the Kondhs as dongar chaas or podu chaas, is the primary source of food for tribal communities. They rely on minor millets like ragi, kosala, and kangu intercropped with arhar grown on 0.5-3-acre hill-slope plots during the Kharif season. The system sustains small and marginal landholdings with no manure or chemical fertilisers used by Kutia Kondh farmers. However, rising population and family sizes further fragment these plots, intensifying pressure on already limited agricultural resources (Tripathy, 2022).

Table 17: Source of Irrigation – Kutia Kandha

Sl.	Source of Irrigation	Number of Households	% of Households
1	Borewell	0	0.0
2	Check dam	0	0.0
3	Stream water/ Chua	40	88.9
4	Farm pond	0	0.0
5	MIP	0	0.0
6	River water	0	0.0
7	Percolation pit	2	4.4
8	Water Harvesting Structure	3	6.7
	Total	45	100.0

All households own agricultural land (1.26 acres avg.), with nearly all possessing Podu (0.67 acres), Dangar (0.21 acres), Garden (0.02 acres), Low paddy (0.30 acres), and Jholla land (0.08 acres). Land with a Record of Rights (ROR) averages 0.45 acres per farmer. Only 45% have irrigated land (0.10 acres), indicating limited irrigation access (Table 16).

Among 45 households with irrigated land, 88.9% (40) rely on stream water (Chua) as their primary irrigation source, underscoring its dominance. No households use borewells, check dams, farm ponds, MIPs, or river water, suggesting limited infrastructure or access. Percolation pits serve 4.4% (2 households), and water harvesting structures support 6.7% (3 households), indicating minimal adoption of alternative irrigation methods. This dependency on streams may reflect local geography or resource constraints, with negligible diversification in irrigation sources (Table 17).

Table 18: Economics of Agricultural Production – Kutia Kandha

Sl.	Cropping Pattern	Production (Kg)	Self-Consumption (%)	Marketable Surplus (%)	Consumption (Kg)	Avg. Price/Kg (Rs.)	Sales Proceeds (Rs.)
1	Paddy	1120.0	32.8	67.2	367.4	15	11289.6
2	Niser (Alasi)	20.0	8.9	91.1	1.8	34	619.5
3	Blackgram	172.0	7.8	92.2	13.4	45	7136.3
4	Banana	200.0	18.6	81.4	37.2	20	3256.0
5	Beans	90.0	10.6	89.4	9.5	35	2816.1
6	Caster	29.3	10.7	89.3	3.1	20	523.3
7	Ragi	150.0	86.5	13.5	129.8	20	405.0
8	Mustard	60.0	18.9	81.1	11.3	48	2335.7
9	Cashew	0.0	6.4	93.6	0.0	50	0.0
10	Maize	370.0	46.7	53.3	172.8	18	3549.8
11	Dongar Rani	0.0	43.9	56.1	0.0	15	0.0
12	Ginger	625.0	4.9	95.1	30.6	60	35662.5
13	Groundnut	58.0	11.7	88.3	6.8	30	1536.4
14	Arhar (Kandula)	36.0	12.7	87.3	4.6	40	1257.1
15	Mix of Vegetables	248.0	27.4	72.6	68.0	20	3601.0
	Total Income						Rs. 73,988.20

The Kutia Kondh and Dongria Kondh, inhabiting the hill slopes, are renowned for their horticultural expertise, as evidenced by their cultivation of various crops, including pineapples, bananas, and jackfruit. Their pineapple plantations stand out as a significant aspect of their agricultural practices,

highlighting their deep understanding of and ability to adapt to the region's ecological conditions to achieve productive outcomes (Tripathy, 2024).

Paddy dominates production (1120 kg) but has moderate self-consumption (32.8%), with 67.2% sold, yielding Rs. 11,289.6. Ginger, with 625 kg, has the highest marketable Surplus (95.1%) and sales proceeds (Rs. 35,662.5) despite low self-use (4.9%). Ragi shows high self-consumption (86.5%), leaving little for sale (13.5%, Rs. 405). Crops like black gram (92.2%) and ginger (95.1%) prioritise markets, while cashew and Dongar Rani produce nothing, and cashew has a high marketable surplus percentage. Total income reaches Rs. 73,988.20, driven by high-value crops like ginger (Table 18).

Table 19: Agricultural Practices of Kutia Kandha Farmers

Sl.	Equipment / Input Type	No. of Farmers Using	% of Farmers Using
1	Tractor	3	3.0%
2	Diesel Pumpset	7	7.0%
3	Electricity Run Motor	0	0.0%
4	Iron Plough	36	36.0%
5	Sprinkler	0	0.0%
6	Power Tiller	1	1.0%
7	Compost	62	62.0%
8	Fertilizer	4	4.0%
9	Both (Compost and Fertilizer)	20	20.0%
10	Use of Pesticide (Yes)	20	20.0%
11	Use of Pesticide (No)	67	67.0%
	Total	100	100.0%

Among 100 farmers, 62% use compost, making it the most common input, while only 4% use fertiliser alone, and 20% combine both. Pesticide use is limited: 67% abstain, and 20% apply it. Iron ploughs are used by 36%, far outpacing mechanised tools like tractors (3%), diesel pump sets (7%), and power tillers (1%). No farmers use electric motors or sprinklers, suggesting reliance on traditional, low-cost methods and limited access to advanced irrigation or machinery, possibly due to cost, infrastructure constraints, or small landholdings (Table 19).

Average Annual Sales Proceeds: ₹2073.5

The Kutia Kondh depend heavily on forests, water, and land, collecting edible leaves, wild tubers, mushrooms, bamboo shoots, and berries. At the same time, landless households sell Siali and sal leaves to buy food, thereby supplementing their diet and income for 2 to 3 months annually. Rapid deforestation over the past two decades has diminished NTFPs like mahua, tamarind, mangoes, kendu, jackfruit, and amla, yet barada saag, char, ber,

Table 20: Kutia Kandha – Collection and Sale of MFPs

Sl.	Type of MFPs	No. of HHs	% of HHs	Marketable Surplus	Sales Proceeds (₹)
1	Hill Broom	56	56.0	28.9 headloads	5776.0
2	Caster Seeds	5	5.0	9.4 kg	561.0
3	Berries	4	4.0	1.8 kg	175.2
4	Firewood	100	100.0	401.4 headloads	16056.0
5	Timber	20	20.0	11.8 bicycle loads	11760.0
6	Mango	32	32.0	5.1 kg	102.0
7	Jackfruit	1	1.0	5 pieces	200.0
8	Honey	21	21.0	10.2 kg	2033.0
9	Jhuna	32	32.0	11.2 kg	1121.0
10	Lakha	13	13.0	14.8	2220.0
11	Siali Leaves	88	88.0	22.0 headloads	3517.4
12	Mushroom	1	1.0	5.4 kg	432.0

kardi, tubers, berries, resins, and gums remain vital for sustenance amid declining yields due to worsening soil quality.

Reduced access to NTFPs and wild food plants lowers dietary diversity and incomes, though tribal women and men gather medicinal herbs to meet health needs. Collection and sale of NTFPs, casual labour, and migrant remittances strengthen earnings beyond agriculture. The FGD further revealed problems related to malnutrition and infectious diseases prevalent among forest-dwelling communities such as the Kutia Kondhs (Sharma & Mariakumar, 2023; Tripathy, 2015, 2023b).

Furthermore, insights from the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in Table 19 revealed that animal husbandry serves as both a crucial livelihood source and a means of protein intake for the Kutia Kondh community. They rear cows and poultry primarily for household consumption, while goats and sheep are raised for market sales. However, distressed livestock sales are common. The poorest households, including widows and persons with disabilities, often rely on MGNREGS wages and pensions for support.

All 100 households collect firewood, generating the highest sales proceeds (₹16,056) from 401.4 headloads, indicating its universal demand. Siali leaves (88% of households) and hill brooms (56%) are also widely collected, yielding ₹3,517.4 and ₹5,776, respectively. Timber, gathered at 20%, fetches ₹11,760 from 11.8 bicycle loads, indicating a high value per unit. Niche products like jackfruit (1 household, ₹200) and mushrooms (1 household, ₹432) contribute minimally. Honey (21%) and Jhuna (32%) add moderate-income (₹2,033 and ₹1,121).

Table 21: Market Participation and Income Generation from Minor Forest Produce (MFPs) among Rural Households

Sl.	Type of MFPs	No. of HHs	% of HHs	Marketable Surplus	Sales Proceeds (₹)
1	Mahua Flower	45	45.0	8.5 kg	255.0
2	Bamboo	15	15.0	20.0 pieces	1000.0
3	Sal Seeds	10	10.0	12.3 kg	615.0
4	Tendu Leaves	60	60.0	15.0 bundles	2250.0
5	Char Seeds	8	8.0	6.2 kg	310.0
6	Kusum Seeds	5	5.0	4.8 kg	240.0

Average Annual Sales Proceeds: ₹945.0

The FGD reveals that women play a vital role in managing NTFP collection and domestic chores. At the same time, adolescent girls once resided in youth dormitories- a fading tradition- as government efforts slowly brought schools and social transformation to these remote villages.

Further, the FGD revealed that agriculture, particularly shifting cultivation of millets like ragi and Kosala, remains their sustenance backbone, practised on small hill-slope plots averaging 0.5-3 acres, supplemented by livestock rearing and NTFP sales. However, the rising population further fragments their already meagre landholdings. The tribal communities, deeply reliant on natural resources like forests, water, and land, sustain their livelihoods by collecting edible leaves, wild tubers, mushrooms, bamboo shoots, and wild fruits and berries for consumption and trade. For two to three months each year, most tribal households depend heavily on forests, gathering Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFPs) such as Siali and sal leaves, which landless families sell to purchase food, thereby forming a critical economic and nutritional lifeline. The FGD revealed that rapid deforestation over the past two decades has drastically reduced the availability of NTFPs such as mahua, tamarind, mangoes, kendu, jackfruit, and amla, while barada saag, char, ber, kardi, tubers, berries, resins, and gums remain essential for survival.

It was ascertained from the FGD that limited access to NTFPs and wild food plants, coupled with deteriorating soil quality, has diminished yields of tubers, medicinal herbs, and other forest produce, severely impacting dietary diversity and household incomes of these tribal groups. Tendu leaves are collected by 60% of 100 households, yielding ₹2,250 from 15 bundles, making it the most lucrative minor forest product (MFP). Mahua flowers, gathered at 45%, yield ₹255 from 8.5 kg, indicating moderate income. Bamboo, collected at 15%, fetches ₹1,000 per 20 pieces, indicating a high value per unit. Sal seeds (10%, ₹615), char seeds (8%, ₹310), and kusum seeds (5%, ₹240) contribute less, reflecting lower participation and Surplus. Tendu and bamboo drive significant earnings despite fewer collectors (Table 21).

Table 22: Kutia Kandha – Value-Added MFPs

Sl.	Type of MFPs	No. of HHs	% of HHs	Marketable Surplus	Sales Proceeds (₹)
1	Siali Rope	40	40.0	10.5 kg	1575.0
2	Bamboo Mats	12	12.0	8.0 pieces	800.0
3	Honey (Processed)	15	15.0	7.5 kg	1875.0

Average Annual Sales Proceeds: ₹1416.7

Among Kutia Kandha households, 40% produce siali rope, generating the highest sales proceeds of ₹1,575 from 10.5 kg. Processed honey, made by 15%, yields ₹1,875 from 7.5 kg, showing a higher value per unit. Bamboo mats, crafted by 12%, contribute ₹800 from 8 pieces, indicating moderate income. Siali rope has the broadest participation, while honey offers the best return per kilogram, suggesting value-added processing enhances earnings despite fewer households involved (Table 22).

Conclusion and Suggestions

The Kutia Kondh tribe's sustainable lifestyle, rooted in their profound connection to the Belghar in the Tumudibandha block of Odisha, showcases a harmonious balance between human needs and ecological preservation. As a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), they practice traditional practices such as podu chasa (shifting cultivation) and small-scale horticulture, reflecting an adaptive ingenuity that ensures sustenance and environmental regeneration. Their expertise in cultivating crops like pineapples, bananas, and jackfruit underscores a deep understanding of their ecosystem, with pineapple farming emerging as a standout feature of their agricultural prowess. They maintain a self-reliant economy deeply tied to their cultural identity through the sale of produce, hunting, and gathering forest resources.

Though government and welfare interventions have sparked gradual changes in social life and infrastructure, the transformation remains invisible, leaving the Kutia Kondh trapped in a cycle of poverty, environmental dependence, and developmental neglect.

The FGD reveal a remarkable continuity of cultural practices embedded in the everyday life of the Kutia Kondhs, seasonal festivals, clan-based rituals, and marriage ceremonies, all of which reinforce collective identity and ancestral memory.

Despite increasing exposure to formal education, state institutions, and market forces, the community consciously transmits oral traditions, ritual knowledge, and customary norms to younger members through participatory involvement in ceremonies and village deliberations. Their flexible marriage

practices, while accommodating change, continue to prioritise kinship solidarity, clan exogamy, and ritual obligations, thereby preserving the moral foundations of social organisation. Elders play a pivotal role in mediating generational transitions, ensuring that adaptation does not erode core cultural values, and emphasising that the preservation of ritual bonds, ecological ethics, and community harmony remains central to Kutia Kondh identity and social cohesion.

The Kutia Kandha study reveals a community of 100 households across six villages, averaging 4.2 members, with a youthful population (mean age 27.1) and a sex ratio of 926. Cultivation (38.8%) and NTFP collection (29.5%) dominate livelihoods, with gendered roles: males in wage-earning and females in NTFP. Education lags, with 36.1% illiterate, especially females (50%). Housing is basic (62% kacha), with full ownership but limited modern amenities (1% indoor water, 37% electricity). Land holdings are small (1.26 acres) and reliant on streams (88.9%) for irrigation. Assets like poultry (74%) and cycles (64%) reflect modest wealth (Rs. 54,256.8). Firewood and ginger drive income, highlighting forest and agricultural dependency amid accessibility and development challenges.

Based on our study, we can suggest three key suggestions to enhance the development of the Kutia Kandha community. First, educational access can be improved by establishing local schools and adult literacy programs to address the 36.1% illiteracy rate, particularly among females (50%), boosting employability and empowerment.

Second, enhance infrastructure by providing reliable electricity (currently only 37%) and indoor water facilities (1% availability), alongside upgrading kacha housing (62%) through expanded PMAY/IAY schemes to improve living standards. Third, strengthen livelihoods by promoting irrigation infrastructure beyond streams (88.9% dependency) and supporting value-added NTFP processing (e.g., honey, siali rope), ensuring sustainable income and reducing forest reliance amid small landholdings (1.26 acres).

Food security and the increasing demand for wood products pose pressing challenges for the Kutia Kondha community over the coming decades, especially as climate change and environmental degradation threaten the forests of Odisha's Kandhamal district, their traditional lifeline. Equally vital is the transmission of ecological wisdom rooted in their sustainable practices, such as shifting cultivation and modern management knowledge, to the Kutia Kondha and local governments, despite limited financial resources. The ecosystem functions and services of their hilly landscapes, such as water regulation through the Eastern Ghats' streams, erosion control on sloping terrains, preservation of sacred groves, conservation of forest-grassland ecotones, and protection of wildlife habitats like those of the elephant and

tiger, are of paramount significance for climate adaptation and sustaining their way of life (Deshmukh et al., 1998)

We suggest adopting the Wadi model, supported by NABARD, to integrate soil conservation, water resource development, agriculture, women's empowerment, health, and income generation for landless communities in tribal areas. This holistic approach addresses production, processing, and marketing while meeting diverse needs. Persistent runoff eroded agricultural land along stream courses, negatively impacting groundwater conditions. Expanding Wadi interventions could mitigate these challenges, enhancing sustainability and economic potential for tribal communities in the region (Tripathy 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2020, 2024). It was revealed by the FGD that between July-August and November-December, food-scarce months before harvest, distress migration drives Kutia Kondh to Andhra Pradesh and Telangana for brick kiln work or to Kerala for stone-crushing, rubber, and tea plantation jobs, seeking elusive economic relief (Tripathy, 2013, 2015, 2021, 2023b).

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Jumgam Kamduk

ANALYSIS OF INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONSHIP OF CHAKMA IMMIGRANTS AND OTHER TRIBAL GROUPS IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Abstract

This article highlights the nature of the inter-ethnic relationships between the Chakma immigrants and other tribal groups in their early period of settlement, as well as the changes that have taken place thereafter. The forced migration of Chakmas from erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to Arunachal Pradesh has generated a range of socio-economic, political, and ethnic tensions in their areas of settlement. Consequently, Chakma immigrants largely remain outside the public 'consciousness' or 'imagination,' experiencing a high degree of alienation, marginalization, and exclusion from the larger society. Over time, the Chakma issue has become prominent in the Indian national context.

Keywords: *Inter-ethnic relationship, consciousness, imagination, immigrants & alienation.*

Introduction

Migration from the erstwhile East Bengal/East Pakistan and the present-day Bangladesh to Eastern and North-Eastern parts of India has been an ongoing phenomenon. The scale of migration from Bangladesh to India may never be fully known, but its impact is seen to be 'severest on the ethnic, economic and ecological fabric of Northeast India and West Bengal leading to the coinage of the phrase 'Bangaldeshisation of India' (Hazarika 1992a).

The migration history of the Chakmas tells us that they were the original inhabitants of the undivided India. The migrated and settled down in Mymensingh district of today's Bangladesh, and their fate took them back to India's Arunachal Pradesh. When dominion of India was divided into India and Pakistan in 1947, the Chakmas were forcefully integrated with then East Pakistan. They migrated back to India, and settled in the eastern

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frontier of India, under some abnormal circumstances (Bath 2023). Insecurity of life, loss of land and livelihood and fear of politico-religious persecution in East-Pakistan have forced the Chakmas to settle in Arunachal Pradesh and other North-eastern States. In 1964, the Government of India granted migration certificates into the country to approximately 35,000 Chakmas to enable them to come to India. Initially they were sheltered in government camps in Assam and later shifted to a camp within the state of Arunachal Pradesh which was then known as North-Eastern Frontier Agency. The migrants were settled by the late Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in the Erstwhile North- East Frontier Agency (NEFA) (Thakur 2011:35). In the absence of proper resettlement and rehabilitation policy, most of them have experienced multiple displacements. In fact, the Chakma ethnic groups due to their controversial habitations in Arunachal Pradesh and in other parts of Northeast are the victims of inadequate facilities and opportunities. The recent, peaceful repatriation of 6,000 Chakma refugees to their homes in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tract is a welcome sign. Still, there are numerous refugees with no hopes of returning because of unstable conditions in their mother land (Hindwan :2010).

Review of Literature

Some relevant observations and studies are reviewed here.

Bath (2023) in his study tries to understand the concepts of refuge, indigenous people and citizenship. It brings into light the context, political or strategic, under which the refugees from Bangladesh were settled in an otherwise 'Protected Frontier', protected legally and historically. Towards the end of the study, different models for solutions suggested by different committees, have been presented. Further, the researcher aims to find a democratic solution to the protracted issue and ignite the minds of all stakeholders, including the host communities.

Kamduk (2023) provided an understanding how Chakma immigrants were dislocated from their original habitats, and constitute as a distinctive ethnic group in the state. It further highlights how various factors such as withdrawal of basic facilities such as education, healthcare, employment and other factors withdrawn by the State Government in the state over the years have contributed to the evolution of Chakma ethnic consciousness which resulted in the growth of ethnic conflicts between them and other tribal groups in the state.

Prasad's (2013) study provides some general insights in the ongoing debate about the notions of home, trans-nationalism, issue of citizenship and return migration. It mainly analysed the socio-economic and political condition of the Chakmas in settled area due to denial of basic fundamental

rights. The study also looks into the various aspects of constitutional provision and citizenship rights related to Chakmas.

Methodology and Profile of Chakmas

This article draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2014-2017 among the displaced Chakma ethnic group who migrated to the state of Arunachal Pradesh. The field study was conducted in three districts—Papumpare, Changlang, and Namsi—where the Chakmas were resettled between 1964 and 1969 and have lived ever since. To achieve the objectives of the study, in-depth interviews and on-site observations were used. Before beginning the interviews, the researcher established contact with community leaders; an introduction from them usually made the households more responsive.

As the respondents were mainly cultivators, they were heavily engaged in agricultural activities during the first phase of fieldwork, which began on June 1, 2016. Some respondents were unavailable for months because they were sharecroppers working on land owned by other tribal groups in distant locations. Others went to their fields early in the morning and returned late, around 5 p.m., making it difficult to meet them on a daily basis. Since Sunday was their only day of rest, many agreed to meet on Sundays, in addition to other days of the week. Respondents were asked questions regarding their migration experiences, sources of livelihood, relationships with other tribal groups, and ethnic conflict. During the interview process, it was found that self-identification as citizens of India was much more pronounced among those born and brought up in India than among those who originally fled the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and came to Arunachal Pradesh as refugees. Furthermore, it was found that they did not like to associate themselves with their country of origin, Bangladesh.

The word ‘Chakma’ or ‘Tsakma’, according to Talukdar, “is a generic term given to a predominant hill tribe of Chittagong Hill Tracts dwellings on the corridor link of Arakan (Myanmar)” (Talukadar 1988:5). The Chakma are considered to be of “Sino-Tibetan and Mongoloid descent, having their own distinct way of life, languages, values and culture. They share linguistic, racial and ethnic ties with South East Asia and the hill peoples of Assam of North East India, Thailand and Upper Myanmar (Chowdhury 2015:41). Majority of them are Buddhist by religion, every village in the study areas has a Buddhist temple within the village.

The Chakmas were rehabilitated in three distinct areas of settlements in Arunachal Pradesh. They were allotted with 5 to 6 acres of land per family in Lower Subansari (now Papumpare), Tirap (now Changlang) and Lohit districts (now Namsi). They were issued trade licenses, ration cards, given employment rights (Paramilitary) and some even exercise their voting

rights in Arunachal Samiti and State Assembly elections (Dutta 2005:151). The Chakmas immigrant group had experienced resettlement problems from the very beginning -Papumpare (Kokila), Changlang (Diyun) and Namsai (Chakma Basti) where entire settlement of Chakma ethnic group is concentrated is largely on the banks of rivers, which remains flooded in rainy season, caused lots of destruction to life and property (Prasad 2013:110).

The refusal by the successive Bangladeshi regimes to own them and non-grant of Citizenship status by the Indian government in more than five decades of their stay in Arunachal Pradesh is what has made the Chakma *Stateless* people with no access to any civil or political rights whatsoever (Singh 2010:124). The withdrawal of basic amenities like employment opportunities, termination of trade licence and confiscation of ration cards made it quite difficult for the refugee to survive (Prasad 2007:1377).

Constructing the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’

In some parts of the northeast, the issue of ethnic identity assertion is related to migration that resulted in a sense of exclusion. This region since Independence witnessed migration of Bangladeshis, Nepalese and migrant workers from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ syndrome crippled the social, political, economic and cultural life of the tribal communities (Bijukumar 2013: 28). As a foreigners, they are often treated as outsider by the local population and language barriers further deepen the divided between them (Sengupta 2008).

The Chakma ethnic group are the most marginalised and excluded section of population in the state. They have lacked a voice of their own and many a times they remain invisible. By and large, they remain outside the public “consciousness” or “imagination”, experiencing a high degree of alienation, marginalisation and exclusion from the larger society. For the Chakma immigrant’s life in Arunachal Pradesh is characterized by lack of opportunities for employment, education, health care, clean water supply etc.

The continued discrimination, domination and harassment faced by the Chakma immigrants over the years have contributed to the evolution of Chakma ethnic consciousness. Their ethnicity has led to development of ethnic identity consciousness and resulted in the growth of ethnic conflicts between them and other tribal groups in the state. The first problem faced by the Chakma ethnic group pertains to be their ethnic identity, because of their immigrant status; the host community have entitled them as ‘refugee’ ‘foreigners’ or ‘illegal migrants’ or ‘aliens’. The relationship between the Chakmas and other tribal groups is presently classified as “us” and “them”, “we” and “they”, and “in -group” and “out-group”, “dominant” and “minority” and “Tribal and Non-Tribal”. Consciousness of distinctiveness in terms of

ethnic differences among Chakmas and other tribal groups is playing an important part in the emergence of ethnic sentiments. Other tribal groups popularly view the Chakmas as 'immigrant group', whose cultural moorings and ethnic make-up is different from them. Further, Other tribal groups believed that ethno- religious affinity in itself cannot be the basis for ethnic intermixing of people (Singh 2010: 195).

Inter-ethnic relationship

At the time of my fieldwork, most Chakma migrants appeared to have adjusted to life in exile, observing everyday life processes to varying degrees of success. But beyond surface observations, their relationship with life in Arunachal Pradesh is far from certain.

An elder respondent of M'pen village in Changlang district explaining the relationship between them in their early days of their settlement.

When we first came here the local people like the Khamptis, Singphos and even Tangsas were very good to us. We had learnt the local language and connected with them emotionally. At our marriages and other celebrations Singphos and Tangsas were invited they would come with their families and friends. Marriages have taken place between the Chakmas and other tribal groups; we still have. We were invited for their celebrations; we used to invite them for the same. Such practices lead to development of close relationship between us. During Agriculture season especially in harvesting seasons they would employ us to work in their field and provided lunch and local wine. They would appreciate our work and pay us in cash and kind. We were also glade to work in their field".

Another elder respondent of Bordumsa also shares similar view about their ethno-religious affinities, "Our relations with Singphos have been very good for long period of time, and they visit our village in Buddha Purnima which is celebrated in the month of May and participate and rejoice with us in name of Buddha. We also reciprocate in the same manner. We have learnt the local language well and mixed with the other tribal groups intimately during our prolong period of the stay. Such commonalities in terms of religion and ethnicity have led to greater understanding and mutual respect for each other. We wanted such practices to grow and bloom without being influenced by external factors such as politics, religion, ethnicity etc., but in recent past politics have taken toil over it and turned it the other way around".

It was admitted by the most of the member of other tribal groups that Chakmas are hardworking and have contributed to the economic development of Arunachal Pradesh in many ways. Due to dint of their hard work, over a period of time, they have become main suppliers of vegetables and fruits in

the areas of their settlements. The host society also search for the Chakma labour for jungle cutting, taming elephant, hire them to work in their field in exchange for cash or kind. The Chakmas are relatively more skilled in agriculture than other tribal groups. It was found during the fieldwork that the educated Khampti youth of Namsi district who have job in town hire Chakmas to cultivate their land and farms. This necessitated the localized mutual dependence as well as enmity between the host community and immigrant group. On other hand, they oppose them as encroachers on their land, resources and employment and on the other hand, their low wages have become a vested interest with contractor and agriculturist. The Chakma ethnic group and other tribal groups in their settlement areas continued to remained as identifiable cultural groups and suffer from the loss of sense of belonging and lack of self-fulfilment.

Reasons for Prohibiting Permanent Settlement of Chakma

T.K. Oommen points to several cases where the original inhabitants of a territory became a minority group. He uses the term 'ethnification' of nationals to refer to such minoritisation of a group. Tripura, a neighbouring state of Assam, was engulfed by Bengalis migrants following the partition riots, and now the Bengali-speaking people constitute the majority population. The tribal people in Tripura are turned into a minority group (Oommen 2002: 172). The most common threat-perception of the Other tribal groups emanates from the fast-growing population size of the Chakmas in the state. It is estimated that nearly 35000 Chakmas were settled in the state as refugees and over the period of five decades their population is approximately 1, 00,000. Looking at such phenomenal growth, other tribal groups fear that Arunachal Pradesh would turn into another Tripura; a situation in which the immigrant population has established its hegemony (Singh 2010:17). The huge population of Chakmas settled in Arunachal Pradesh has created a sense of insecurity in the minds of the other tribal groups in the areas of their settlement. The Chakma ethnic group no longer clamour for their homeland (origin) and are determine to stay in the areas they have made homes. On the contrary, the other tribal group and All Arunachal Pradesh Student Union (AAPSU) have raised their voice against the Central Government's decision to settle Chakma ethnic group in their land permanently, fearing that it may change the demography of the state and may soon pose serious threat to their identity and culture. With such constant oppositions from all sections of the society, the Chakmas in Arunachal Pradesh find themselves in the midst of uncertainty and hopelessness (Kamduk 2023: 38).

According to the oppositional approach, ethnic groups are viewed as persistent identity systems. Examples such as the Jews, Irish, Welsh and the various tribal groups in the north-east come to mind. They have persisted

over long periods of time despite adverse circumstances. These groups have deep ineffable affective importance for their members. What, however, sustains and accentuates such an importance is the oppositional process. The sociocultural, economic and political opposition experienced by a group from the other, usually dominant groups, is direct proportion to the amount of opposition encountered by the group, the greater the opposition, the greater the degree of solidarity and conversely, the lesser the amount of opposition, the lesser the degree of solidarity(Kumar 2018: 6-7). Chakmas have come to constitute as one of such ethnic groups who have been socially excluded from social services, welfare programmes, materially excluded from land, security networks, political choice etc., for a very long period of time. The non-grant of Citizenship status by the Indian Government is the major cause of the Chakma unrest in the State, as they perceive that their political status in society is in jeopardy without such attendant rights. They have a feeling that they have not been given due status regardless of sharing a common homeland along with common bonds of ethnicity and religion with other tribal groups in the state. Also, the executive actions taken against Chakma ethnic group in terms of withdrawal of basic facilities like ration cards, employment opportunities and legislative steps including passing of resolutions in the legislative assembly against their settlement in the state are clear indications of its intent of not considering the Chakmas as one of the natives or tribal communities (Bath 2023:16). The continued discrimination, domination and harassment faced by Chakmas over the years have contributed to the evolution of Chakma ethnic consciousness which resulted in the growth of ethnic conflicts between them and other tribal groups in the state.

Keeping this in mind, let us try to understand why the other tribal groups are vehemently opposing the idea of permanent settlement of the Chakma ethnic group is

1. Protected nature of State

The settlement of Chakma ethnic group in Arunachal Pradesh is variously viewed by the other tribal groups as 'unilateral', 'arbitrary', 'illegal' and 'unjustified'. The shelter provided by the Central Government of India is vehemently criticized by the local people of the state. Deepak K. Singh also argued that it was a historic mistake to provide shelter to the Chakma refugees by the Central Government (Singh 2010). While reacting to Union Government's arbitrary decision of settling the Chakmas in the state, most of the interviewees and All Arunachal Pradesh Students Union(AAPSU) members pointed out to the contradiction emanating from such settlement in a state which enjoys protection under various acts such as the Bengali Eastern Frontier Regulation Act, 1873, the Chin Hill Act 1896; the Sixth Scheduled of the Constitution, ILP and host of local customary conventions widely prevalent

and upheld by the people of different ethnic communities in the state, since the pre-independence period. These provisions have become important tool to provide special protection to indigenous people of the state. Under provisions of these regulations, non-tribals or outsiders are debarred from entering into a notified hill territory without ILP and disallow to own any piece of land or develop any permanent stake in the state. And it further empowered the State Government to extern any person, if his or her presence is considered to be harmful to the local interest. AAPSU points out that the Indian Government violated the legal provisions such as “Inner Line Regulation” in NEFA, which prohibit people from outside Arunachal Pradesh from even entering the state.

II. Land Question

As Fernandes argues that “given their symbiotic relationship with the land and the close link between natural resources and culture, the affected ethnic groups view the land shortage also as an attack on their identity” (Fernandes 2004:610). Other tribal groups perceived that - their presence is causing ‘irreparable damage’ to the fragile ecology of Arunachal Pradesh-known for being one of the 10 global ‘hotspots’ of biodiversity and for its fragile mountain eco-system (Singh 2010:146). Numerous instances of large-scale encroachment of reserved forest land and illegal felling of trees are cited by the State Government in support of its contention against the Chakma settlement in the state. Initially in 1964, the Chakma ethnic groups were allotted a fixed area for their homesteads and cultivation. Gradually their numbers spilled over the adjacent lands belonging to the indigenous tribal group. In Miao subdivision a committee constituted by the State Government found an area of some 872 hectares encroached upon by 788 Chakma families. The report further noted that the encroachers were indulging in criminal and illegal activities (Saikia 1994:3311-3312).

In the Namdapha National Forest, the Chakmas have settled there and destroyed the forest for jhum cultivation. The government officers had evicted them which had led to ethnic conflict between them in the past. The AAPSU asserts that its movement against the Chakmas is to protect their right over land, forest and water resource in Arunachal Pradesh (Eastern Panorama, October 1994: 1-3).

III. The Fear of Losing of Employment in Government Sector and Other Sphere

Economic factor also appeared to be an important determinant of the conflict between the Chakmas and the Other tribal groups. The leaders of Other tribal groups believed that the denial of Citizenship to the Chakmas

would solve the unemployment problem to some extent. The fear of losing of employment opportunities in the state is more acute among the educated youth. There is no private sector or industries where the educated youth could get employed. In such conditions the government job is the only avenue left among the educated youth, where they could find employment. In such a stiff competition situation the youth belonging to Other tribal group cannot wish to share the job opportunities with them.

The Chakmas fitted admirably and became critical actors in the tremendous expansion of town in their areas of settlements. In Diyun-Bordumsa, Miao, Chowkham area, the Chakmas are a force to be reckoned with, not just because of their number but because they are hardworking and dominate the local economy. Youths belonging to Other tribal groups with some education do not take up manual jobs, partly due to unrealistic expectations ie look down up on manual work. They work everywhere where the youth of Other tribal groups would not think of even venturing into; be it running the vegetable markets, work in paddy fields as hired labourers or as household helpers. They grow rice and wheat in the fertile low-lying areas of Miao Subdivision and cash crops like Maize, ginger, chilly, beans and other vegetables products in the uplands. They are also the main suppliers of agricultural products in Miao and other towns in Changlang district. The growth of vegetable markets has also been noticed even in the interior places especially around the area occupied by them.

As Arunachal Pradesh faces a labour shortage, certain sections of Other tribal groups also encouraged immigrants by providing them shelter, land for settlement and cultivation. Local contractors and businessmen also prefer to engage Chakma immigrants as they provide cheap and skilled labour force. On the contrary, the Other tribal groups often allege that the avenues for gainful employment among low-skilled job are shrinking due to continued presence of low-skilled Chakmas workers. Over the years, on the whole, it is observed that the Chakmas have more successful economic pursuits despite limited fortuity.

IV. A sense of insecurity due to presence of large number of Chakma

The local tribesmen accused the Chakmas of all sort of crimes like destroying the environment by mercilessly felling trees, poaching Elephant for ivory, smuggling, armed robbery and murder (Pulu 2014:120). Social offences and crimes like theft, burglary and forgery became very common with the settlement of the Chakma ethnic group. As reported by the respondent belonging to other tribal groups number of incidents of crimes such as jail breaking, theft, murder, rape etc became very common with the settlement of Chakma ethnic group. Chakmas alleged involvement in 'criminal' and 'anti-

national' activities were perceived by the State Government, as yet another ground for the latter's continuing opposition to their permanent settlement in state. The Chakmas are said to covertly engage in illegal timber business in Changlang and its neighbouring Namsai district. Where such is their clout that local people fear to enter (Sikaia 1994: 3312). The migrants from the CHT were skilled in making country-made gun and pistol and have carved out enclaves in Namsai and Changlang District. The entire community are said to believe to be engaged in these prohibited activities according to the local administration. Moreover, the Chakmas are taught to be self-centred, hostile, and notorious and have remarkable ethnocentric attitude. The other tribal groups associated these harmful changes in their social and economic environment with the arrival of the immigrant Chakma ethnic group.

Ethnic Conflict

The concept of conflict has drastically changed in the recent times. It is no more between the invader and the invaded, but between the native and the migrants. It is the settlement, which begins peacefully by stray migration of a handful of people in batches over untrodden land that later ignites the tension (Oinam 2003: 2035). Movement against the anti-foreigner movement in Arunachal Pradesh has also been seen in ethnic context by the scholar Deepak K. Singh in his book 'Stateless in South Asia: The Chakmas between Bangladesh and India'. Singh argues that, "The genesis of the anti-foreigners (read Chakmas) movement in Arunachal Pradesh can be located in the recent past. Although voices of protests against outsiders have been raised from time to time in the past, it was only in the early 1980s that the issue of illegal infiltration of Chakmas started attracting public attention in a significant way and was widely covered in the media. Singh further observes that in Arunachal Pradesh the movement against 'the Chakma refugees, has always been on the top of the agenda of All Arunachal Pradesh Student Union body since the early 1970s'. For Singh, "this is particularly significant in the light of the fact that this was a period in which the anti-foreigners' issue in North-East India had not yet become part of the popular discourse (Singh 2010). H. Srikanth in his article, "Resolving Ethnic Conflicts in the North East: Need for Radical Civic Forums", has stated that, "The outsiders are generally thought to be migrants and illegal migrants from both domestic as well as neighbouring countries. Various ethnic communities contend that the outsiders are the root cause of their problems and sufferings. Hence, they demanded deportation and denial of Citizenship to those outsiders. In this regard the Arunachalee opposition for granting Citizenship for the Chakmas, the Khasis' assault on the Bengali and the Nepalese and the Bodos; attack on the Adivasi and the Bengalis Muslims are indicative of such ethnic movements (Srikanth 2005).

The settlement of Chakmas in the state has added to the plurality of society but has also brought ethnic conflict to many areas. Tensions occasionally develop over land boundaries, resources, and cattle, which sometimes flare up into incidents of violence. For instance, a land dispute occurred between the Chakmas and the Singphos at M-Pen in the Changlang district on April 9, 2010. The clash was over 60 acres of land occupied by five Chakma families, who had developed it into a homestead and practiced settled cultivation over time. The Chakmas claimed the land belonged to them due to 25 years of occupation and alleged that it was allotted to them by the State Government, giving them a legal right to it. Conversely, the Singphos claimed the land was given to the Chakmas only for sharecropping and clearing the forest. Consequently, both communities fought over the same natural resources and geographical area, resulting in violence against and the eviction of the Chakmas.

To safeguard the interest of its people, the AAPSU launched a number of agitations against the Chakmas in the recent past. The incident of another ethnic conflict also took place between the Chakmas and Other Tribal Groups in the late 1980s, when the Chakma population started asserting their political rights with various other demands such as reservation of job for the Chakma ethnic group, inclusion of them in welfare services under Public Distribution System (PDS), Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNERGA), Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) scheme a housing programme of Govt. to allot shelter to BPL families etc.

Also, in 2015, the Supreme Court had directed the Centre and Arunachal Pradesh Government to grant Citizenship to Chakma within three months, to those Chakmas who had migrated from Bangladesh in 1964-69, saying they cannot be discriminated in any manner. The verdict was received with huge backlash and disruption of the normal life. There was total shutdown apart from violent reactions from people of the state (Times of India September 20:2015). In a press release, AAPSU termed the order as arbitrary and stated that "AAPSU will fight tooth and nail against the verdict and it wants all the stakeholders of the state cutting across party line to openly disapprove this unacceptable verdict of the apex court of the country (The Arunachal Times September 21, 2015). The Arunachal Pradesh government approached the apex court to review its order but in vain. After the Supreme Court rejection, both the central and state government have started consultation to find a solution to the issue (The Hindu September 23, 2015).

When the anti-foreigner movement swept the state, the Arunachal Pradesh Government were forced to withdraw all the facilities from them. In 1980, the State Government banned the employment opportunities for the

Chakmas. It stopped issuing trade licenses to members of the community. Furthermore, all trade licenses issued to them were seized in 1994. On February 21, 1992 a full year prior to elections to the Arunachal Pradesh State Assembly yet another circular was signed by Circular officer withdrawing all facilities under the PDS from them (Hindustan Times, 14 November 1996). Arunachal Pradesh Government decided not to issue ration cards to the Chakmas with effect from 1 November 1991 and those already issued, were to be surrendered immediately. Further they started dismantling the basic social and economic infrastructure in the Chakma settlement areas. The AAPSU took up various steps to drive the Chakmas away from the state like deletion of their names from the voter's list, questioning the census report, burning up Chakma villages in Diyun, M pen and Kokila areas. In 1982, AAPSU launched a campaign demanding not to give admission to the Chakma students in the schools and colleges. This effectively curtailed their right to education. schools built by the Chakmas using local community resources were closed down or destroyed. Thus, the Chakmas in the state are hopelessness and uncertainty due to denial of basic facilities and amenities such as education, healthcare facilities, employment and trade licenses withdrawn by the state government have not been restored. Thus, the context of oppositional process becomes clear in such cases. As a result, the socio-economic and political conditions of Chakmas continue to remain unsatisfactory. The ethnic rivalry seems to have both sharpened the sense of identity with one's own community and reduced empathy and fellow-feeling between members of Chakmas and other tribal groups.

Conclusion

Ever since the partition of the Indian subcontinent and the subsequent formation of East Pakistan (later Bangladesh), nationals such as the Chakmas have come to Arunachal Pradesh, with or without valid documents. The permanent settlement of Chakma migrant group has generated a range of socio-political, economic, and communal tensions. To safeguard the interest of its people, the AAPSU launched a number of agitations against the Chakma immigrants in the recent past. The withdrawal of basic facilities, such as ration cards and employment opportunities, clearly indicates the support of the state government towards the AAPSU and Civil society. On the other hand, the Chakmas immigrants began to seem themselves as people deeply wronged and marginalized. These events accentuated the sense of opposition among the Chakmas towards the other tribal group in the state. This led to intensification of ethnic sentiments, which led to formation of number of ethnic based organization among the Chakma immigrants. Furthermore, the ethnic conflict between them and other tribes in the state has become a major obstacle to the peaceful coexistence and well-being of the people in the region.

Over the years, this conflict has escalated mistrust and tension between the Chakma settlers and other tribal groups. There is a strong connection between the immigration and the communal unrest in Arunachal Pradesh. Thus, both rising expectations and a sense of injustice and discrimination have contributed to the rising ethnic consciousness among the Chakmas. A democratic solution to the problem must be sought—one that satisfies the local tribal groups while taking into full consideration the humanitarian and legal rights of the Chakma residents in the state.”

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**LABOUR AND THEIR LIFEWORLDS:
A STUDY OF ORAON TRIBAL WOMEN'S SEASONAL
MIGRATION AND LIFE STRATEGIES IN
THE BRICK KILNS OF BIHAR, INDIA**

Abstract

This study adopts a lens of life-course principles to examine the experiences and trajectories of seasonal migration of Oraon tribal women from the Latehar district of Jharkhand to brick kilns in the Kaimur district of Bihar. By focusing on historical time and place, timing of lives, linked lives, and human agency, the study seeks to investigate how depeasantisation, debt bondage, and the other agrarian conditions force Oraon women to seek opportunities in distant brick kilns. By employing the case study and survey method, this study selected 40 Oraon tribal migrants working as Nakasi worker across four selected brick kilns. The study addresses three research questions: (1) How do the structural conditions of the agrarian transition shape the migration journey of Oraon women at different life stages? (2) What is the role of the debt and local intermediaries in producing the new forms of bondage in brick kiln industry? (3) How do Oraon women exercise their agency? The study shows that migration of tribal women operates as a household survival strategy and a mechanism of semi-proletarianization where the wages are only meant for survival. Their transition from cultivators to “muddy labour” is shaped by diverse systems of caste, gender, debt, and agrarian decline. The advance payment (peshgi) system and the sardar-mediated recruitment process create new forms of bondage that bind workers across seasons. Yet within these structural constraints, the women exercise forms of agency through negotiation and coping strategies. By demonstrating the core value of integrating structural and life course principles, this study also contributes to debates on India's agrarian transformation by foregrounding the lived experiences of tribal women within broader political-economic processes.

Keywords: *Muddy labour, Oraon Tribal Women, Seasonal Migration, Livelihood Strategies, Brick Kilns.*

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Introduction

Every winter, when the paddy has been harvested and the fields of Latehar lie fallow, hundreds of Oraon tribal women along with their families leave their homes in Jharkhand and choose to sell their labour in the brick kilns of Kaimur district in Bihar.

They opted brick kiln as a destination to sell their labour not because they wish to, but because they have no option. Their local ecology, including agrarian land is degraded, seasonally fragmented, depleted and often failed to feed their families during the lean season. Crops failure, out of pocket expenditure due to health and family emergency press them to sell their labour and therefore they follow the *sardars*¹.

In the era of late capitalism, migration in varied forms became a worldwide phenomenon. It also carries wide-ranging social, economic, and political consequences. People from class (individually, family or community) move in pursuit of improved opportunities and a better quality of life. At its core, migration reflects a deeply human impulse: the desire to seek out new possibilities to address the hardship of the life. So far, this journey has hardly straightforward. Those who migrates often face cultural barriers, discrimination, and the unsettling prospect of losing their sense of identity (Sundari, 2007; Kishore and Kiran, 2013).

Among tribal populations, migration is frequently driven by pressing socio-economic realities such as unequal land distribution, scarce resources, limited employment options, and debt. In lean season, these conditions push them to leave their ancestral homelands in search of survival elsewhere (Rozelle et al., 1999; Gowda and Shivashankar, 2007; Bagchi and Majumdar, 2011). So, there is a need to understand the intersecting socio-economic realities through the domain of the sociology of migration.

Earlier research shows that the social and cultural contexts of migration often focus on the areas where migrants move (Appadurai, 1996) or from where migration takes place (Gardner, 1995. Osella and Osella 2000, 2003). However, the reasons behind people's decisions to migrate need to be explored in depth. These all came under the purview of the sociology of migration which has identified several primary factors that drive the phenomenon of migration. Several major causes of migration have been identified in the literature dealing with the study of migration in sociology. These reasons include drought, crop failure, lack of non-farm employment options, inadequate availability of basic amenities in rural areas, problems associated with corruption, and inadequate representation of tribal communities (Deshingkar & Start, 2003).

Season migration is often interpreted within the context of a broader system associated with capitalist production, resulting in exploitation

and oppression (Breman 1985, 1996; Mukherji 1985; Standing 1985). This understanding frequently blurs the distinction between the role of migration within the broader societal structure and the standpoint of migrants. Through their migration to urban areas, they can access improved employment opportunities and higher wages, thereby bolstering their economic stability (Yadav, 2020). This study also pointed out that seasonal migration serves as one of the major visible manifestations of rural poverty and the absence of the development plans and policies. Here, it is important to discuss the nature of the migration, its potentialities associated with upward mobility. Earlier studies show that migration became a strategic means for the individual, family or community to escape from the disadvantageous condition of marginality (Yadav, 2020; (McDowell & De Haan, 1997).

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the life courses and lived experiences of female seasonal migrant's labour at the brick kilns of the Kaimur district of Bihar, India. This research design is theoretically informed by the life course paradigm of Elder, lifeworld of Ponti and colonization of lifeworld by Habermas. Elder (1994) mentioned that life-course paradigm is useful to understand and capture the biographical complexity and subjective meanings by focusing on the human lives and changing society. Ponti (1962) concept of lifeworld is used to understand the perception and experiences and colonization of lifeworld (Habermas, 1987) is useful to discuss the way modern capitalist system stabilizes itself by altering the communicative fabrics of the migrant labourers. In this present study the focus is on the female migrant workers who are involved in Nikasi work at Brick Kiln. Four brick kilns are selected through purposive sampling where Oraon women are engaged in Nikasi work. This study has chosen one case and one FGD for in-depth investigation. The methods used in this study is interview, FGD and case study method. Apart from this, this study also surveyed 70 individuals (including households) from the Oraon tribe engaged in Brick kiln to understand the static data. 40 out of 70 individuals only expressed their willingness to participate in this study. Consent was properly taken and also make them aware about the aims of the study.

The Underpinning of the Phenomenon

Figure 1 seeks to show how the lack of social capital and advance in form of debt forced the Oraon tribal women to look for work in Brick kiln. Mainly the Oraon women prefer to choose the Nikasi a low skilled work. Through the above conceptual underpinning, we try to show the shift from traditional agriculture-based livelihoods to labour in brick kilns, leading to a process of depeasantization. Economic distress and the need for subsistence drive families to decide whether to migrate for labour. This decision is influenced by both family compulsions and personal choices of women. This seasonal

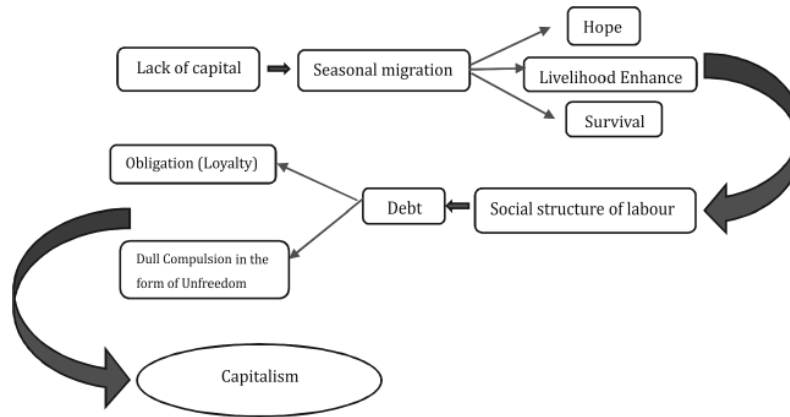


Figure 1: Author's own compilation

migration of Oraon women is driven by socio-cultural, economic, and credit-complex factors that are deeply rooted in historical and structural contexts. Their labour in brick kilns acts as a flexible means of capital accumulation and labour exploitation, creating new types of labour relations and human capital. Through this process, new forms of bondage and unfreedom, and new ways of capital accumulation emerge. This study will discuss the relationship between seasonal migration of women, labour exploitation, and socio-economic factors which can be elucidated in the line of life course principles. In next section, we will discuss the organisational form of brick kiln.

The Brick Kiln Organization

The brick kiln industry in India is primarily based on rural migrant labour, a neglected section of society with health, social, and economic issues. Workers migrate from their native villages during October to May to build temporary huts at the kiln site. 92% of the workers are migrants, while 8% are locals. Work allocation is based on work from different states, with labour being classified into four categories (Banerjie, 2016; Kaji, 2019).

Table 1: Worker Labourers Classification and nature of work in Brick Kiln

Type of Worker	Nature of Work
Pathera labourers	Pathera involves preparing clay, moulding bricks, and drying them, typically done by a husband and wife, who are exclusively involved in the process.
Bharai labourers	The labourers who carry unbaked bricks to kilns on mules or Rehdi
Jalai labourers	To prevent the bricks from burning, the kiln must be kept at a constant temperature.
Nikasi labourers	Bricks are extracted from the kiln and loaded onto a bullock cart for transportation.

Table compiled by Author.

This study focused primarily on nikasi labourers. At the field site, Oraon tribal communities particularly women were found working in brick kilns. They have been hired informally by the recruiter, mainly Sardar, sometimes mediated by the social capital, kin, and relatives. The recruitment of labor in these kilns follows a rigid four-tier hierarchy. At the top, the owner popularly known as Seth followed by contractors called Sardar; then supervisors also known as Thikedars; and finally the labourers themselves, known as Dadan. Contractors bring migrant labourers to the kilns, while supervisors keep a close watch over their daily work and output. Because power is concentrated at every level of this chain, breaking free from such bonded arrangements remains extremely difficult for the labourers trapped within it (Panda & Mishra, 2018). The following table shows the description of recruitment in Brick kilns in study area.

Table 2: Recruiters to the Brick Kilns

Recruiter to the Brick Kilns	Migrants
Kiln Owner	04
Broker/ Contractor	36
Total	40

Source: Interview by author Field Survey.

The vast majority of labourers, 36 out of 40, were recruited through brokers or contractors (commonly known as Sardars), and only 4 were directly recruited by the kiln owners themselves.

Table 3: Category Wise Distribution of Sampled Respondents on Migration status, Nature of work, Debt status, and Recruitment status

Respondents Category	No.	Migration status	Nature of work	Debt status	Recruitment status
Marginal land	20	Migrants	Nikasi labourers	n=13	Broker & social network
Tenants (dependent on others land)	07	Migrants	Nikasi labourers	n= 10	Broker & social network
Landless labourers	13	Migrants	Nikasi labourers	n= 13	Broker & social network
Total	40	40	40	36	

Source: Field Survey, 2023

The following table delineates the category wise distribution of respondents on the nature of migration, debt, work and recruitment. Out of 40 labourers, 36 has taken debt which shows the debt is prevailing across all the category. The participants are mainly from the three categories marginal

landholders, tenant and landless labourers and result also shows that all the respondent were recruited from the social networks and brokers.

Lifeworld of Oraon Tribal Women Labourers

This section discusses the lifeworld of the Oraon tribal women. Lifeworld refers to a social world which is subjectively experienced and communicated. It is a world represented by the every day stock of knowledge which is culturally transmitted for interpretation. This section seeks to understand the shared meaning, everyday routine and lived experience of the Oraon tribal women through which these communities make sense of their existence. As discussed in earlier section, the lifeworld of these migrant women is shaped by the debt, ecological degradation, and dull compulsion. These are the everyday tyranny of their life. Discussing Habermas (1987) is important here, he stated that market logics, modern rational structure progressively colonized the lifeworld. It eroded the meaning, cohesion, and autonomy of the everyday life. In the field area, their colonisation can be easily observed. The traditional lifeworld of these communities is fundamentally aligned with place-based rituals and organised around agriculture and forestry; however, after the state formation, and capitalist penetration, their social life and egalitarianism began to be subjugated. Progressive colonisation of the lifeworld by the systematic imperatives has been started, and it is continuously shaping the lifeworld of the tribal community. Tribal areas of Jharkhand is agriculturally a dry, mono-crop area, and ecological degradation, the decline in landholdings and capitalist penetration induced scarcity has pushed tribal families toward seasonal migration. Once their reciprocity and egalitarianism dissolve, they become partially subjugated, but the complete subjugation in the form of colonisation prevails as a cultural field in brick kilns.

In brick kiln, their days are not guided by the communal rhythms but the target sets by the thekedar. During a conversation at the site, one female labourer captured this displacement with quiet meticulousness: *“At home, the work is hard, but it is ours. Here, we work more than in the house, but even the money goes in the Malik’s name. We are just hands.”* The shift from “ours” to “just hands” shows the lifeworld colonisation aptly described by Habermas as the replacement of meaning-laden, self-directed labour with anonymous productive function under another’s authority. The lifeworld of these women is an embodied one. Phenomenologically, their experience of the kiln is inseparable from their physical selves which consists the repetitive motion of moulding bricks, the heat of the firing zone, the dust that settles in the lungs, the tiredness that accumulates without rest days. Merleau-Ponty (1962) aptly mentioned that the body is not merely an instrument but the very medium of experience finds urgent expression here. These women do not simply *have* bodies that labour; their sense of time, possibility, and selfhood is

constituted through that labour. It shows that the lifeworld of Oraon women at the kiln needs to be understood through the totality of enclosure. The kiln is not just a worksite. It is a cultural space in which the boundaries between labor and domesticity entirely dissolve. Brick kiln became a site carries a totality of lived experience of the tribal community in which productive work and familial life are interwoven and became a single, shared existence.

Debt Bondage in the Brick Kiln Industry of Bihar

This section discusses how debt bondage in the brick kilns of Bihar induces exclusion. Debt here is not a financial number or loan, but it accelerates the process of exclusion that pushes the nikasi workers to the condition of marginality. Here, debt can be understood as a cumulative disadvantage. It is a process that denies the entitlement and accessibility of these workers. Through a case study, this study attempts to show how debt penetrates the lifeworlds of the nikasi labourers. Debt bondage is not merely economic exploitation; it is something more, where debt colonizes and invades the social space of the nikasi labourers. This section examines the historical context and temporal aspects, the timing of life events, the interconnectedness of lives and familial strategies, and the role of human agency in interpreting the case.

Case 1

This case is of Dhanwanti Oraon, age 44, female, who belonged to the nikasi labour group. She stated that for the past five years, I have lived and worked in a brick kiln. I have no option to leave it. Indeed, it is also far from my village in Jharkhand and a last option for our survival. I came here after taking peshgi, advance money for the fulfilment of daily expenses and other needs. Now that advance follows us every season: the *malik* cuts it from our wages, keeps the accounts in his book, and we keep coming every year, trying to clear the debt. What we get after selling the labour is very less amounts, and it never matches the hours we put in. We live in a temporary hut beside the kiln, with smoke, dust, and muddy ground all around us.

Still, we return every year. In Latehar, there is no work, even getting the casual daily wage work is uncertain. Some days there is no work at all. Here, in the brick kiln, the piece-rate system and continuous work mean that if my family and I push ourselves, we can save a little. At the kiln, we survive not only through our labour but through each other. In the kiln, our migrant community gives us courage to endure and to keep anticipating that our lives will be different.

The above case shows how the debt bondage and advances create a compulsion in form of unfreedom and bondage. The long hours of 12-16 hours,

poor working conditions, slum like housing with less amenities, health risks are the features of the brick kiln. Uncertainty at village work is also a reason for the migrant worker to choose kilns and it get additionally supplement by the debt, advances and their aspiration to save small amounts. Her narration places “her voice” at the center while aligning with documented patterns of bonded brick-kiln migration, hardship, constrained choice, and hope for mobility. The dispossession and condition of marginality at brick kiln also generates a sense of community, as worker from similar lived situation share similar kind of false consciousness.

The above discussed case is based on the life course principle. This principle mainly includes the key element such as historical time and place, timing of life events, linked lives and family strategies and human agency. Taking account of the historical time and place, Dhanwanti’s life reveals the condition of rural poverty, lack of income generation opportunities, landlessness and uncomplimentary ecological conditions forced families into informal, bonded kiln work. Decline of agricultural surplus and values along with inadequate social welfare scheme and protection make debts or advances from kiln owner as a one of the few significant accessible credit sources. The other key element is timing of life events. The case shows that entry into kiln work occurs often after marriage when the accountability and needs increase. The family member also helps in brick associated tasks which can also be understood as attached labour (Jodhka, 1994). This kind of labour attachment shapes future work trajectories and limit the mobility. The other one is the linked lives and family strategies. The decision of migration in case of Dhanwanti is a household survival strategy. It shows that entire family migrates to brick kiln and parent deliberately involve children in work to get more payment even they express strong aspirations for intergenerational mobility. The other one under the discussion of life course principle is human agency under constraint. From a life course view, her choice of kiln work is an example of agency within the structural constraints. It shows that worker who engaged in brick kiln actively compare all the options. The option ranging from local casual labour, agriculture, government schemes, or kiln. The selection of the kiln as a last option which is ascended due to dull compulsion and survival strategy. It permits them for thinking about some futuristic saving and plan for debt repayment, despite they are aware about the associated risk and working conditions. The above case is not an individual biography, but it is an example of how the whole life courses of the migrant workers are organized around debt, migration, family obligations and agency within the structural constraints.

Debt as insurance and Unfreedom: A discussion

Debt can be understood as a kind of social relationship. It is embedded in the social relation of production. This section examines how debt functions

as an instrument of control, why it continues, and what it means for the lives of Oraon families engaged in nikasi work. Debt in form of advance can be framed as incentives designed to foster a productive labour force even in conditions that are very unpleasant and dangerous. The above discussed case of Dhanwanti shows that brick kiln became one of the sites where debt as a crucial source of credit for migrant labourer. The debt as advance is not online an incentive but it also has contradiction. It serves dual purposes. In the case of the labourer, it addresses their immediate need such as a medical emergency, ceremonial cost or the cost of a funeral. For the kiln owner, it secures a cycle of obedient, immobile workforce for the seasonal time of brick kiln. The contradiction is due to the productive force which makes debt as a kind of social relation of production. Kiln owner and its associated agencies and the labourer both parties enter the arrangement knowingly, yet the symbolism of the power between them is asymmetrical. In Weberian terms, debt as a transaction operates entirely outside the domain of formal rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) — there are no contracts, no standardised terms, no impersonal rules governing the exchange. What exists instead is a relationship of personalised dependence, closer to what Weber described as traditional domination, where authority rests not on codified law but on customary obligation and the patron's discretion (Bremen, 2009; Kumari, 2018).

The advance, then, functions as a form of substantive insurance for people who have been excluded from the structural mechanism of formal social protection. Wages in brick kiln are too low which did not permit saving. At the time when labourer have not any other access of the institutional credits, the kiln owner's advance becomes the only buffer between a family and catastrophe. Debt is used as a capitalist ploy, and tactics seem to be an insurance for the labourer against their needs and scarcity, but the capital has a monopoly over the conditions for the disadvantage and creates a bond in the form of unfreedom. It is measured in months of bound labour where one has to surrender their autonomy, and in the slow absorption of entire families as a workforce into a regime of productive unfreedom. Marx's concept of "dull compulsion of economic relations" finds vivid expression here: the labourer chooses bondage not because it is desirable, but because all the available possibilities and alternatives have been already foreclosed (Bremen, 2010).

In kiln, there is also a gap between the subsistence costs and actual wages. The piece work kind of the arrangement reproduces the labour dependency into coercion. Workers who fall behind on production targets or having need engaged their family members including children into the cultural field of brick kiln. It creates or manufactures a kind of bondage which can be understood as the obligation of the labourer to sell uninterrupted labour until the debt is cleared. It also produces a hereditary condition for the labourer to be engaged in brick kiln industry (Kumari, 2018).

Debt bondage is a cumulative disadvantage and it is not a single life event. Through the life course principle this study shows that debt make their life more vulnerable and their marginalities is visible in social relation of production. The debt is applied to the entire family household. Somari Oraon, a nikasi worker mentions that “Whenever we need money, they give us without papers.” (extracted from field notes).

She narrated one incidence, in previous year, my husband took an advance of ₹18,000 to settle an older debt. She does not know how much has been repaid. They do not tell anything; they just say keep working; the hisab (final count) will be at the end of the season. We keep working and also involve our children in working. Her children are out of the school during their life in brick kiln. Here, the discussion of concept timing in lives is important to understand that a childhood spent at the kiln rather than in a classroom excludes future mobility. As Somari added gently, *“we wanted him to go to school but how he can, we also need his hands here, who will take care if he goes to school. The school here is far from the kiln.”*

The narration shows that there is no exist. One who carrying the debt have to come in next season. Women who engaged in brick kiln are not independent to exit. They also have to support their husband whose name is in record book. The register carries one name for one labour role.

Phulmani, a nikasi labourer stated that: *“My husband takes the advance, my husband’s name is in the register. But I am the one making bricks from four in the morning. They don’t count my work separately.”*

Female nikasi labourers also do additional work of their husband such as loading baked bricks onto truck to enhance their saving. It shows that the adaptability of the labourer can be understood as a human agency in constrained circumstance. Labourer opted for practical choices and each choice operates within a power structure that effectively excluded them. This exclusion led marginality can be seen at the time when there is no work in kiln or at the time of closures. Without the permission of the owner, worker was not allowed to exit or seek work elsewhere. Mishra (2011) also illustrative work also showed the same happening. Waiting in brick kiln is also a social time. Sugna, an older female labourer engaged in nikasi work narrated that ‘during lean time, we wait in brick kiln. we cannot go, our waiting is aligned with their requirement.’ Malik said and we wait; we don’t have any choice when we take advance payment.

Her narration can be understood in line the principle of cumulative disadvantage where skills become kiln-specific, social ties narrow, the sense of what is possible shrinks to fit the rhythms of production and repayment. Starting from the migration which gets harden through the debts, dependency and internalised structural constraints. From taking debt, bringing and

aligning family in production sites, dropout and pulling a child from the school for surplus saving closes the door of exist. Agency exists at every stage, but it grows narrower with each step forward.

Conclusion

This study shows that the brickkiln is a site where materialism shapes the labour body and also social production of relation through debt. The brick kiln is not merely a workplace. It is a total environment whose material reality bends the life trajectories of everyone who entered into it. The materiality of the milieu such as its isolation, its rhythms, its boundaries is not a backdrop to exploitation. It is one of its instruments which accelerate the colonisation of lifeworld (Habermas, 1987). The brick kiln creates a milieu in which the only available framework for daily life is the logic of production. The enclosure is not only physical such as barriers, drying yards, mud-walled shelters but also social and psychological. The boundaries of work and home is collapsed. The labourer eats, sleep and do all the domesticated work in brick kiln; also breath the same dust, experience the muddy clay and even heat at the time of nikasi. By taking insights from the Ponty (1962) works, this study concludes that the body of the female migrant labourer is not just a body which is in the brick kiln but through their body the space of the brick kilns is perceived and given meaning. It shows that brick kiln is their lifeworld where the material conditions of kilns subjugate and colonizes their experiences and perception. This study also shows the cycle of debt is a mechanism of cumulative marginality. This study suggests that there is a need for an integrative approach that includes materialism and social structure to understand the social relations of production in the brick kiln. The brick kiln determines the life course environment of the labourer.

Note

1. Sardar here refers to the labour recruiters who arrive in their villages each autumn with advance payments that are simultaneously a lifeline and a chain

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EPISTEMIC HOOLIGANISM: DECOLONIZING COLONIAL ETHNOGRAPHIES OF MUSLIM BANJARAS

Abstract

This paper critically interrogates colonial knowledge production by examining how British administrators and anthropologists represented a marginalized community known as Muslim Banjaras in India. Through a deconstructive reading of colonial ethnographies and archival texts, the study challenges the objectivity and reliability of Western-centric epistemologies that historically essentialized and marginalized subaltern communities.

The study underscores the importance of oral narratives as vital epistemological tools that challenge colonial archives and recover subjugated knowledges. It calls upon anthropologists and social scientists to focus on oral histories, everyday lived experiences, and community memory in their research, especially when working with historically marginalized groups. Emphasizing decolonizing methodologies, the paper advocates for more reflexive, inclusive, and accountable forms of knowledge production.

By interrogating the politics of representation and dissenting voices of marginals, this paper contributes to ongoing debates around knowledge, power, and voice. It concludes by raising a critical question: Is there a need to decolonize colonial literature?

Keywords: *Epistemic violence, Muslim Banjaras, scepticism, deconstruction, marginalized, Othering*

“Where the European has trod, death seems to pursue the aboriginal”

—Charles Darwin (cited in Bauman 2004:38)

Introduction

While it is important to acknowledge the significant contributions of Western academia, it is equally essential to critically evaluate the perspectives and methodologies that are often encouraged within the social sciences. Western ideas, particularly those originating from colonial scholars, have long dominated academic discourse. Although their contributions are not to be outright dismissed, the accuracy and reliability of data collected by these thinkers warrant scrutiny. Scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have underscored the notion that knowledge is never innocent, it is invariably produced to serve interests, often aligning with the priorities of those in power¹. Despite this, there appears to be limited attention given to the reliability and validity of their findings, especially in the context of marginalized and colonized communities.

The colonial project was not merely territorial, but it was deeply epistemic. Through classification, documentation, and representation, British colonial administrators and anthropologists constructed a knowledge system that reinforced imperial domination. Among the many communities subjected to this representational violence were the Banjaras, a historically nomadic group who, when Muslim, occupied an even more precarious position in the colonial imagination. Muslim Banjaras are a community who hitherto remain unexplored. As Abdul Waheed highlights in his doctoral work, the community continues to be under-researched.²

This paper further interrogates the structural and epistemic reasons behind this neglect, raising a critical question: why has this community been persistently overlooked within both colonial and postcolonial knowledge formations?

Additionally, this paper seeks to interrogate the ways in which British colonial and anthropological literature represented Muslim Banjaras, how the knowledge about them is produced and to produce that “knowledge,” what gets left out or silenced? Why British ethnography lacks oral narratives methodology? What does the counter narrative has to offer? Does the knowledge produced about Muslim Banjaras reflect the voices and lived experiences of the community itself? Or do these narratives diverge? And if they differ, what does it tell us about the epistemic authority behind such representations?

The concept of epistemic violence, as theorized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, refers to the silencing or misrepresentation of the subaltern in dominant discourses.³ It is not merely about what is said, but about who gets to speak, and how certain groups are denied subjectivity through representational strategies. A lack of observation, discussion, and contemplation leads to violations of academic propriety and undermines the

knowledge formation process. John Dewey argues in his work, "Social as a Category," that these three elements together form the basis of the category of Social. Dewey also emphasized the importance of the category social act as a lens to maintain academic integrity.

Spivak's seminal essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" (1988) developed Michel Foucault's concept of epistemic violence to describe the systemic silencing of subaltern groups through dominant modes of knowledge production. For Spivak, colonial discourse did not merely exclude subaltern voices, but it actively constructed them as voiceless, rendering their subjectivity invisible or illegible within colonial frameworks. In the context of British India, official documents, anthropological records, and administrative categories became sites where native communities were inscribed not as speaking subjects but as objects of rule.

Focusing on two foundational colonial texts—*The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, Volume 1 (1896) by W. Crooke and *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, Volume II (1916) by R.V. Russell and Hira Lal, this study undertakes a critical deconstruction of the ways in which Muslim Banjaras were portrayed. These texts, while often cited as ethnographic records, are in fact ideological documents that encode the colonial gaze, constructing the Banjara identity in service of administrative legibility and social control. So, the paper addressed how British have perceived of this community found in various parts of India. However, most of them have settled down in the terai belt of Uttar Pradesh, stretching out from the district of Saharanpur in the west through the districts of Moradabad, Rampur, Bareilly and Pilibhit to the eastern districts of Gorakhpur and Bahraich. Bareilly is one of the biggest settlements of Muslim Banjaras.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section focuses on the theoretical frameworks used in this paper, drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's views and Edward Said's concept of Orientalism. The methodology section explains the textual and interpretive approach employed and discusses the relevance of the Banjaras' narratives.

The analysis section offers a deconstructive reading of the selected colonial texts, and finally, the discussion and conclusion reflect on the implications of these findings for contemporary sociological inquiry.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the critical insights of postcolonial theory, with specific reference to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of epistemic violence and Edward Said's critique of Orientalism. These theoretical tools

enable a deconstruction of colonial knowledge systems and reveal how representation is tied to structures of power, marginality, and exclusion.

Postcolonialism and the concept of Epistemic Violence

Post-colonialism or post-colonial theory talks about the cultural, political, social and economic consequences of colonialism and imperialism. It is an ideological response to colonialism. The use of the prefix “post” is not limited to describe the era after colonialism, but to question and rethink the reliability and authenticity of knowledge produced about East as addressed by Edward Said. The discourse is relevant to the question of power structures that exist in epistemology and therefore, it talks about decolonization of literature, especially of colonial era. The concept of epistemic violence is thereby an important outcome of this discourse as it questions the reliability and validity of knowledge. The term Epistemic violence has been used in the era of contemporary social theories like postcolonialism. Many scholars have talked about epistemic violence but the very first among them was Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In 1988, in her nominal work, *Can the Subaltern Speak*, she said,

“The clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other. This project is also the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subject-ivity. It is well known that Foucault locates epistemic violence, a complete overhaul of the episteme, in the redefinition of sanity at the end of the European eighteenth century. But what if that particular redefinition was only a part of the narrative of history in Europe as well as in the colonies? What if the two projects of epistemic overhaul worked as dislocated and unacknowledged parts of a vast two-handed engine?”

Here, the main argument of Spivak is about the destruction of knowledge systems by the colonial power. Beyond physical destruction, destruction can be done in academia as well. Failing to give due credit to deserving individuals, such as writers, thinkers and authors is an act of epistemic violence. She raised critical concerns about how colonizers did not merely colonize physical territories but also dissented voices of natives and erased local ways of thinking, knowing, and understanding reality.

Orientalism – Edward Said

Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) critiques the West’s production of the “Orient” as an imagined geography, constructed through texts, art, and scholarly work. This Orient was not a real place but a discursive formation through which the West asserted its superiority. Orientalism was not only cultural stereotyping but a form of epistemological domination—a way to define and control the non-Western world by constructing its people as exotic, backward, and uncivilized.

In the context of the British colonial gaze upon Muslim Banjaras, Orientalism operated through a dual logic: first, by depicting Islam as a “foreign” and “suspect” element in India; second, by representing mobile communities like the Banjaras as inherently disorderly. The convergence of religion and mobility thus intensified their marginalization. British anthropological writings, while claiming scientific neutrality, were steeped in orientalist logic, producing Muslim Banjaras as a deviant population that required surveillance and reform.

Deconstruction as Method

Deconstruction is a critical tool used to unveil dominant meta-narratives and grand theories, allowing for a deeper understanding of marginalized perspectives and the underlying realities they obscure. Deconstruction as developed by Jacques Derrida talks about binary oppositions. It reveals how categories like “civilized or uncivilized,” “lawful or criminal,” or “settled or nomadic” are constructed not as objective realities but as ideological fictions serving the colonial project.

Postcolonial scholars believe that it is extremely crucial to deconstruct existing literature, particularly that which stems from colonial academic frameworks, and to critically interrogate the assumptions underpinning these works. Just as the colonial period witnessed an epistemic overhaul, as observed by numerous postcolonial thinkers, a similar phenomenon can be seen among the Muslim Banjaras. A critical deconstruction of the colonial works on the history and castes of the Banjaras reveals the extent to which colonial discourse has shaped knowledge production about this community.

Through deconstructing the texts *Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces* and *Central Provinces*, volume 1 (1896) by William Crooke, and *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, Volume II (1916) by R.V. Russell and Hira Lal, the paper uncovers the unstable meanings, internal contradictions, and power-laden assumptions that structure colonial representations of Muslim Banjaras. It challenges the taken-for-granted status of these texts as ethnographic truths and repositions them as instruments of epistemic violence.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in critical discourse analysis and postcolonial deconstruction. The objective is not to validate historical “facts” but to critically examine the discursive construction of the Muslim Banjara identity in colonial literature, specifically within British ethnographic and administrative texts. The methodology is

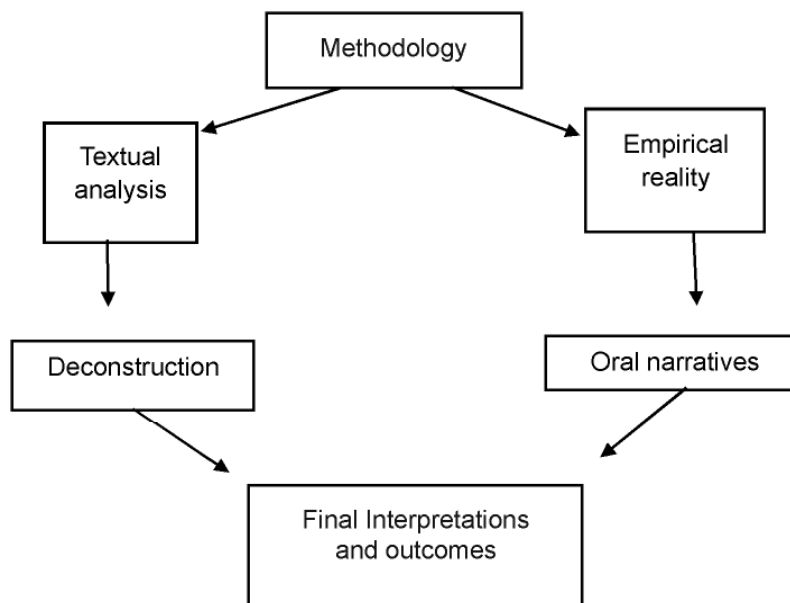
framed by a hermeneutic understanding of texts as social products that reflect and reinforce power relations, particularly in colonial contexts.

To unveil and deconstruct existing colonial ethnographies, it is essential to undertake a close and critical re-reading of these works. This process was carried out in the present study. A key limitation identified in colonial ethnographic traditions is the absence of indigenous voices, which this research seeks to address by placing those voices at the center of analysis.

The methodology is therefore divided into two parts. The first part involves textual analysis, where the selected works were systematically deconstructed to reveal the underlying colonial assumptions, discursive strategies, and silences that shaped their production. The second part employs oral narrative techniques in order to foreground indigenous perspectives that were historically marginalized. Respondents for oral narratives were identified through snowball sampling, a method that facilitates the inclusion of community members who serve as key knowledge holders.

By combining textual deconstruction with oral narratives, this methodological framework not only challenges the authority of colonial ethnographies but also re-centers indigenous knowledge systems and lived experiences within the scholarly discourse.

Below is a flow chart to understand the methodology applied in this paper.



Selection of Texts

The two primary sources for this analysis are: *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, volume I (1896) by William Crooke and *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, Volume II (1916) by R.V. Russell and Hira Lal.

These texts were chosen because they are classical examples of British colonial ethnography and are frequently cited in both colonial and postcolonial writings about Indian tribes and castes. They are representative of the broader body of knowledge produced under colonial rule that sought to classify, categorize, and control native populations.

Relevance of oral narratives

When a community or society has no written record, or it is under explored, then oral narratives technique is used. Muslim Banjaras is one such community who have no written record about them. The Muslim Banjara community is one such example, with little to no archival material available that reflects their lived realities or historical consciousness. In the absence of written records, oral testimonies serve not only as sources of cultural memory but also as vehicles for articulating indigenous perspectives.

Employing oral narratives in this study allows for the recovery and amplification of marginalized voices, which are often silenced or distorted in dominant discourses. This approach becomes particularly significant in addressing the erasure of subaltern experiences and in challenging the authority of colonial or mainstream texts that lack counter-narratives.

Selection of oral narratives and respondents

The oral narratives presented in this paper were collected during ethnographic fieldwork. Snowball sampling technique was employed to select respondents. Initial respondents were identified through personal networks, and subsequent participants were accessed through referrals provided by those already interviewed, allowing for a more organic and trust-based engagement with the community. Among the many oral narratives collected, only those that directly engaged with the central research question were carefully selected for inclusion in this paper.

Criteria for Respondent Selection

Respondents were selected based on the following criteria:

1. **Oral memory and lived experience:** Preference was given to elder members (above 60 years) who could recall community

transformations across generations and share insights absent from written records.

2. **Gender inclusivity:** Voices of both men and women were included to reflect the gendered dimensions of colonial representation, which often neglect women's perspectives.
3. **Community recognition:** Individuals recognized as oral historians, or respected elders were prioritized to ensure culturally grounded narratives.
4. **Willingness and trust:** Respondents were chosen based on their willingness to share, comfort with the researcher (aided by my familial ties), and familiarity with local cultural idioms and language.

Analysis

In tracing the historical representation of the Banjaras, this study engages with two significant colonial-era ethnographic works—Robert Vane Russell's *Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India* (1916) and William Crooke's *Tribes and Castes of the Northwestern Provinces and Oudh*. These texts have been deliberately selected not only for their detailed documentation of nomadic and tribal communities, including the Banjaras, but also because they exemplify the colonial lens through which indigenous knowledge was categorized, essentialized, and often distorted. Examining these works allows for a critical understanding of how early colonial narratives contributed to the epistemic marginalization of communities like the Muslim Banjaras and how such representations continue to influence contemporary scholarship.

Robert Vane Russell, a British civil servant and anthropologist, is known for his extensive research on the tribes and castes of Central India. His 1916 ethnographic survey remains one of the most detailed accounts of various communities' social structures, customs, and practices in early 20th-century India. However, modern scholars critique Russell's work for its colonial perspective and the potential misrepresentation or oversimplification of the communities he described.

Similarly, William Crooke's *Tribes and Castes of the Northwestern Provinces and Oudh* provide an extensive account of the communities inhabiting this region. This work remains a valuable resource for researchers, historians, and anthropologists interested in India's social and cultural history. Divided into several chapters, the book examines different tribes and castes, detailing their customs, traditions, beliefs, and social status. Crooke also contextualizes these communities within the broader historical and political transformations brought about by British colonial rule. His analysis

underscores how colonialism disrupted traditional structures, reinforced social hierarchies, and shaped perceptions of these communities in ways that continue to influence contemporary discourse.

Both works emerged from the colonial state's broader project of codifying and classifying Indian society for administrative control. They reflect a distinctly colonial gaze that sought to "fix" fluid, mobile, and hybrid identities into rigid taxonomies of caste, tribe, and religion. These colonial texts are thus approached in this study not as objective repositories of ethnographic fact, but as discursive formations that both constructed and regulated knowledge about communities like the Banjaras.

Anthropometry and the Colonial Construction of Caste: A Critique of Racialized Knowledge

In William Crooke's ethnographic writings, there are clear references to the use of anthropometry, a study that involves the measurement of physical features such as skull size, nose shape, and facial structure, as a tool for classifying castes and communities. (figure 1)

Table of Facial Angles.

CASTE.	Average Index.	CASTE.	Average Index.
Mánjhi	70	Banjára	66
Dhángar	69	Barhai	
Arakh	68	Bráhmañ	65
Bauriya		Rájput	
Agariya		Chamáñ	
Bhuiyâr		Etc., etc. . . .	...
Bhurtiya		Pási	
Chero	67	* * *	62
Kharwâr		Musahar	
Fanka			
Kahâr			
Darzi			
Nâli			
Kol			

Figure 1: Taken from pg. No xxxiii, Vol I, Tribe and Caste of Northwestern Provinces and Oudh, (1896) W. Crooke

This approach, grounded in the racial science of the 19th century, sought to link physical attributes with social hierarchy. However, such methods are now widely discredited within contemporary anthropology, as they rest on reductionist and essentialist assumptions about human differences. The idea that caste identity can be objectively known through bodily features reflects not only a flawed scientific framework but also a deeper colonial anxiety to

rationalize and control Indian society through supposedly empirical tools. These physical typologies were neither neutral nor benign; rather, they were deeply ideological, reinforcing a vision of social order that justified British dominance. By attempting to read caste through the body, Crooke's work exemplifies a form of epistemic violence, where Indigenous social categories were overwritten by racialized logic that denied the fluidity and complexity of lived identities.

Misrepresentation of Banjaras: Labelling of Banjaras as "Criminals"

"in former times the Banjaras especially in Gorakhpur and the neighbouring districts, had an evil reputation for dakaiti and similar offences...In recent years they have come under the notice of the police in connection with the kidnapping of the girls. There can be little doubt that most, if not all of them, occasionally introduce girls of other castes into the tribe. Quite recently the police in the Agra district have found reason to suspect that some of them in the guise of Commissariat contractors carry on an extensive trade in stolen cattle..."- para no. 21, pg. No. 164, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, Volume I (1896)

This excerpt from William Crooke's *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, Volume I, exemplifies the colonial gaze through which the Banjaras, particularly the Muslim Banjaras, were systematically misrepresented and criminalized. The narrative is saturated with suspicion, moral panic, and generalizations that present the community as inherently deviant. By stating that they had an "*evil reputation for dakaiti*" and linking them with activities such as kidnapping and cattle theft, Crooke effectively frames the Banjaras as a threat to social order and security. What is particularly troubling is how this accusation is not grounded in rigorous empirical evidence, but in police suspicion, hearsay, and anecdotal remarks, which are then elevated to the status of ethnographic truth. This conflation of colonial administrative discourse with anthropological observation demonstrates how colonial ethnography functioned less as a neutral study of communities and more as a tool of surveillance and control. The emphasis on crimes such as girl kidnapping and cattle theft further racializes and moralizes the Banjaras' identity, positioning them as violators of caste, property, and gender norms—core anxieties of both colonial and upper-caste Hindu moral orders.

Moreover, the phrase "*in the guise of Commissariat contractors*" reveals a deep colonial paranoia: even when the Banjaras were engaged in legitimate labour (such as supplying goods to the military), their presence was viewed with mistrust. This reflects the colonial state's fear of mobility and autonomy among nomadic groups, who, by virtue of their movement and independence, resisted easy categorization and governance.

In sum, Crooke's representation is not merely descriptive but deeply prescriptive as it constructs the Banjaras as a criminal caste whose very social reproduction (marriage, labour, mobility) is suspect. Such portrayals contributed directly to their stigmatization under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, illustrating the intersection of colonial knowledge production and legal-institutional violence. This is a clear instance of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms epistemic violence. This epistemic violence was not simply described, but it **produced** the Banjara as criminal, as other, and as politically irrelevant. In this sense, knowledge itself became a tool of governance, and anthropology a discipline of control.

Similarly, Russell also presents examples that cannot be universally applied to all Banjara communities. Such false generalizations are therefore open to serious scrutiny.

"Major Gunthorpe states that the Banjaras are accustomed to drink before setting out for a dacoity or robbery and, as they smoke after drinking, the remains of leaf-pipes lying about the scene of action may indicate their handiwork."- Para no. 19, Social Customs, Pg. No. 186 The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India, Vol II (1916) by R.V. Russell and Hira Lal.

In 1871, the British colonial government enacted the Criminal Tribes Act targeting certain communities characterized by their nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyles, poverty, and tribal identities. British Government during the colonial period labelled some entire communities as 'criminals' because of their involvement with some marauding activities. Were they criminals? What were their alleged criminality? Labelling their entire generations as criminals is not an act of othering them?

Many scholars have reached similar conclusions and marshaled evidence to support them. Birinder Pal Singh, in *Criminal Tribes of Punjab* (2010), argues that colonial authorities fundamentally misapprehended nomadism—not merely as an occupation or lifestyle but as a coherent philosophy oriented toward mobility, non-attachment to place, and skepticism toward property. Unable or unwilling to recognize the social rationality of mobile lifeways, imperial administrators cast nomadic groups as uncivilized, culturally deficient, even "savage," and therefore presumptively dangerous to public order. This epistemic framing, combined with the economic precarity of many itinerant communities and their limited access to fixed means of production, facilitated a presumption of criminality (thievery, dacoity) that hardened into categorical designation. In Singh's reading, the label "criminal" functioned less as a descriptor of demonstrable conduct than as a state-produced identity that pathologized mobility and legitimized surveillance and coercion (Singh, 2010).

Scepticism

“It seems improbable, therefore, that the Banjaras accompanied the different Muhammadan invaders of India, as might have been inferred from the fact that they came into the Deccan in the train of the forces of Aurangzeb. The caste has indeed two Muhammadan sections, the Turkia and Mukeri. But both of these have the same Rajput clan names as the Hindu branch of the caste, and it seems possible that they may have embraced Islam under the proselytising influence of Aurangzeb, or simply owing to their having been employed with the Muhammadan troops. The great bulk of the caste in southern India are Hindus, and there seems no reason for assuming that its origin was Muhammadan.” Para no 1, Pg. 163

Here Russell is trying to argue that all Banjaras were Hindus and not Muslims and they were forced to conversion of their religion to Islam.

On this Irfan Habib in his work, *Merchant communities in Precolonial India, in The Rise of Merchant Empires: Long-Distance Trade in the Early Modern World, 1350-1750*, said that Banjaras were not Hindus, and these colonial writings hold several inaccuracies. There is no doubt that Tavernier’s account, though essentially correct, has many inaccuracies.

*“Not all Banjaras were Hindus. Muslims constituted an important segment of the Banjaras in northern India. Although some Banjara communities were traditionally associated with trade in certain commodities, like the Labanas with salt, the Multanis with grain, and the Mukeris with wood and timber, it is clear that most of them had no inhibitions about carrying anything that yielded a profit. Nineteenth-century British anthropological research has provided us with much information about the Banjaras. The tendency to accept a common origin for all Banjara communities – for example, from the Bhats and Charans of Rajasthan – may, however, invite scepticism.”*²⁴ Although Irfan Habib has addressed the historical origins of the Banjaras, his analysis largely relies on the earlier works of colonial ethnographers such as Crooke and Russell. Habib’s work reflecting systemic biases of 19th century British ethnographers who were keen to create simple classifications about Muslim Banjaras and to “other” them.

Decolonizing Identity: Muslim Banjaras’ Resistance to Colonial Ethnographic Frameworks

Narrative 1: A 49-year-old male respondent

During one of the field visits, the researcher had an engaging conversation with a middle-aged male respondent, worked as a trader of rice grains, shared an oral account of his community’s history and origin. With a tone of quiet pride, he stated:

“Hum Bani Jarham ke qabile se aate hain... hame Sheikh Tajjar kaha jata tha Pehle hum Saudia Arab me hi the, hamare abba (dadaji) bataya karte the ke kuch log tijarat ke silsile me yahan aaye the—naaj (anaaj) ka kaarobaar karte the—aur phir yahi bass gaye. Kuch log hamare gaon ko aur uske aaspaas ke ilaaqe ko chawal nagri ke naam se bhi jaante hain.”

(Translation: “We belong to the Bani Jarham tribe... we were known as Sheikh Tajjar. Earlier, we lived in Saudi Arabia. My grandfather used to say that some people came

here for trading—especially food grains—and eventually settled here. Some people even refer to our village and its surrounding areas as ‘Chawal Nagri’ (land of rice).”

From the above response, it can be observed that Muslim Banjaras are denying the facts presented by colonial ethnographers that is related to religion and origin of these Banjaras.

Constructing the ‘Other’: Racialized Analogies and the Gypsification of Banjaras

Another sceptical and problematic portrayal can be found in William Crooke’s observation that *“to European observers, the Banjaras often seemed to recall the Gypsies...”*, even citing an improbable claim that a Hungarian nobleman once conversed with them in the “Zingari” language. Furthermore, Crooke adds that the Banjaras’ *“superstitions of all kinds, including suspected witch killings and sacrifices, reinforced the Gypsy image of the class”* (Crooke 1896:166). These views are further echoed by R.V. Russell and Hira Lal (Russell & Lal 1916:179–182), who similarly represent Banjaras through the lens of mystery, primitivism, and criminal suspicion.

Colonial texts by William Crooke (1896) and later by R.V. Russell and Hira Lal (1916) contain highly **orientalist and exoticized portrayals** of the Banjaras. Crooke equates the community with European Gypsies, even referencing a dubious anecdote about a Hungarian nobleman allegedly speaking to Banjaras in “Zingari.” He further reinforces this parallel by attributing to the community a belief in “witch killings and sacrifices,” thereby essentialising them through a lens of **superstition and cultural primitivism**.

Narrative 2: A 66-year-old widow respondent

In sharp contrast, an oral account collected from a 66-year-old widow respondent offers a **harsh critique** of such representations:

“Unse (Britishers) kaho ke kabhi aaye ho yhan? Hamare yahan ka taur tareeka dekha bhi hai.. Hum Musalman hain, ye jaadu tone hamara kya lena dena.. hamari jabaan to aap jaan hi rahe ho jaise apki bhaasa waise hi hamari bhasa..zaroor unhone kisi or qabile ke baare me kaha hoga hum banjara to tijarat ke alawa kisi baat se matlab nahi rakhte ji..”

(Translation: “Ask them (the British) — have they ever even come here? Have they seen our customs and way of life? We are Muslims, what do we have to do with magic and superstition? You can understand our language — just like your language, ours is no different. They must have been talking about some other tribe. We Banjaras are only concerned with trade and nothing else.”)

This statement presents a clear rebuttal to colonial narratives, exposing their detachment from lived reality. Her assertion “have they even

come here?” reveals the spatial and cultural distance between the knowledge producer and the subject, highlighting a process of knowledge fabrication rather than ethnographic engagement.

The claim that Banjaras have no connection with superstition, and their identity as Muslims, directly contradicts colonial depictions rooted in mysticism. The speaker’s self-identification as a trader further dissolves the notion of a criminal or “gypsy-like” identity, presenting instead a community invested in commerce and structured social norms.

One can reach to the conclusion by the above response that this analogy with European “Gypsies” (Roma) is neither neutral nor accidental. It is rooted in a colonial discourse of racial typology, where groups perceived as mobile, non-sedentary, or culturally distinct were categorized as exotic, uncivilized, or even dangerous. By comparing Banjaras to Gypsies, colonial ethnographers were not merely drawing a superficial cultural parallel but were actively deploying a racialized framework that pathologized mobility and framed certain communities as inherently deviant or suspicious.

Absences and Silences: The Marginalization of Muslim Banjaras in Colonial Ethnography

One of the most striking patterns that emerged during the analysis of British colonial literature is the systematic marginalization of Muslim Banjaras within ethnographic and administrative accounts. Despite the expansive documentation of tribal and caste communities in India during colonial rule, Muslim Banjaras are notably absent or only briefly mentioned in the foundational texts of the period.

For example, in William Crooke’s influential ethnographic compilation, the term “Muhammadan Banjaras” is rarely mentioned and that too in a single paragraph (para 21) comprising just four lines. This minimal reference is insufficient in capturing the complex realities of the Muslim Banjaras as a distinct socio-religious group. In contrast, Hindu Banjaras receive significantly more detailed descriptions, indicating a clear imbalance in representation.

Similarly, ethnographic accounts such as those by Russell, the representation of Banjaras remains narrowly constructed, with disproportionate emphasis on themes such as human sacrifice, criminal tendencies, and witchcraft. This selective portrayal not only reinforces orientalist stereotypes of nomadic and tribal communities as inherently deviant but also reflects the epistemic violence embedded in colonial knowledge production. Most significantly, Russell’s account offers scant mention of Muslim Banjaras, thereby erasing their distinct religious, cultural, and historical experiences. This conspicuous absence raises a critical question:

Why has the cultural and social life of Muslim Banjaras been systematically overlooked? The neglect may be understood as part of a broader colonial and postcolonial ethnographic silence surrounding marginalized subgroups who do not fit neatly into dominant caste or religious taxonomies. From a decolonial and subaltern standpoint, such omission reflects the ways in which knowledge about communities is filtered through the lens of power, what is documented, whose voices are heard, and whose lives are rendered invisible. This calls for a rethinking of ethnographic categories and a conscious effort to recover the silenced histories of communities like the Muslim Banjaras, whose hybrid identities challenge the binary frameworks often employed in mainstream sociology and anthropology.

The postcolonial sociological tradition, though more critical of colonial knowledge systems, has often reproduced similar exclusions. Imtiaz Ahmad, in his foundational work *Caste and Social Stratification Among the Muslims* (1973), acknowledges this disciplinary neglect. He notes that although caste structures are present among Indian Muslims, they have not received the same scholarly attention as caste among Hindus. As a result, sociological inquiry into Muslim social hierarchies remains underdeveloped, leaving significant gaps in understanding the diversity of stratification systems in Indian society.

This double marginalization, first by colonial ethnographers and later by even Indian sociologists and anthropologists have contributed to the silencing of Muslim Banjaras within academic discourse. Their distinct historical trajectories, kinship structures, occupational patterns, and religious identities remain obscured under generalized depictions of Banjaras, most of which refer exclusively to their Hindu counterparts.

Voices Against the Archive: Oral Testimonies Challenging the Colonial Ethnography

In order to challenge and deconstruct the colonial ethnographic representations that marked Muslim Banjaras as inherently criminal, below testimony not only question the authenticity of colonial texts but also assert indigenous subjectivity and voice.

Narrative 3: A 73-Year-Old Male Respondent

As a part of ethnographic data collection, the researcher gathered this information from a 73-year-old respondent. This oral narrative of a 73-year-old man offered a powerful resistance.

“Mai 73 saal ka hoon ji. Aap dekh hi rahi ho hamare yahan kaise rehti hain aurten.. ja ke aap Kahin se bhi pata karlo k koi bhi banjari bina naqaab ke bahar jaati ho ya hmari

qaum me kisi ne bhi kisi aurat ke saath kuch galat kiya ho.. chori dakaiti ke kisse to har jagah hote hain hain aise to humare baare me koi kuch galat chhaap raha hai to ye thodi ke hum wahi ho gaye.. hum to sheikh tajjar hain. Tijarat ke alawa hamne kabhi kuch nahi kiya bus yhi hamari pehchaan hai ji baki sab galt hai.”

(Translation: “I am 73 years old. You yourself can see how our women live here... Go and find out from anywhere whether any Banjara woman steps out without a veil, or if anyone in our community has ever done anything wrong to a woman. Stories of theft and robbery exist everywhere—just because someone has written something wrong about us does not mean we are like that. We are Sheikh Tajjar—honourable traders. Apart from trade, we have never done anything else. This is our identity, and everything else is false.”)

This testimony contests the colonial construction of Banjaras as deviant or criminal. The speaker asserts moral discipline, respect for women, and trading as an ancestral occupation—a clear departure from the ethnographic accounts that labelled the community as thieves or outlaws. The insistence on “*Sheikh Tajjar*” (honourable traders) is not just a rejection of the criminal tag but a powerful act of self-identification rooted in dignity, tradition, and commerce.

Moreover, the mention of gender norms and the strict moral conduct around women dismantles the trope of cultural inferiority that was often projected in British texts. It points towards epistemic violence wherein entire communities were misrepresented without understanding or acknowledging their ethical frameworks and social codes.

Narrative 4: An 84-Year-Old Female Respondent

On the question of representation as criminals, an 84-year-old woman responded (with confidence on her face),

“Dekho ji angrejon ne to sirf hume barbaad hi kiya hai, unki jisne ghulami kari wahi sahi baki sab gunde dakait. Hum banjaron ne kabhi nahi unke agey sar jhukaya isiliye hamare bare aisa kaha hoga, kehne do ji... Allah dekh raha hai..”

(Translation: “Look, the British have only ruined us. Those who worked for them were considered good, and the rest were called thieves and robbers. We Banjaras never bowed down to them, so they must have spoken about us like this. Let them say whatever they want... Allah is watching.”)

This account reflects a historical-political consciousness that views colonial knowledge as strategically constructed. It underscores that subservience to colonial authority was a condition for recognition, while refusal to submit resulted in vilification. Her assertion, “*Allah is watching*,” reflects a spiritual form of resistance, suggesting that moral judgment lies beyond the colonial gaze.

Her response also subtly exposes the politics of inclusion and exclusion in colonial representations where loyalty was rewarded with legitimacy, and

non-compliance was met with criminalization. The binary between “those who obeyed” and “those who resisted” is central to understanding how epistemic violence operates not just through omission but through misrepresentation.

Limitations of the study

This study is limited to Muslim Banjaras of Western Uttar Pradesh and not from other parts and other Banjara communities of South Asia. However, by focusing on colonial texts, it seeks to uncover the historical roots of epistemic violence that continue to influence the marginality of this community today. Future research could incorporate counter-**narratives** from other communities across South Asia and draw on field-based knowledge to deepen this critique. Apart from this, the study relies on only two colonial texts, which constrains the breadth of archival perspectives and may amplify source-specific biases.

Conclusion

British academics have portrayed the Banjaras in a negative light, aiming to tarnish their image in front of mainstream society. Epistemic Violence was observed in their writings, and they have failed to understand the meaning and significance of nomadism. It has been observed that these ethnographies lack oral testimonies raising critical question of methodology used by them.

The analysis pays special attention to the use of labels such as *criminal*, *nomadic*, *uncivilized*, and *fanatic* to “other” them (what Gayatri Spivak argued in her work, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*) The Muslim Banjaras were described, labelled, and categorized in the absence of their own voices, and their lived experiences were filtered through a colonial lens that rewrote them into a narrative useful for the empire. This epistemic hooliganism is not just a misrepresentation, but it is a form of narrative dispossession that reinforces the power of the colonizer as the only legitimate speaking subject. The narrative constructed by Crooke and Russell is a textbook case of what bell hooks critiques as the colonizer’s tendency to speak “*about you better than you can speak about yourself.*”

By embedding these narratives within the broader framework of postcolonial critique and deconstruction, the study not only challenges dominant narratives but also affirms that oral histories are not merely supplements to written records but also emphasized that they are epistemological tools in themselves. The narratives as acts of resistance, exposing how representation is tied to power, and how communities such as the Muslim Banjaras actively resist erasure through memory, language, and everyday ethics.

In both *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* and *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, the

Banjaras, particularly those identified as Muslims, are consistently depicted through the lens of criminality, suspicion, and deviance. This construction served the broader colonial logic of governance, whereby nomadic and mobile populations were perceived as threats to the order, surveillance, and fixity required by the state.

In these texts, criminality is racialized, communalized, and essentialized. The British authors not only framed the Banjaras' nomadic lifestyle as incompatible with civilization but also emphasized their Muslim identity as a further marker of deviance. The Muslim Banjara, thus, became a double other, both as a mobile subject and as a member of a religious minority that was already viewed with suspicion in the post-1857 colonial state.

Through deconstructive analysis of British colonial sources alongside contemporary oral narratives from Western Uttar Pradesh, the research reveals the profound disjuncture between colonial knowledge production and lived community experiences.

The analysis exposes several critical patterns of colonial representation: the analogical linking of Banjaras to European "Gypsies" as part of a broader discourse of racial typology; the systematic erasure of Muslim Banjaras from ethnographic accounts that privileged Hindu variants; and the construction of nomadism itself as inherently suspicious, uncivilized, and criminal. These representational strategies were not merely descriptive but constitutive, creating categories of deviance that legitimized surveillance, control, and exclusion.

Most significantly, the oral testimonies collected reveal how Muslim Banjaras construct alternative histories that directly challenge colonial characterizations. Their self-identification as "Sheikh Tajar" (honorable traders) with Arab lineage, emphasis on Islamic moral frameworks, and assertions of commercial rather than criminal identity represent powerful acts of epistemic resistance. These counter-narratives do not simply correct colonial "errors" but expose the fundamental violence of imposing external categories onto communities who possessed their own coherent systems of meaning, identity, and social organization.

The systematic absence of Muslim Banjaras from foundational ethnographic texts like those of Crooke and Russell reflects not mere oversight but the active operation of colonial knowledge systems that rendered certain communities invisible when they failed to conform to expected taxonomies. This pattern of erasure extends into postcolonial scholarship, where even critical sociologists have reproduced similar exclusions in their analyses of caste and community in India.

The testimonies of elderly community members provide crucial evidence for understanding how marginalized groups maintain agency in the

face of representational violence. Their insistence on moral discipline, trading identity, and spiritual authority challenges not only specific colonial claims but the entire epistemological framework that positioned European observers as authoritative interpreters of Indian social life.

However, this study also illuminates the complex dynamics of resistance and accommodation within colonial contexts. The observation that communities perceived as loyal received more favorable treatment while those who “never bowed down” faced criminalization reveals how colonial knowledge production was intimately connected to political control and administrative convenience.

Moving forward, this research contributes to decolonial scholarship by demonstrating how textual deconstruction combined with indigenous oral traditions can restore suppressed histories and challenge dominant narratives. It underscores the necessity of centering marginalized voices not merely as correctives to colonial distortions but as valid knowledge systems that offer alternative frameworks for understanding identity, mobility, and social organization.

The study calls for a fundamental reconceptualization of ethnographic practice that moves beyond extractive documentation toward collaborative knowledge production that respects community epistemologies. It suggests that true decolonization requires not only critiquing colonial texts but actively supporting communities in articulating their own histories, identities, and futures on their own terms.

Ultimately, this research reveals that the colonial archive’s silences are as significant as its assertions. The marginalization of Muslim Banjaras within ethnographic discourse reflects broader patterns of how power operates through knowledge production, determining whose voices are heard, whose experiences matter, and whose identities are deemed worthy of scholarly attention. By foregrounding the oral testimonies of Muslim Banjaras alongside critical analysis of colonial texts, this study contributes to the ongoing project of recovering suppressed histories and challenging the epistemic foundations of continued marginalization.

Decolonization and Need of Epistemic Vigilance

The persistence of colonial categories in contemporary academic and administrative discourse demonstrates that decolonization remains an incomplete project. This study suggests that meaningful progress requires not only historical critique but active engagement with communities to support their own knowledge production and self-representation. Only through such collaborative approaches can scholarship move beyond reproducing colonial

violences toward genuinely transformative understanding of India's diverse social landscapes. Epistemic vigilance serves as a vanguard of justice. One must adopt the lens of epistemic vigilance and critically ask: Is this piece of knowledge trustworthy, and whose interests does it serve?

There is a thrust need to re-examine the history, not just of Banjaras, but of other communities as well and support with evidence to correlate said theories and stories. We must be grateful to postcolonial discourse for recognizing the importance of deconstructing existing literature and emphasizing decolonizing methodologies. It is essential to remain vigilant and wakeful!

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Notes

1. Spivak, (1988) critically examines how Western intellectuals often speak for marginalized subjects, reinforcing colonial power structures.
2. Waheed (2000) conducted a doctoral study on the social structure and economy of Muslim Banjaras in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh.
3. Spivak's essay develop the concept of epistemic violence to describe the systemic silencing of subaltern groups in dominant discourses.
4. Habib Irfan defined "Banjaras" as long-distance transporters of grains as distinguished from "*Banyas*" as village merchants.

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NEOLIBERAL URBANISATION, INFORMAL LABOUR AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN ODISHA

Abstract

Neoliberal urbanisation has led to a significant rise in the informalisation of labour within the city space. About 90% of India's labour force is employed in the informal sector, which dominates the country's economy. The International Labour Organisation reports that in comparison to men, more women are employed in this sector. This increasing involvement of women in the informal economy in the city space has generated a debate whether informal labour leads to women empowerment or impoverishment. While economists argue that informal labour has generated economic empowerment of women, feminists and political economists assert that it has created poverty trap leading to impoverishment. Based on this background, the article empirically examines how informal women labour in Bhubaneswar city leads to women empowerment. The data for the study were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was collected through conducting 90 interviews, 9 Case studies and few group discussions. The study revealed that women employed in the informal sector feel empowered due to their financial security and independence, active contributors of capital towards their families, experience dignity and respect in society and the ability to make choices in various life domains. However, illiteracy among a few women acts as a hindrance to empowerment. Apart from that, some of the major challenges faced by women include lower wages, job instability, double burden and long working hours that often lead to a loss of leisure time. If these challenges can be addressed, it will lead to greater empowerment of the informal women labour in the neoliberal city space.

Keywords: *Neoliberalism, Informal Sector, Empowerment, Women, Employment.*

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Introduction

Women's empowerment is a widely adopted multidimensional model encompassing resources, agency, and achievements. It refers to the process of increasing women's economic, social, and political power (Reshi and Sudha 2022: 1353). These components include human, material, and social preconditions for choice, goal-setting, and action, leading to potential outcomes in addressing gender inequality (Bhojani et al. 2024: 1). The 1945 United Nations Charter established gender equality as a basic right. Article 15 of the Indian Constitution recognises the strength of women and includes gender equality as one of the essential rights. The 1976 National Plan of Action serves as a guideline for women's development, with subsequent measures aimed at empowerment. All developing nations are progressively realising the importance of encouraging women to engage in the economy, thereby empowering them by integrating them into the mainstream development process, helping them regain their economic standing, and providing them with work opportunities (Senapati and Ojha 2019: 163). However, Limited accessibility and strict rules of formal jobs restrict a major portion of women from entering the formal sector. Whereas neoliberal policies of privatisation, deregulation and individual freedom have shrunk public sector jobs, expanded the informal sector due to rapid urban growth, migration and structural adjustment policies. The sudden rise in the informal economy in the neoliberal era is based on various factors such as less amount of employment in the formal sector, the weakening of the idea and benefits of formality, constant increase in temporary job demands, and part-time jobs, and the numerous options for casual work and small businesses (Bromley and Wilson 2018: 9). The general character of the state in the era of neoliberalisation is to create a 'good business or investment climate' for capitalistic endeavours (Harvey 2005: 67) which played a crucial role in fostering integration through social policies and promoting and overseeing the informal sector (Ahmed et al. 2011).

However, in developing countries, the informal economy continues to thrive due to weak governance, inadequate education and infrastructure, widespread poverty, and high demand for affordable goods and services that formal businesses cannot meet (Djidonou and Foster-McGregor 2022: 529). The Informal economy employs about 330 million workers (93% of the total workforce) who are not part of the organised economy (Jena and Mahapatra 2009: 1), and about 90% of India's labour force is employed, which almost contributes 50% of the national income (Srija and Shirke 2014: 40). So Informal sector is not a marginal or temporary but occupies a central part of urban economics especially in global south. These informal businesses were mostly private, exploiting low-wage rural or migrant workers, notably young women, and operating without any regulation (Harvey 2005: 129). Despite being a significant sector, many workers face insecurity, vulnerability, and

struggles. This sector suffers from poor job quality, including low wages, long working hours, unsafe conditions, exploitation, uncertain tenure, and inadequate social security. The informal sector often fails to provide workers with stable livelihoods, leading to widespread social and economic injustice (Jena and Mahapatra 2009: 2).

Due to the impact of neoliberalism, the informal sector today is different from that of prior decades. The neoliberalism has significantly diminished the benefits and security provided to the majority of formal economy workers in both wealthy and poor countries (Bromley and Wilson 2018: 7). A large number of socially and economically unprivileged people are mostly engaged in this, and the majority of employees are migrants from rural regions who have weak educational training and work in low-paying, semi-skilled, or unskilled employment (Mohapatra 2012: 197). This rapid labour informalisation is noticeable, implying a changing character of labour in the twenty-first century (Mezzadri 2020: 156). Female employees have experienced this informalisation to a greater extent in the developing nations (Mohapatra 2012: 197). The proportion of women working informally in developing nations is significantly higher (92%) than that of men (87%) (Bonnet et al. 2019: 5), because women face difficulties in acquiring employment in the formal sector due to their higher rates of illiteracy, family obligations, lower levels of education, a lack of job skills, and societal and cultural hurdles (Mehra 1997: 144; Fapohunda 2012: 35). That is why the informal sector is the only option for them to earn an income (Fapohunda 2012: 36).

Women's participation in paid work, irrespective of the type of work marked as an improvement in their perception of economic independence. Women who participate in the workforce tend to have higher freedom of decision-making and spatial mobility than non-participating women. Women's economic empowerment again fosters self-determination, self-efficacy, self-confidence, self-management, competency, skill, knowledge, attitudes, consciousness, and access to resources (Soputan and Kerebungu 2020: 46). At the same time, larger percentages of earning women tend to experience less domestic violence than women who do not participate in the workforce. Having control over the family purse strings, and especially the fact that some of the money comes from her work, improve the status of women within the household (Jose 2007: 20; Krumbiegel et al. 2020: 77). Women workers are also moving beyond the industry to form alliances with women's organisations and other activist groups, including labour unions, to preserve their social achievements and better their lives (Zaman 2001: 157).

On the other hand, Women encounter the problem of relatively low wages in manufacturing or low-status service sector jobs. The other source for amassing wealth arises out of the super-exploitation of labour power,

particularly of young women migrants from rural areas (Harvey 2005: 148) as a result of urban-focused investments, which have created greater job possibilities for women in cities. The employment of illiterate women in the informal sector has increased because they are willing to accept low wages (Ahmed et al., 2010). They may deal with discrimination based on their gender, which is essentially non-existent in the formal sector (Sharma 2012: 35). Wage disparities, sexual harassment, and excessive pressure are common in the informal economy (Senapati and Ojha 2019: 163). It also emphasises that work environment disadvantages, such as informality, part-time work, and a significant gender wage gap, can diminish women's bargaining power as well (Krumbiegel et al. 2020: 86). This Study aims to explore how informal labour in a Neoliberal city impacts upon women's empowerment, It also attempts to understand the challenges faced by women in the informal economy.

Review of literature

Cities play a crucial role in the reproduction, reconstruction, and ideological evolution of neoliberalism (Banerjee-Guha 2009: 95) due to the lack of dynamism in the rural sector. That's why cities and their suburban zones have become increasingly important geographical targets and institutional laboratories for a wide range of neoliberal policy experiments (Brenner and Theodore 2002: 368; Davies 2014: 3222; Peck et al. 2019: 54). It has been introduced into urban policy regimes, aiming to rejuvenate local economies through deregulation, privatisation, and fiscal austerity. These experiments aim to mobilise city space for market-oriented economic growth, property redevelopment schemes, new social control, policing, increased support for public-private partnerships, and surveillance strategies, and elite consumption practices while securing order among marginalised populations (Peck et.al. 2009: 58).

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) first used the term "informal sector" in its Kenya Mission Report in 1972 (Rao 1996: 171; Fapohunda 2012: 37; Bromley and Wilson 2018: 6). International statistical standards define that on the terms of the employment relationship informal employment defined as a job held by an employee must not be subject to national labour law, income taxation, social protection, or entitlement to specific employment benefits for the employment relationship to be considered as informal (Bonnet et al. 2019: 3). A Statistical Picture shows that two billion (or 61% of the world's employed population) earn their living in the informal sector (ILO 2018: 13). In the global context, males are more likely than women to work in informal employment (63% vs. 58%), in developed nations (19% vs. 18%), and emerging countries (69% vs. 64%). It demonstrates that informality exists in all nations, regardless of their level of socioeconomic development. Despite that, developing nations are more common than developed nations

(Bonnet et al. 2019: 5). It is also overrepresented among the poor and those who are marginalised due to their gender, ethnicity, or migration status (Bromley and Wilson 2018: 14). And the scarcity of well-paying jobs in the highly regulated formal sector, coupled with rigid rules, drives many people towards the informal economy. This has resulted in the increased informalisation of labour in the city space (Jonakin 2006: 294).

Since the 1970s, the idea of women's empowerment has been spreading rapidly as a way to describe the changing power dynamics in support of women's rights and greater gender equality (Cornwall 2016: 343). It has evolved in the context of feminist scholars into a guiding principle for considering how to improve women's lives in all of their complex economic, social, cultural, and political dimensions (AI Mamun and Hoque 2022: 1). It's an inclusive process that encourages marginalised and disempowered groups or communities through awareness-raising, proactive participation in public life, and mobilisation for the right entitlements (Sharma 2017: 400), which encompasses increasing women's access to and ability to exercise choice, financial autonomy, decision-making autonomy, and freedom of movement (Mahmud et al. 2012: 611; Mehra 1997: 138).

Research has indicated that women working outside the house have increased self-assurance, independence, control over their family, health awareness, and participation in social activities (Sarwar and Abbasi 2013: 203). Its subjective viewpoint varies from individual to individual based on their own beliefs and values. Hossain's study in Bangladesh demonstrates how readymade garments (RMG) or garment employment has influenced the lives of women workers. His study provides important insights into the economic and social empowerment processes for impoverished women in low-income developing countries (2012: 3). AI Mamun and Hoque demonstrate that paid RMG employment significantly enhances female employees' economic, social, and psychological empowerment. The findings show that women working in RMGs have higher economic capacity, freedom of movement, enhanced capacity for decision-making, greater self-worth, employment skills and experience, and awareness of their rights to make decisions (2022: 1)

Theoretical Framework

Many scholars examining the urban informal sector primarily highlight the struggles, vulnerabilities, and survival strategies of informal workers, including poverty, inequality, and exploitation (Bremar 1996: 45; Hart 1973: 70). However, they often overlook how this very structure can also serve as a site of women's empowerment, particularly for migrant women. Conversely, scholars of women's empowerment tend to emphasise women's agency, yet fail to analyse how this informal sector itself creates opportunities

for women to exercise that agency, which is why they feel empowered despite all the disadvantages of this sector.

This study applies Giddens' structuration theory to understand women's empowerment in the urban informal sector. The duality of structure can be seen as impacting an urban space through various transformations that result from the interaction between the agents and structure (Lamsal, 2012:112). For Giddens, structure refers to a set of rules and resources that regulate human actions, and agency pertains to the activities in which an individual is the doer (Ayuba, 2021: 128; Lamsal, 2012: 113). Neoliberal values form part of the rules and resources in the urban informal sector, which is structured by and reproduces particular forms of social and economic behaviour that guide social practices. This shapes how people work, migrate, consume or make economic decisions. Individuals act within these rules while also reproducing them through daily activities.

There is a popular proposition which states that the oppressed and marginalised individuals can free themselves if they are given the opportunity (Chitnis, 2005: 244). Women's agency leads to empowerment when it exercises questions, challenges, or changes regressive norms and institutions that perpetuate the subordination of women (Hanmer & Klugman, 2016: 238). Within this context of development, scholars have explained the process of empowering women in developing countries, where women exercise agency and adapt to flexible labour markets, easily entering into informal jobs and developing new survival strategies. This theory holds that people are empowered when they have the agency to draw upon existing rules and resources within the social system (Chitnis, 2005: 240). The biggest change noticed is that women's role changes from nurture of the family to equal economic contribution (Spivack & Desai, 2016: 2). These challenges to the traditional habituated gender roles include teaching the next generation, setting examples for children and others transforming the dream and creating social support groups (Spivack & Desai, 2016: 15).

Methodology

Social Settings

The study was conducted in the capital of Odisha, Bhubaneswar. Bhubaneswar is also known as the "Temple City of India," which is located in the eastern part of India. It was designed by German architect Otto Königsberger in 1946 (Chetty and Surawar 2020: 667). The Bhubaneswar urban development area consists of the Bhubaneswar Municipal Corporation area. It covers 186 sq. kms (72 sq. mi), which consists of 67 wards (Mishra 2023: 627). The total population of Bhubaneswar constitutes of about 840,834

as per the 2011 Indian census, while males comprised 444,806 (56.05%) of the population in 2011, and females constituted 349,028 (43.95%) of the total population. The growth rate over a decade was 44.9 %. Earmarked as the first smart city project of the government of India, Bhubaneswar has the greatest rate of job growth among 17 Tier-2 cities in India. The primary study was conducted in Mancheswar Industrial Estate, a manufacturing hub in Bhubaneswar. This area is found to be one of the prominent and larger industrial estate patches in Bhubaneswar, which has shown phenomenal progress over the previous two decades (Mishra 2023: 634). This industrial hub houses food processing, agro-based, textile, and small chemical industries, that attract women workers with limited education from both rural and urban areas.

Methods and Data Collection

This Research used both the qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine how the informal economy affects the status of women's empowerment in the neoliberal city. The primary study was conducted in Mancheswar Industrial Estate. Case studies, semi-structured interview schedules, personal interviews and group discussion methods were used to collect primary data from the field. Interviews were conducted with 90 female workers, and 9 case studies were conducted from 3 different informal sectors, such as Aditya Birla fashion retailer, Mangaraj prawn factory and Prime Pickle Factory, where the majority of the workers are females. The respondents participated voluntarily in the interview and group discussion. The interviews were conducted with self-selected participants using the purposive sample method from the above-mentioned 3 factories.

Result and Discussion

Economic Empowerment

Women's ability to exercise choice increases when they have access to employment. Women's economic empowerment is the process of developing capacity, ability/skills, resources, and access to quality income and living standards (Soputan and Kerebundu 2020: 39). This increasing household contributions, women's value and bargaining power inside or outside the family, are clear indications of women's empowerment (Rao 1996: 173; Hossain 2012: 9; Chowdhury 2017: 120; De 2022: 470; AI Mamun and Hoque 2022: 2). The informal economy provides enough opportunities for female employees by providing economic flexibility, keeping them close to city services and amenities, and increasing their knowledge and abilities through training, counselling, and problem-solving with coworkers (Billah and Manik 2017: 184).

Table 1: Income of the Informal Women Labour

Income	No. of Respondents	Percentage
5000-7000	6	6.67
7000-10,000	64	71.11
10,000-15,000	20	22.22
Total	90	100

*Source: Field Data

Table 1 shows the Earning capability of women in the above-mentioned informal sectors, where the majority of women (71.11%) earn between 7000-10,000 per month. The reason for mentioning their economic profile at first because it believes that if women gain access to economic resources, they will be able to make improvements in their lives and have more liberty and self-esteem to make various home and strategic life decisions (Hossain 2012: 9; AI Mamun and Hoque 2022: 7). When we examined the respondents, we discovered that most of the women are quite satisfied with their monthly salaries. Women's wages go directly towards household expenses. They do not rely on any male member of their family for their essential needs or other luxuries. They also contribute almost an equal share of overall household expenses through their salaries. In some cases, where the male member of the family is unable to earn, the female worker takes on all of the family's responsibilities, such as fooding, clothing and health care needs of all family members, and education of the children. So, their economic empowerment was seen here through their financial ability and autonomy, as shown by their economic contribution to their family members. These working women negotiated their roles in the home and society, challenging the notion of male breadwinners as a myth (AI Mamun and Hoque 2022: 5). The women workers felt honoured and happy to be able to contribute financially to their families on a part-time or full-time basis, and even help their parents in repaying their debts as well. Their level of life has increased as a result of their economic independence, and they are grateful for the opportunity to assist and support their family.

Case Study 1: Reema (Anonym), who belongs to a higher caste family, left her schooling and defied societal norms by marrying someone from a lower caste and facing rejection from both her family and in-laws. After migrating to the city, her husband wasted all the money, drank, and neglected to care for her only son. Seeing this situation, she began working at a pickle factory, earning enough to manage household expenses and her son's education. After a while, her family suggested bringing her son back to ease her burden. However, she firmly declined, asserting her capability to manage both her household and her child's upbringing independently.

Decision-making Capacity

Women did not have the same social, political, economic, and cultural rights as men because of patriarchal systems. Men have absolute authority to manage both households and society, while women are often kept at home. The main improvements we want to see in today's society are that women should participate in decision-making because increased decision-making capacity leads to empowerment. Throughout the past, women lost their ability to make decisions due to their lack of financial security, but today's reality is different, and now women also earn. As a result, they were involved in decision-making both inside the family, such as childbearing, marriage, family planning, and child education and beyond the family. Women make independent decisions about personal needs such as clothing, jewellery, and cosmetics, manage expenses like buying gifts for family, walk outside and get vegetables or other supplies from the market, which was once done by male family members. More importantly, they now decide on life partners, family planning, social networks, and even challenge caste boundaries and the dowry system. Work experience enhances women's authority, even in challenging economic conditions, leading to greater involvement in family decision-making (Zaman 2001: 146).

Case study 2: Basanti, a 45-year-old woman who had lived peacefully with her family until her husband's tragic accident left him jobless. So, she eventually joined a textile manufacturing unit at a reputed MNC. Now at this age, she bears full responsibility for her family, her husband's medical expenses and her two children's education. Now she makes all family decisions, and her husband and children accept it. She stated that this job provides her more autonomy and respect in the family as well as in the industry, making her husband and children proud of her.

Table 2: Educational Background of the Respondent

Education	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Illiterate	7	7.78
Primary and upper primary	18	20
Secondary	47	52.22
Higher Secondary	18	20
Total	90	100

**Source:* Field Data

Access to Education

Soputan and Kerebungu Stated that, "What can change the weakness of women's status is nothing but education" (2020: 40). It is a fundamental right and a crucial component of the empowerment of women, which enables them

to fully engage in social, economic, and political realms (Fapohunda 2012: 41). Education gives women the abilities, information, and self-assurance they need to participate in society, assert their rights, and enhance their quality of life (Onuonga 2014: 209). Nowadays, more educated young employees are entering the informal sector in larger numbers. As we can see in Table No. 2, the majority of women working in the informal sector are educated. where the majority of women (52.22%) have at least passed their secondary schooling. Numerous factors, including poverty, gender discrimination, and isolated villages, prevent them from pursuing higher education. Very few (7.78%) are illiterate, yet they understand the value of education and prioritise their children's education. Many young women who have only passed their secondary schooling (20%), who could not complete their degrees due to family constraints, are now saving their earnings to continue their studies. They stated that this industry helps fund their higher education and their siblings' schooling as well.

Case Study 3: Supriya, a 20-year-old who completed her +2 from a local college, couldn't continue her studies due to her father's limited income as a marginal farmer. The entire six-member family has completely relied on his father's small earnings, making it impossible for him to finance her daughter's further education. So, she migrated to Bhubaneswar and worked at a prawn factory, saving money for her higher education in the city. She also financially supports her younger sister's schooling and encourages her to pursue higher education.

Knowledge and self-awareness

Women who work in this informal industry have a greater sense of social awareness. They frequently challenge conservative societal norms, customs, and discrimination against women. Women's participation in employment has a favourable influence on their growth. They are aware of their fundamental rights and actively fight for their rights in the workplace, family and society. Furthermore, they are aware of the factory's working conditions and have improved them with clean washrooms, clean water, constant electricity, and clean surroundings. They feel safe here, and some companies also offer nutritious breakfasts and snacks to their workers. Female employees are also aware of women's rights and governmental schemes and policies, and they gain advantages from them. The strong community meetings enable them to deal with problems, whether they are within or outside the workplace. It appears that their strong social bonds assist them in becoming socially empowered.

Case study 4: Pooja, a young woman of 18 years, just finished her secondary school but couldn't pursue further studies due to financial hardship.

She joined the textile company through a friend and became self-sufficient. She continues to support her family at such a young age; her family members and her community were very proud of her. She enjoys her life and taking advantage of the city's freedoms, where she is learning a lot of things. She said, "What's the point in staying home when I can be independent in this field? I am happy that my life is different and that I can support my family. I will continue to live my life on my terms even after being married".

Table 3: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Location	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Rural	68	75.56
Urban	22	24.44
Total	90	100

*Source: Field Data

Migration

Table 3 indicates that most of the women (75.56%) have migrated from rural areas. Only a small percentage of women (22.44%) are native to the area. The migration is caused by both the push and the pull factors. The main reasons why they left their village and migrated to urban areas include poverty, unemployment, a lack of work opportunities in the nearby area, greater restrictions, a slower pace of mobility, sickness of family members or an unexpected loss of a male breadwinner, and a lack of freedom in the village.

The key pull factors for women migrating to cities include financial opportunity, better living style, less strict system, independence, better quality education and ease of entrance into the informal sector. Before migration, women felt powerless in the village due to a conservative mindset and a lack of opportunities. As per Table No.2, the majority of women have very few educational qualifications, which is a major constraint for them to access the formal sector jobs. That's why they joined the informal sector. They stated that if they don't, they get depressed and feel helpless. They believe that migrating to the city has brought some positive changes to their lives. The research also demonstrates that women are satisfied with their occupations because there are no formal education requirements, fixed working hours, and regular salaries in this industry. They also decided to go to a city where there are more opportunities for a better life.

Case Study 5: Sumitra moved to Bhubaneswar with her elder sister, who was already employed in the same industry for years. Sumitra barely finished the 8th grade of school due to significant family problems. There are not enough employment opportunities in the rural area. Her father works as a sharecropper due to a lack of sufficient farmland in their village for

subsistence, so managing the family is becoming too tough. Both sisters migrated to the city for employment, working in the same industry, enjoying their independence, and contributing to their family's support, which wouldn't be possible without migration.

Access to Resources

Women now have the chance to access financial resources and make investments in mutual funds, LIC, fixed savings, health plans, vehicles, gold, etc. Some women are also helping their husbands to buy or build their own houses. A study by AI Mamun & Hoque in Bangladesh shows that some women are also able to buy a piece of land in the village in their name (2012: 5). Women in the informal sector have had to arrange organisations to preserve their interests, and conventional savings and credit programmes have been mobilised to provide sources of finance for themselves (Fapohunda 2012: 41).

Case study.6: Gayatri is a 31-year-old illiterate woman who lives with her husband and children and works in a prawn factory. The high cost of living in the city makes it tough for her to properly support the family on her husband's low income. Hence, she decided to start working to support her partner. She said she was now helping her husband financially and that they had moved to a better place. They had furnished it with comforts like a refrigerator, washing machine, and television. She also purchased a scooter on an EMI plan and uses her own money to pay the interest each month.

Working in the informal economy has increased the opportunities for advancement of female workers. All of the employees have benefited from it. Women perceived an increase in their freedom of movement as a result of their work. The female workers said that their spouses are increasingly assisting them with domestic tasks. In rural areas, parents send their female young children to the city to work, giving them the freedom to choose their life mate and make their own decisions, and attempting to get their opinion in every area. Their importance in their family has grown, and society's attitudes towards them are changing. Most women report less violence and abuse after entering the labour force. Those young females who work in this field have also refused early marriage, early pregnancy or plans to have one or two children.

Challenges of Women Informal Labour

Informal women workers are characterised by low salaries that often fall short of the minimum standards of living, as well as poor nutrition, long working hours, hazardous working conditions, and a lack of essential services such as drinking water, first aid, and sanitary facilities at the workplace (Mohapatra 2012: 202). However, in addition to the problem of economic

survival, lack of assets, women's double burden, patriarchal restrictions, vulnerability, lack of choice, insecurity, and social isolation, exploitation as cheap labour are significant elements that affect not only the participation of women in the informal sector but also their capacity to organise their associations (Rao 1996: 174). The migrant women who are semi-skilled, low-skilled, or unskilled, this may mean that they enter a low-paying, unorganised sector where they are more likely to be exploited and abused (Mohapatra 2012: 202). The majority of the female employees stated that certain people in their communities were still defaming and disrespecting factory workers because of the social stigma associated with women working outside. Many studies argue that this type of work is linked to the following problems, such as: lack of sufficient social protection, instability of employment trajectory, low labour income and deprivation of labour entitlements, lack of sufficient protection from an unfavourable work environment and organisation; and scarcity of freedom of association, speech, and collective bargaining (Bromley and Wilson 2018: 6). This Sector also threatens to lead to more poverty, inequality, and slower economic growth, and has always been challenging, physically taxing, and marked by dangerous circumstances, including fire dangers, sexual harassment, overtime payments, and physical and verbal abuse (Hossain 2012: 17).

Economic Challenges

Women in this sector often face irregular work schedules, making it difficult to maintain a stable income. Research findings reveal that some of these women struggle to earn a sufficient living in the informal economy. As we can see in Table 1, some women (6.67%) also earn less than 7000 a month, and the majority (71.11%) are between 7000 and 10,000, which is very difficult to survive in the city. Due to the rapid urbanisation, inflation also increases each year. In this situation, they were compensated insufficiently to meet their basic requirements. They live in very poor housing conditions in overcrowded slum regions lacking essential amenities such as nutritious food, clean water, a clean atmosphere, and so on. They also cannot afford a higher education for their children or a healthy lifestyle for themselves. They will be unable to overcome such challenges throughout their lives.

Case Study 7: Soudamini, a 52-year-old woman, has worked in a pickle factory for 15–16 years but now struggles with poor health. Despite the need for rest and care for herself, she is not able to afford it for herself. Earning less than ₹10,000 per month for years, she spent her savings on her children's education and marriage and even took a loan for her daughter's wedding. With no financial security, she cannot leave her job, yet continued work is worsening her health. She also avoids taking leave because it results in a reduced salary, leaving her unable to access proper medical care or much-needed rest.

Future Aspiration

It is also evident that a large number of workers do not see their occupations as viable options for the future because they don't have any financial security or insurance after retirement, no savings due to low wages, and no alternative work options at an older age. As a result, they spend their later years in very poor conditions, lacking adequate health care and support. Women in the informal industry are paid very little despite putting in a lot of overtime, but still working at the same level where they started. There are still a few opportunities for growth or increment due to a lack of education. Most young women in this sector are not highly ambitious; they join because village life offers little freedom and poverty with a lower standard of living. They are working in this sector because it is the only field where entry is very easy, and they get to enjoy city living and enough freedom without any restrictions from their families. They don't have any plans for the future. Their family's financial hardships are the reason they are here. After getting married, the majority of single girls would quit their jobs.

Case Study 8: Deepali, a 24-year-old woman, has been working at the prawn factory for five years but remains dissatisfied due to low pay, no holidays, no security, and long 10-hour shifts, including half-days on Sundays. Her monthly salary doesn't go beyond 8,000/- per month. He is residing in a private mess with four to five girls sharing a small room because of the high expense of living in the city. She saw no long-term prospects in her job and faced multiple rejections from potential groom's families due to her employment. Consequently, she decided to quit her job after marriage.

Table 4: Marital Status of the Respondents

Marital Status	No. of respondents	Percentage
Married	52	57.78
Unmarried	38	42.22
Total	90	100

**Source: Field Data*

Double Burden

Table 4 shows that the Majority of women are married (57.78%). So, both family and factory responsibilities burdened most women. Patriarchal gender norms, such as expecting women to handle childcare and household work while men control marital decisions, further restrict women's agency, income-earning opportunities, and decision-making power. For mothers of small children, these challenges intensify, as infants require constant care and breastfeeding (Bhojani et al. 2024: 6). They have no holidays and work 9

to 10 hours a day in the industry. They fail to give enough attention to their families or themselves. When both the husband and wife leave for work, there is almost no one to care for their children. The majority of these working women's children do not receive the attention they need. The absence of parental support also hinders their children's academic progress. Due to the infrequency of holidays, the young ladies who left their village are also unable to see their parents. Even they are unable to present whether any of their family members are suffering.

Case study 9: Sushma is a married woman with two children: a one-year-old daughter and a four-year-old son. She chose to work in a textile company since she couldn't sustain her family on her husband's salary. She took maternity leave from the workplace and did not get paid during that period. After delivery, she decided to return, but it was too hard for her to leave her newborns with her grandmother for eight or ten hours. Because of this, her spouse also frequently complains that she fails to care for his family properly. She can't manage her home and work at the same time, and she feels extremely helpless.

It shows that most of the time, women feel alienated doing the same work over and over again with little or no chance to progress. Gender-specific work culture is also followed. More females than males are employed in this industry, but men dominate most of the higher positions. Illiteracy frequently provides a barrier to empowerment because many informal sectors at least need matriculation for entrance, and those with less education receive lower pay and have very limited mobility in these fields. Since there aren't enough opportunities in the formal sector, many of them still work in the informal sector despite being well-educated. Due to the intense workload in this industry and the lack of set hours or holidays, they are prevented from enrolling in further education. They can't switch to a better formal job and work for the rest of their lives in these low-paying jobs with incredibly few opportunities for advancement.

Conclusion

Women's subjugation in India has a long history due to its patriarchal nature. She always depended upon male members in her entire life. But this study indicates that women in the informal sector generate income, enjoy freedom of movement, autonomy, build self-confidence, and enhance their overall well-being. This process ultimately contributes to their empowerment. Due to the neoliberal policies in urban development, the informal sector's situation is now steadily transforming. Their employment process also improved and gave employees contract letters, paid time off, maternity leave, overtime pay, tiffin at work, daycare services, amenities, and workplace

medical care. Due to numerous obligations, rules, and regulations which prevent them from accessing any kind of formal employment, the informal sector greatly helps those women become independent; as a result, they are now both financially and socially autonomous. The most common advantages of their job in this sector were the increased sense of independence, the lighter load on their family, and their capacity to support themselves. The informal sector assists women who lack higher education. They no longer feel deprived because of this; instead, they feel empowered as active contributors of capital to their families. The decision-making capacity is no longer solely in the hands of male members; females are gradually taking over the capacity because of the financial viability. The number of households led by a single mother is increasing, which means that many women are taking on the role of solo caretaker and source of financial support for their children. They are treated with respect and dignity at the workplace and in their communities, which has given them a greater sense of empowerment. The majority of women are satisfied with their employment, becoming more ambitious as they make choices in various aspects of their lives.

On the other hand, informal women labour negotiation with low salaries and domestic demand, the double burden of home and workplace, no increment or future assurance, working in the same position for an extended period, living in such poor or unsanitary conditions, a lack of food or health care facilities, and a negative attitude towards women workers are among the major issues that women workers in the informal sector have faced. Due to the larger participation of women workers in the informal sector, factory owners have shown little interest in improving state of health, education, and public safety for women and girls or adjusting management practices to increase the productivity of skilled female workers. Despite these obstacles, social and economic empowerment for women and girls in the field has increased. If these challenges can be addressed, it will lead to greater empowerment of informal women labour.

Note

The names used in this paper are anonymous.

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**DIALECTICS ON THE TRANSITION AND
TRANSFORMATION IN THE RITUAL ART OF
GARUDAN THOOKKAM: A STUDY ON THE
THOOKKAM OF ARAYANKAVU TEMPLE**

Abstract

The study focuses on the history of Hook Swinging and one of its popular versions in Kerala, Garudan Thookkam, and how the intervention of the forces of time led to the transition and transformation of this ritual art. This paper is divided into seven parts to discuss varied aspects of Garudan Thookkam and how this ritual art influences the lives of the local people of Arayankavu. The introductory part discusses some general features of Garudan Thookkam and its popularity among the local people. The importance of space and time (Geo-Chronology) for the ritual art is given priority in the second section of the paper, thus, the performance theory of Richard Schechner is applied here to analyze space, time and the ritual. As this festive occasion in a typical carnival tempo offers the people 'temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and the established order' Bakhtin's Carnivalesque theory is also applied. The folk and classical elements embedded in this ritual art is studied in the third section of the paper. Fourth section is on the impact of colonial modernity and the nature of transformation in this ritual art. While analyzing the complex stages in the transformation of an individual to the Garudan Thookkakkaran (the performer/artist), the theory of liminality developed by Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner is applied. It is the mythological and dramatic nature of the ritual that helps to enliven it in the memories of local people. Thus, the fifth section of the paper on Garudan Thookkam studies the role of myth as one of its popularizing factors. Next section gives space to discuss the artistic and aesthetic elements of the Garudan Thookkam. Concluding analysis discusses how the theories of Schechner, Bakhtin, Van Gennep and Victor Turnor is effectively applied to analyze the varied aspects of Garudan Thookkam as ritual, art and festival.

Keywords: *Hook Swinging, Ritual Art, Gramadevata, performance theory, liminality*

Introduction

Garudan Thookam is an important ritual art form of Central and South Kerala. The historical analysis of any ritual art form is incomplete without considering the time and space of the event. In this study, the location of the ritual is the Bhadrakali temple of Arayankavu a village in the Ernakulam district of Kerala. However, it is difficult to remove the ambiguity shrouded in the chronology of this ritual art.

Today there is a huge hike in the expenses of *Thookkam* performance. Sri. Rameshan who is a member of *Kshethra Bharana Samithi* (temple administration committee), Arayankavu Temple and also a staunch devotee, reported that he spent nearly one and a half lakh rupees for arranging *Thookkam* in 2018. However, the popularity of this ritual art is also increasing among the local people of Arayankavu astonishingly. Divergent reasons can be there for such a contradiction, including spiritual as well as material factors. Surely, the devotion of the people to the local deity is no doubt an important factor, but those political developments in India since the 1990s, which led to the huge wave of mass re-entry to all religious institutions, are also to be counted. Again, *Thookkam* is also a festive occasion that offers people opportunities for social gatherings, gossiping, discussing everything including politics, and thus getting recharged with refreshing memories. Surely, it is the memory of these beautiful moments, which prompt people to wait eagerly for the next *Thookkam*.

So far, the *Garudan Thookkam* as an art form has evolved much to secure an identity of its own. Its vibrant music and rhythmic dance reached their aesthetic perfection with the passage of time and the conscious and dedicated efforts taken by experts/maestros, *Therozhi* and *Puthusseri Kuruppus*, in this field has raised its status as one of the most important ritual art forms of Kerala. Now this art form displays the features of both folk and classical art which are good enough to gratify the aesthetic cravings of the people even in contemporary times also.

Thookkam is usually arranged annually by different families of the locality as an expression of gratitude to the local deity for some material gains in their lives.

Theoretical Frame work of the Study

The theoretical frame work of the study is based on Mikhail Bakhtin's Carnavalesque, the liminality theory of Van Gennep and Victor turner and

Richard Schechner's Performance theory. The carnivalesque theory is applied to discuss the festive and happy mood that people experience during festive occasion and liberate them from their day to day worries and anxieties. The carnivalesque theory is also adequate to display how the festive occasion temporarily suspends the traditional power structure and day to day societal norms. Carnivalesque theory also explains how a festive occasion like *Garudan Thookkam* helps to forget societal hierarchies and helps the interaction between people of different classes.

The theory of liminality helps to analyze the complex phases an individual undergoes to get transformed as the *Garudan Thookkakkaran*. The liminal phase is ambiguous, in-between condition, when the performer experiences a condition of neither here nor there. Performance Theory is applied to explain the mythological and dramatical elements that helps to keep this ritual art alive in the memory of the local people. It also helps to understand how *Thookkam* has adapted and interacted with the forces of modernity to retain its relevance.

Methodology of the Study

An ethnographic field study is conducted to understand varied aspect of the *Garudan Thookkam*. This approach helps to identify *Thookkam* as a living and performing ritual art and its impact on local people. The participatory observation during the performance helps to realize personally the carnival tempo during the performance and the special awesome atmosphere that it generates. This observation helps to understand the transformation process of the performer into the *Thookkakkaran*. Interviews with the performer, organizers and devotees help to understand the spirit of the performance and the deep attachment of the performer and devotees towards this ritual art. A good number of authentic literary works related to the area also help to form the historical understanding of the performance.

Literature Review

The works of L. A. Anantha Krishna Ayyar, Edgar Thurston, Nadia Ceremetakis and Rajan Gurukkal help to build a strong anthropological foundation to the study on the *Garudan Thookkam*. The works of Van Gennep, Victor Turnor, Richard Schechner help to develop a suitable theoretical frame work for the study. The Rites of passage by Van Gennep and the Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure by Victor Turnor help to analyze the phases of separation, liminality and re incorporation that an individual performer experiences as ritual progresses. Theories of performance is taken from Schechner's Ritual and Performance. The Anthropological background for the study is taken from Ceremetakis's An Introduction to Cultural Anthropolgy,

Bakhtin's Rabelais and his World, offers to the study an understanding on the world of Carnavalesque and discusses how a festive occasion like *Thookkam* offers people with temporary freedom. Basic information regarding South Indian communities, tradition, caste and belief is discussed in detail in Ethnographic Notes of South India by Iyer and Thurston. Rajan Gurukkal's works offer a local/Malayalee scholars' perspective on myth, culture and society and it is reflected in this study on the *Garudan Thookkam*. Chandler and Opert offer a clear colonial perspective on the popular ritual art form like the *Thookkam*.

The Geo-Chronology of the Ritual Art

Usually, the ritual art of *Garudan Thookkam* is celebrated in the Bhagavathy temples of Kerala. Mythologies and popular beliefs regarding some incurable diseases such as smallpox (*Vasuri*), cholera, etc. sowed fear in the minds of the people. The limitations of medicinal erudition and proficiency in earlier times compelled people to develop some alternative measures as remedy and solace, and thus started propitiating Mother Nature/ Goddess through certain ritual practices. The historical background for the evolution of *Garudan Thookkam* can be traced back to such indigenous beliefs of the people.

Arayankavu, Koottekkavu Bhagavathi temple (Amballoor), Irumpuram Devi temple near Perumbavoor, Muvattupuzha Kavuvu are some of the important Bhagavathi temples where *Garudan Thookkam* is performed annually in the Ernakulam district. A comparatively small structural temple with a spacious premise is generally considered an ideal space for this ritual festival. Thus, here people can gather together, spend time together, enjoy music, dance, and drama and, devotedly participate in pulling the cart carrying human *Garudas*.

In the Arayankavu Bhagavathi temple, this festival is celebrated in March/April (*Meenam/Medam*), the hottest months of the year, and in the days (*Nalu*) of *Aswathi* and *Bharani*. Another important day connected with this festival is *Pathamudyam*, which is also considered as an auspicious day as per the traditional calendar (*Panchangam*) when the sun is in its most powerful position. *Pathamudyam* is also in April, ten days after the festival *Vishu (Medasamgramam)*. Any festival in Kerala is a harvest festival also. Considering the significance of the season and the importance of feast during the festival of *Garudan Thookkam*, an observation can also be made that there is a strong bond between *Thookkam* and the agrarian practices of the locality.

Festivals help people to connect back to their roots, realize their identity, and strengthen social bonds. The preparation for *Garudan Thookkam* starts many days before the fixed date of the ritual. All the relatives of the

family who has taken the vow to make arrangements for the *Thookkam* reach the *Tharavadu* (ancestral home) for the preparation and the family arranges a grand feast for all the relatives, neighbours, and friends. The pre-fixation of the space and the time of the ritual festival ensure authenticity, certitude, and continuity to it.

Richard Schechner in his *Ritual and Performance* noted that the rituals are usually performed on a fixed schedule, at specific locations regardless of weather or attendance. To Schechner ritual sites are 'cultural places' where there is a synthesis of humanly modified landmarks with 'calendrically' marked time (Ingold 2003:620).

Mikhail Bakhtin in his work *Rabelais and His World* discusses the importance of festivals in the lives of the people. Bakhtin's concept of Carnival is different from the observance of an official holiday or 'self-serving' festivals imposed by Governments or other secular or theocratic authorities (Bakhtin 1984:13). The sanction for carnival derives not from a calendar prescribed by church or state but from a force that pre-exists priest or king (1984: 19). Popular festivals such as *Thookkam* can also be brought under the principle of carnivalesque for analysis. Considering the mass appeal of ritual festivals like *Thookkam*, not any contemporary secular or religious authority can decide the date and venue of the ritual. It is pre-fixed at some remote past by people of some unknown origin. The contemporary power institutions can intervene in these mass festivals only to make certain modifications in accordance with the changes of the time. Here, festivals help people to liberate themselves, though momentarily, from the strangle hold of power centers.

Keeping aside features such as venue and time, festivals across the world have some universal characters, such as group gatherings, specific performances, exchange of goods and ideas, sharing of food and finally ending with the dispersal of the participants. The occasion of *Thookkam* also offers the people of the locality an opportunity for social interaction, transaction of goods and ideas, cherishing the moments of entertainment with music, dance, etc., and like any other festival, people disperse to their selves after *Thookkam* festival. Thus, as Schechner observes during festivals people clad in colorful costumes, gaily move in processions, singing and dancing, telling stories, sharing food, fire burning, incensing, drumming and bell-ringing, emitting body heat all around, creating an overwhelming synaesthetic environment (2003:632).

Elements of Folk Art Embedded in *Garudan Thookkam* and its Transformation into Classical Art

The artistic elements that are embedded in the *Garudan Thookkam* has certain classical as well as folk traits in it. The organic nature of folk art does

not have any bifurcation such as ritual and art (Gurukkal 2022:600). Besides, folk art is in such a phase of evolution that there is space for experimentation, innovations, and additions. But the classical phase of any art form hints at stagnation, decay, and decline (2022:600-01) The ritual practices in the *Thookkam*, such as *Thelliyeru* (Purification process), *Malanottam* (depicting the sacrifice of Jeemootavahana), *Kappu* (an agreement with the devotee and the performer) are highly ritualistic, symbolic and folkish, and in the dance performance of *Thookkakkaran* also has a strong folk element. But the highly renowned and perfected percussion instruments which accompany *Thookkam* including *Chenda* (a cylindrical Drum), *Elathalam* (cymbal), *Chengila* (an Indian gong) etc., lead it to the status of a classical art. It is also to be noted that in the *Arayankavu Thookkam*, the *Thookkakkaran's* *Uduthukettu* (attire) is similar to that of a *Kathakali* artist, vividly displaying its classical elements. The observation here is, that the *Garudan Thookkam* is in its liminal status of transformation as it has not fully evolved into a classical art as it proudly retains some of its folk elements.

The Ritual: Rigidity, Divergences and the Colonial Gaze

Hook Swinging was a religious ritual practiced in different parts of India. Not sufficient evidence is available to discuss the exact period of its origin. However colonial writers noticed this practice, and as part of their effort to understand indigenous cultures, they studied these local practices and wrote about it. Some of the colonial writers were greatly inspired by Rousseau's call for self-reflexivity, that is, the study of one's self, through the observation and study of others. To Rousseau, it is the primary mechanism for escaping from ethnocentrism (Ceremetakis 2017:9).

Different forms of Hook-Swinging were practiced in various parts of India. These were known under different vernacular dialects such as *Charak-Puja*, *Pota- Puja*, *Khidi-Mari*, *Bhokta-Puja* etc. (Powell 1914 :147-48). J H Powel the author of the book *Hook Swinging Ceremony in India* observes that this festival is rooted in the soil of India. The colonialist writers, belonging to a 'higher grade civilization', as they claimed, tried to intervene in the practice of hook swinging. Therefore, people were very much reluctant to perform before foreigners. They gave it up altogether in some places, due to the pressure from authorities. In this ritual, devotee-performer had to perform the toughest practice of suspension and rotation on a pole. It was made possible by piercing the back of the performer through a hook (*Choondakuthal*) and tying it to the pole. People generally took it up as a ritual practice, to increase the fertility of humans as well as nature by propitiating respective local deities or *Gramadevata*. Thus, other than fighting incurable diseases, this ritual can also be counted as part of fertility cult.

Gramadevatas (local deities), also known as *Kali* or *Mariamamma*, generally preferred animal sacrifices. Therefore, devotees had to perform compulsory bloody oblations in these temples. It was in such temples that the custom of hook-swinging was practiced (Opert 1893:476-77).

For J S Chandlers the practice of hook swinging was merely a 'superstition'. Therefore, he believed that, the colonial authorities had to intervene and ban it. When the Governor of Madras Lord Napier visited Madurai Chandlers managed to secure hooks and knives used for swinging to show him. Seeing the weapons forced Governor to ban the ritual. The last report of the ceremony from the place was from the year 1891-92.

Edgar Thurston's, *Ethnographic Notes of South India* discussed in detail the intervention of administrators to prohibit this practice. The government of Madras in 1854 reported that it was not performed frequently then. It was also reported that two men were killed in the Salem district in 1852 during this ceremony as the pole from which they were suspended had broken.

Another colonial report is that in the Kistna district, the custom was revived by an old pensioned Hindu *Subedar*, whose father's sister performed *sati* some seventy or eighty years back. In commemoration of this *sati*, he decided to conduct a swinging festival annually (Thurston 1906: 488).

Certain eyewitness accounts left by European writers reveal that only the lower-class people practiced this ritual. Some specifically mentioned that it was the *Parayas* who performed this ritual. They received one to four rupees from the general fund or from an individual contributor for their sacrifice. 'The *Brahmins* do not assist at this ceremony, which they despise'. Another belief among the people was that the person who performs this task would suffer no pain if it was for some good purpose or severe pain if it was for something bad. Moreover, the consumption of intoxicants by the performer was so high that he became insensitive to all kinds of pain.

The quickness with which the wounds on the body of the performer healed was considered a miracle by the devotees.

Colonial writers viewed this entire practice scornfully and considered it as an outdated and inhuman practice and preferred the intervention of the administration to ban it. But for the people of the locality, it was practiced to propitiate the local deity which assured them with moments of piety, and devotion and offered them opportunity for joyous social gathering. Forgetting all the age-old hierarchical discriminations imposed upon their lives by caste and class, a huge crowd gathered around the swinging site clad in their most colorful attires. The air vibrated with the bangs of drums and cymbals filled them with unprecedented joy. They prayed for good rain, crops, and general

prosperity. A carnival-like mood is generated there helping people to forget all their worries and anxieties.

The man who performs this ritual pass -through phases of liminality. It is a kind of transformation from his original, submissive self to such an esteemed status of a person who is sacrificing his own life for common goodness. In earlier period, the person who was to swing was chosen by lot and the right to perform this ceremony was confined to certain families in a locality. It was considered an honor and privilege to be chosen for this duty. Only young men were chosen for this, they received abundant love and respect from the local people even after the performance of the ritual.

Even though the colonial authorities despised such native practices, until the eighteenth-century festivals were conceived of as a safety-valve mechanism by them. It was treated as a means for restoring social order by giving way to the suppressed feelings of tensions (Fournier 2019: 11).

Promotion and popularization of myths through *Garudan Thookkam*

Garuda is the chief character in the ritual art of *Garudan Thookkam*. As per indigenous mythology, he is believed to be the mount of Lord Vishnu. Therefore, certain amount of sanctity is attached for Garuda also. He is believed to be the son of Kasyapa to Vinta one of the daughters of Daksha.

In the Arayankavu temple, the *Thookkam* is performed to commemorate the victory of Goddess Bhadrakali over her foe Darika. Other ritual arts like *Mudiyettu*, also celebrates the victory of Kali over the demon Darika. The artist of *Mudiyettu* performs the battle between Kali and Darika. But, *Arayankavu Thookkam* depicts the entry of Garuda to the battlefield. He was sent by Lord Vishnu after the battle to quench the thirst of Bhethala who assisted Kali in her fight against Darika.

As per the mythical story, Darika, the son of Daruvathi, was blessed by Brahma for not to be killed by anyone except a woman who is born *Ayonija* (not born through mother), and also that thousand Darikas were to be born from single drop-let of his blood. Humans, gods, ascetics, and Apasaras (celestial nymph) were threatened by Darika. Finally, Lord Mahadeva in his anger created the fiery goddess Bhadrakali and assigned her the duty to kill Darika.

As Bhadra Kali was going for battle against Darika, she also took Bhedala from the jungles of Bhethal. As they reached battle ground Bhethala spread his tongue on the battlefield and drank each droplet of blood thus, preventing it to fall on the ground. Bhadra Kali killed Darika, but Bethala's thirst could not be quenched. Kali told Bethala that he had to be satisfied with the blood of the first person who entered the battle ground. Mahavishnu

sent Garuda and by drinking a single drop of the blood of Garuda, Bethalala's thirst was quenched. Thus, Garuda saved the world from Bethala's anger.

Arayankavu Garudan Thookkam is performed, to commemorate the arrival of Garuda on the battlefield and quenches the thirst of Bhethala. Here, the *Thookkakkaran* dresses up as Garuda and practices *Kacha Thookkam* (hanging on cloth waist band), and barring the previous practice of piercing the back with hooks, *Thookkakkaran* hangs with this *kacha* and only a few drops of blood are shown by making a scar on the back.

An important part of *Garudan Thookkam* is the '*Malanottam*'. It is connected to another mythological story of the life and great sacrifice of Jeemoothavahana who was willing to sacrifice his own life for saving the lives of the *nagas* (snakes). Due to ill will Garuda took the pledge to clear the earth off snakes by killing and eating them. Jeemoothavahana disguised himself as a *naga* and Garuda tried to eat him but could not. Pleased by the great sacrifice of Jeemoothavahana, Garuda released the *nagas* from his anger. This is the mythological scene recreated by *Thookkakkaran* through the ritual performance called '*Malanottam*'. These are the mythological components knitted in *Garudan Thookkam* which help to make it both sacred as well as popular among people.

Garudan Thookkam: The art & expression

Garudan Thookkam or *Garudan Parava* the ritual art form, is a perfect visual treat also. The *Kolppantham* (Traditional Wicks), fireworks, and the colorful attires of the artist successfully generate a kind of divine atmosphere. *Garudan Thookkam*, apart from its ritual part, is performed along with strong, vibrant music and the rhythmic dance. The *Thookkakkaran* dresses up as Garuda, with wings and beak performing to the tunes of drums, cymbals, etc. But the transformation of the *Thookkakkaran* to Garuda is never an easy affair. It demands sincere dedication and determination from the part of each performer. He has to sharpen his skill in dancing and also get trained for the correct movement of the beak, which requires training of nearly six months explains, Sri. Sumesh, the performer of *Garudan Thookkam* and also the *Velichappadu* (oracle) the Arayankavu temple. Thus, for grooming a perfect *Garudan Thookkam* artist years of hard training is required.

It is also to be noticed that there is not any principle of hereditary succession to the duty of *Thookkakkaran*. The basic requirement for initiation into this field is pure aptitude and sheer dedication to the ritual art.

The musical instruments that accompany *Garudan Thookkam* are *Uruttu Chenda* (a kind of drum), *Maddalam* (a kind of South Indian drum), *Veekan Chenda* (drum), *Ilathalam* (Cymbal), *Chengila* (Indian gong) etc. A

particular type of '*Melasampradaya*' (a special pattern of the performance of percussion instruments) is followed in *Arayankavu Garudan Thookkam*. These were perfected by the ancestors of '*Therozhi*' and '*Puthusseri*' *Kuruppus* (traditional family of Instrumentalists).

Even the makeup items of the *Thookkakkaran* including the facial colours, crown, dress, ornaments, etc., are also to be kept with all sanctity at the residence of the *Thookkakkaran*. The natural pigments for facial makeup are *Vellamannyola*, *Chayillyam*, *Chuvappu*, *Pacha*, and *Mashi*. The artist who is to take up the role of Garuda has a traditional attire to wear, which includes *Pattuval*, *Njori*, *Kacha*, *Munti*, and *Ashtimala* (garland). The *Ashtimala* is carved from the wood of the mango tree. Other fixations to the body of Garuda include a beak, *Chamaram* (false hair), *Chiraku* (wing), *Uthareeyam* (shawl), and the crown (*Iyer 1909: 166-67*). Except for the beak and wings rest of the dress has similarities with *Kathakali*, *Ottanthullal*, *Koothu*, etc., other traditional art forms of Kerala.

In the Arayankavu temple when the *Thookkakkaran* completes his *Uduthukettu* (attire) looks very much similar to a *Kathakali* artist except that of a *Chiraku* (wing) and *Chundu* (beak). These are two basic features that enhance the status of the artist to *Garuda*.

A well-trained artist effortlessly uses his beak by moving it with his tongue and teeth. The *Thookkakkaran* can receive contributions or offerings from the devotees only with his beak. Even though a spectator finds it very difficult task, for the trained artist it is not. The intense training makes them efficient enough to fulfill all the responsibilities expected from them by the devotees.

Previously thickly starched cotton clothes were laid on the ground to give comfort to the artist during performance. But now cotton clothes are replaced with plastic bags. Though this transformation is for convenience, cotton was more comfortable for the artist as it absorbed his sweat speedily but plastic does not offer that comfort.

When inquired, to the artist (Sri. Sumesh), on whether he experienced any powerful mental or psychological disturbances/trance (*urayal*) during any of the phases of his performance, he answered negatively.

Van Gennep observes that when the ritualist passes from one status to another he experiences, physically and 'magico-religiously', a special situation for certain duration of time. 'This symbolic and spatial area of transition may be found in more or less pronounced form in all the ceremonies which accompany the passage from one social and magico-religious position to another.' (Gennep 1960:18).

The artist also admitted that after the performance he received the recognition as divine *Garuda* among the people forever. Besides, once he got transformed as *Garuda* in *Garudan Thookkam*, he was also identified as *Thookkakkaran* whatever his other designations may be.

The ritual performer has to pass through a phase of liminality before getting his new status as *Thookkakkaran*. Usually, in any ritual practice the practitioner passes through rites such as 'the rites of separation from a previous world, the pre liminal rites, those executed during the transitional stage, liminal (or threshold) rites and the ceremonies of incorporation into the new world, post liminal rites' (1960: 21). Victor Turnor elaborates the process of transition in such a way that, 'the first phase of separation comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a state) or from both, during the intervening "liminal" period the characteristics of the ritual subject (the passenger) are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm, the few or none of the attributes of the past or the coming state. In the third phase the (reincorporation) the passage is consummated' (Turnor 1966: 94-95).

In the context of the Arayankavu temple *Thookkam*, the performer has to strictly adhere to a seven-day *vrata*, by following mental as well as physical purity. Ananthakrishna Iyer during the early 20th century describes the preparation for *Thookkam*, 'During the morning hours the performer dresses in a garment tucked to the waistband and rubs his body with oil and is shampooed particularly on the back, a portion of the flesh in the middle is stretched for the insertion of the hook' (Iyer 1909: 323). His master instructed him to perform various movements called *Payitta* (1909: 323). Earlier, a special kind of chariot was prepared for *Garudan Thookkam*. It was a kind of vehicle resting on two axles with four wheels. In this, there is a horizontal beam resting on two vertical supports. A strong rope tied to a ring attached to the beam is connected to a hook. Over the beam, there is a small roof that is tastefully decorated and inside this, there is space for two or three persons to swing at the same time.

Previously the *Thookkakkaran* was carried to the temple from the house of the devotee through a *Chaad* (a special commutation vehicle) but now motorized vehicles are used for carrying the *Thookkakkaran* to the temple, but inside the temple premise only the traditionally decorated wooden chariot can be used thus retaining its connection with the past.

Conclusion

The ritual art of *Garudan Thookkam* or Hook Swinging should have its origin among some primitive tribes of India when their concept of

the propitiation of God meant the ultimate sacrifice of human life itself. An active dialectic process has also evolved since then, between man and nature, man and man, man and society and man and institutions. It is through these dialectical processes that transformation has set in the practice of sacrifices. As humans began to get familiar with different ideologies on the principle of ahimsa, animal and human sacrifices began to be denounced and looked down upon with aversion by a bulk of the population. In its place, milder versions of sacrifices began to get social acceptance. Therefore, in the place of human sacrifices, at one point of time in history people began to do experiments with milder but intense forms of worship. When the spirit of *bhakti* (devotion) mingled with folklore and myths which are popular among people, different worshipping patterns also began to evolve. This can be the background for the emergence of practices such as Hook Swinging and *Garudan Thookkam*. Along with this internal dialectical process of transformation external factors such as the spread of modernity through colonialism also played an important role in the transformation of this ritual form. *Garudan Thookkam* earlier demanded the piercing of the back of the *Thookkakkaran* and spilling blood to propitiate the deity, but now it simply requires spilling a few droplets of blood, even that is also not needed, depending upon the willingness of the *Thookkakkaran*.

The *Arayankavu Garudan Thookkam* is an occasion when local people get the opportunity to gather together in a fixed place and on a fixed date to take part in the festival. As Schechner through his performance theory points out, it offers the people space and occasion for economic, social, and cultural exchanges.

Three important concepts applied to explain the structural evolution of the ritual art form of *Garudan Thookkam* are that of Bakhtin's Carnavalesque, Schechner's performance theory, and the liminality of Van Gennep and Victor Turner. Originally, this was a non-Brahminical practice. Previously the role of *Thookkakkaran* in *Garudan Thookkam* of ArayanKavu temple was played by artists belonging to the *Nair* Community. L.K Anathakrishna Iyer in his 'Cochin Castes and Tribes' reports that the swinging ceremony is performed by *Nairs*, *Cammalas*, *Kuruppans*, and *Izhuvas* in fulfillment of a vow. So, it is the festival of the ordinary section of society and during the festival time, people gather near the temple premise which is decorated with flowers, tender coconut leaves, and electric illuminations. Here during festive occasions, people enjoy their freedom. This ritual has its own customs and practices and it in a carnival tempo, presents a completely different, non-official, extra-ecclesiastical and extra political aspect of the world of man and of human relations (1984:100). So, the application of the theory of carnival is valid in explaining some major features of *Garudan Thookkam*. To understand the historical significance of the venue and date of the ritual certain principles of Schechner's Performance theory is applied. The transformation of the artist

from an ordinary human to the holy figure of *Garuda*, which involves strict *vrata*, (pre-liminal phase) on the part of the artist, before the transformation (liminal phase), and these 'liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial'.(1966:95) Thus, the theory of liminality developed by Van Gennep and Victor Turner explains well the process of the transformation of an ordinary individual to the holy figure of Garuda in *GarudanThookkam*.

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Prashant Anand

**MAPPING THE SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE:
USAGE PATTERNS, MOTIVATIONS, AND
BEHAVIOURS OF GEN Z STUDENTS AT
BANARAS HINDU UNIVERSITY**

Abstract

The integration of Social Network Sites (SNSs) into the very existence of Generation Z (people born between 1997-2012) has significantly changed the domains of communication, information dissemination, and identity construction. This paper explores the patterns, reasons, and behaviours of Gen Z students at Banaras Hindu University (BHU) in India who use Social Network Sites. To investigate, this paper uses both descriptive and inferential analysis. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey of 158 students at BHU has been conducted to understand deeper insights into this hyper-connected demographic community. The results show that most students use smartphones a lot, with 82.3% of them using SNSs at least once a day. Among SNSs, Instagram emerged as the most popular platform (84.8% penetration), creating a social media experience that was both visual and engaging. To use SNSs, motivations are primarily utility-based and relational, i.e., the need to interact with peers (65.2%) and to be informed about trends (62.7%), rather than the pursuit of validation (15.8%). The inferential statistics show that there are important correlations between different groups of people.

This research finds that students are knowledgeable and practical navigators of their digital realm, with their experiences shaped by demographic influences. The present paper establishes a significant statistical foundation for comprehending digital activity within Indian universities and emphasises the necessity for additional investigation into the formation and construction of online identity.

Keywords: Social Network Sites (SNSs), Identity, University Students, Digital Culture, Instagram.

The 21st century has been profoundly shaped by the rapid emergence of Social Network Sites (SNSs), platforms that redefined how humans connect on an individual level how humans form communities, and the very sense of self-presentation (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). For Gen Z (people born between 1997-2012) these digital surroundings that they are living in are not novel technologies but are intrinsic part of their social reality, making them “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001). If we keep this generation as context, In contemporary society a university campus can serve as a critical site for exploration, where individuals navigate the transition to adulthood, form new social bonds, and engage in profound processes of identity construction (Erikson, 1968).

In the Indian context, this digital transformation is more pronounced numerically than in other countries. A report done by Forbes India notes that India has a Gen Z population of 375 million, or 37.5 crore (Jain, 2024). That makes this demography not just one of the world’s largest but also the most populous of internet users in India. Indian Gen Z is at the forefront of an ongoing socio-cultural shift, using SNSs for everything from entertainment to education to political activism and for their own individual selves. However, while trends across the globe are well-documented, there is a need for Indian context-specific, empirical study that captures the unique phenomenon of social media usage within India’s diverse and stratified landscape. Educational institutions like Banaras Hindu University (BHU), which attract students from a wide spectrum of regional, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds, offer fertile ground for such inquiry.

Present literature related to social media/SNSs often adheres to generalised tropes that act as broad stereotypes, portraying youth as social media addicts and their use solely driven by a quest for validation. This paper argues for a more nuanced understanding of patterns of use of SNSs, But dealing with the complex relationship between SNSs and identity construction—a primary aim of the larger research project—it is essential first to map the foundational context, the concrete patterns of use and the underlying motivations. What platforms do the students use, how often, and on what devices? What are their primary goals and drivers for SNS engagement? Further, how do demographic variables like gender, field of study, and background influence these behaviours?

In light of the above issues, the paper has three objectives:

1. To determine the current status and extent of social media usage.
2. To explore the underlying motivations driving this usage.
3. To identify and analyse the patterns of social media engagement and test for significant demographic correlations.

For fulfilling these objectives, the researcher has used both descriptive and inferential statistics. In this manner the study tries to provide a foundation

for understanding the digital habitat of contemporary students in which identity is being formed. It seeks to move beyond assumptions and provide a data-driven portrait of a generation navigating its social world through the screens of smartphones.

Theoretical Framework

To contextualise this study and situate it firmly into the paradigms that are already explored in academia, it is necessary to discuss the theoretical frameworks and prior empirical work that illustrate the intersection of SNSs, youth culture, and identity.

Two theoretical perspectives are particularly significant for this research. First, the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973) provides a framework for understanding user motivations. One thing that social media differs from other media in is that in the case of social media, the user is both producer and consumer. So any traditional model of media effects is not applicable here. These models perceive the user as a passive receiver only. On the other hand, the theory of User and Gratification sees participants as active producers of the entire phenomenon happening on social media. The needs of Gen Z are often categorised into domains such as cognitive (acquiring information), affective (emotional experience), personal integrative (credibility and status), social integrative (connecting with family and friends), and tension release (escapism) (McQuail, 1983). This particular Theory enables us to analyse why university students use social network sites, which further allows us to test their usage and alignment with informational, social or self-status gratification that students get from the SNSs' usage.

In addition to the above theory, Erving Goffman's (1959) theory of dramaturgy offers a powerful lens for understanding identity performance on SNSs. Goffman's conception of social interaction as a performance, where individuals, like any other actors, manage their impression on a "front stage" while they prepare in a "backstage". The fundamentals of SNSs, features like profiles, curated photo feeds, and stories and videos, essentially create a front stage. For users, where they can carefully edit, filter, and present a version of themselves. The near-perfect versions of themselves are what scholars have termed the "curated self" (Hogan, 2010). The potential difference between this online self and the offline "real" self is a central concern of this study.

Empirical Studies on Social Media and Youth

Global research in the field of Social Media has consistently shown high rates of social media adoption among young adults. These studies indicate that platforms like Instagram and Snapchat are favoured because of their

visual nature, which further facilitates self-expression and peer comparison (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). In the context of India, research by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI, 2023) indicates that there is the staggering growth of young internet users, primarily accessing digital content via smartphones. Studies conducted by Dinker (2023) have begun to explore the impact of social media on Indian youth. He notes the dual role of SNSs in providing opportunities for learning and social connection. Along with that, it creates pressures related to appearance and success.

Recent empirical work within the Indian context further nuances our understanding of social media use among youth, especially when differences of gender and geography are taken into account.

A 2025 study by LIGS University, examining social media adoption among university students, highlights clear gendered patterns in platform engagement. Using mean difference comparisons and t-tests, the study found that while male students reported higher use of platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, female students demonstrated a higher overall level of social media adoption. In particular, women were more engaged with visually driven platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube. The study suggests that this difference is linked to varying user motivations, where female students tend to engage more for communication and information, while male students are more inclined towards entertainment-orientated use.

This pattern is further supported by a large-scale survey conducted in 2024–2025 (ResearchGate/Opeepl India Report), which examined over 1,000 Gen Z users in India. The findings indicate that female users are not only more active overall, but also more deeply embedded in platform ecosystems. On average, female users engaged with social media more frequently per month than male users. They also showed higher participation on visual and short-form content platforms, with significantly greater use of Instagram and Reels-style formats. This suggests that gendered differences are not limited to access, but extend to frequency, intensity, and the nature of engagement.

At the same time, geographic location emerges as another important factor shaping social media behaviour. A 2024 study by Nivetha and Radha, focusing on undergraduate women in urban and rural India, highlights how patterns of use vary across contexts. While urban students were more likely to use social media for networking, self-expression, and visibility, rural students tended to use these platforms for learning and accessing information that might otherwise be unavailable to them. This points to a more layered understanding of the so-called “digital divide”, where differences lie not only in access but also in purpose and experience.

Taken together, these studies suggest that Gen Z cannot be understood as a uniform digital category. Instead, their engagement with social media

is shaped by underlying social factors such as gender and location, which influence both how and why these platforms are used.

However, a significant gap remains in the existing literature regarding focused, empirical studies that employ statistical testing to examine how different demographics influence SNS use within a particular setup like a university. Much of the existing literature deals with mainly anecdotal evidence. This paper tries to fill this gap by providing a detailed, data-driven profile of Gen Z.

Methodology

The paper uses a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, which is suitable for capturing a population's characteristics or attitudes at a specific point in time (Babbie, 2010). This incorporates both descriptive components to outline usage patterns and inferential components to test for significant relationships between key demographic and behavioural variables.

The target population for this paper was students enrolled in Banaras Hindu University (BHU) who also belong to Generation Z (people born between 1997-2012). A non-probability convenience sampling method was used to recruit participants. Data was collected from the BHU over a period of 20 days using an offline questionnaire. A total of 158 complete responses were obtained, forming the sample for this analysis. A post-hoc power analysis was conducted using G Power software. With an effect size of $w = 0.3$ (medium), $\alpha = 0.05$, and $df = 1$, the achieved power ($1-\beta$) for this sample size ($N = 158$) was approximately 0.92, exceeding the conventional threshold of 0.80. This indicates that the sample size was sufficient to detect statistically significant medium-sized effects with high probability, hence reducing the likelihood of a Type II error.

Data Collection Tool

A structured questionnaire was developed with the use of Google Forms as well as in printed form. The questionnaire consisted of 34 questions, which included demographics, social media usage patterns, motivations, and behaviours related to identity-type questions. But for this paper, the analysis focuses on the following key sections:

Demographics: Birth year (Q1), Gender (Q2), Field of Study (Q4), and Background (Q5).

Usage Patterns: Frequency of use (Q6), Most used platforms (Q7), Primary device (Q8), and Daily time spent (Q9).

Motivations and Behaviours: Primary purpose for use (Q10), Motivation to engage with content (Q11), and Pressure to post (Q12).

The questionnaire employed a mix of multiple-choice, multiple-select, and Likert-scale questions to gather data.

Data Analysis

The data collected from online Google Forms and offline sheets was exported to IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28) for comprehensive analysis. This analysis has two stages:

1. **Descriptive Statistics:** Frequencies and percentages were calculated for all categorical variables to describe the sample and its fundamental usage patterns. This provides a clear representation of the data trends.
2. **Inferential Statistics:** To test for significant relationships between categorical variables, the Chi-Square Test of Independence (χ^2) was conducted. This test evaluates whether the distribution of one categorical variable is different across the categories of another variable. The null hypothesis (H_0) for each test was that there is no association between the two variables in the population. A p-value of less than 0.05 ($p < .05$) was considered statistically significant, providing evidence to reject the null hypothesis.

To quantify the strength of any significant associations identified by the Chi-Square test, **Cramer's V** was calculated. Cramer's V is a measure of association between two nominal variables, with values ranging from 0 to 1. The conventional criteria for interpretation are ~0.1 (small effect), ~0.3 (medium effect), and ~0.5 (large effect). This provides an objective measure of the practical significance of the findings beyond mere statistical significance.

Findings and Analysis

This section contains the results of the data analysis, organised from general descriptive patterns to specific inferential tests.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The sample of 158 BHU students shows a considerably diverse demographic profile, as summarised in Table 1. The sample was predominantly male (73.4%), which may reflect the general gender distribution in certain streams at BHU or a response bias. Academically, the sample was well-distributed, with the highest representation from Humanities & Social Sciences (32.9%) and Natural & Physical Sciences (28.5%). A significant finding is the rural (46.2%) and semi-urban (24.7%) background of a large majority (70.9%) of the respondents, challenging the urban-centric narrative

often associated with intensive social media use and highlighting the digital penetration into non-urban India.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N=158)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Man	116	73.4%
	Woman	40	25.3%
	Non-binary / Other	2	1.3%
Field of Study	Humanities & Social Sciences	52	32.9%
	Natural & Physical Sciences	45	28.5%
	Engineering & Technology	14	8.9%
	Management & Commerce	12	7.6%
	Other	35	22.2%
Background	Rural	73	46.2%
	Semi-Urban	39	24.7%
	Urban	46	29.1%

Patterns of Social Media Usage

The data reveals a picture of a deeply digitally integrated student community.

Frequency and Intensity of Use

The frequency of SNS use is remarkably high, as detailed in Table 2. Majority of students are using it on a daily basis, with 65.18% accessing SNSs “Several times a day” and a further 6.32% being “Always online.” When we combine with those who use it “Once a day” (10.75%), this indicates that 82.25% of the sample are daily users. Only a minority of respondent students (17.71%) use SNSs less frequently. This indicates an “always-on” culture among Gen Z is a deeply ingrained daily habit.

Table 2: Frequency of Social Network Site Use (Q6)

Frequency	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Several times a day	103	65.18
Once a day	17	10.75
A few times a week	20	12.65
Rarely	8	5.06
Always online	10	6.32
Total	158	100.00

Note: Percentages are rounded to two decimal places; totals may not equal 100 exactly due to rounding.

This high frequency is complemented by significant daily time investment, as shown in Table 3. Almost half of the Gen Z students (46.84%) spend between 1-3 hours on SNSs daily. A further 20.89% spend 4-6 hours, and 12.03% spend more than 6 hours. Cumulatively, 79.75% of respondents invest one hour or more of their day on social media. This significant time commitment underscores the central role SNSs play in the daily routines and time allocation of BHU students.

Table 3: Daily Time Spent on Social Network Sites (Q9)

Time Spent Daily	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Less than 1 hour	32	20.25
1–3 hours	74	46.84
4–6 hours	33	20.89
More than 6 hours	19	12.03
Total	158	100.00

Note: Percentages are rounded to two decimal places; totals may not equal 100 exactly due to rounding

Platform Dominance and Device Preference

A clear hierarchy of platforms emerged from the data, with Instagram standing as the undisputed leader. As shown in Table 4, a staggering 84.8% of respondents identified Instagram among their top three most-used platforms. This is more than three times the second most popular platforms, Facebook (24%), Twitter/X (20.9%), and LinkedIn (20.3%) respectively. The visual, ephemeral, and algorithm-driven nature of Instagram appears to perfectly align with the communicative and expressive preferences of Gen Z students.

Table 4: Most Used Social Media Platforms (Select up to 3) (Q7)

Platform	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Instagram	134	84.81
Facebook	38	24.05
Twitter/X	33	20.89
LinkedIn	32	20.25
Snapchat	13	8.23
Others	33	20.89

Note: Percentages exceed 100% as respondents could select up to three options.

This SNSs ecosystem is predominantly accessed by mobile devices. An overwhelming 94.9% of students reported using a smartphone as their primary device for social media (Q8), with only 5.1% using a laptop/desktop

or tablet. This finding confirms a mobile-first, and arguably mobile-only, paradigm. The smartphone's portability and constant connectivity facilitate the high-frequency, "anytime, anywhere" usage pattern observed, deeply embedding SNSs into the interstitial moments of student life.

Motivations for Usage

To understand Gen Z, students using SNSs is critical to interpreting its role in their lives. The present data reveals that Gen Z motivations are more pragmatic and social than performative.

Primary Purposes

When respondent were asked about their primary purposes to use social media (select all that apply), their responses, highlight the combination of entertainment and utility. Entertainment (69.6%) and accessing News & Information (64.6%) are the two dominant purposes. This was closely followed by Networking (52.5%) and Academic Purposes (48.1%), indicating that a significant portion of Gen Z students use these platforms for functional goals associated with their studies and career building. Self-Expression (27.8%) was a less common primary driver; in retrospect, that suggests that for many Gen Z consumption and connection are more central than active content creation for identity display. As these were multiple-response questions, the percentages reflect the proportion of respondents selecting each option rather than exclusive priority.

Motivations to Engage

As shown in Table 6, regarding what motivates Gen Z to interact with content (e.g., like, comment, share), it further reinforces the theme of connectivity and information-seeking. The top motivators are Connecting with peers/friends (65.2%) and Staying updated with trends (62.7%). Professional/Academic growth (51.3%) is also a strong driver. In stark contrast, the motivation of Seeking validation (likes, comments) was selected by only 15.8% of respondents, making it the least significant motivator. This is a significant finding that challenges the existing caricature of Gen Z, which is the validation-obsessed social media user. For BHU Gen Z, engagement is more about staying informed and maintaining social bonds than it is about accumulating digital approval.

**Table 6: Motivation to Engage with Social Media Content
(Multiple Response) (Q11)**

Motivation	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Connecting with peers/friends	103	65.2

Table 5: Primary Purpose for Using Social Media (Multiple Response) (Q10)

Primary Purpose	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Entertainment	110	69.6
News & Information	102	64.6
Networking	83	52.5
Academic Purposes	76	48.1
Self-Expression	44	27.8

Note: Percentages exceed 100% as it was a multiple-response question.

Staying updated with trends	99	62.7
Professional/Academic growth	81	51.3
Expressing opinions & beliefs	51	32.3
Seeking validation (likes, comments)	25	15.8

Note: Percentages exceed 100% as it was a multiple-response question.

Inferential Analysis: Exploring Relationships between Variables

To uncover deeper structures within the data and move beyond mere description, we conducted Chi-Square Tests of Independence to examine relationships between demographic factors and social media behaviours.

Gender and Platform Preference

A Chi-Square Test of Independence was performed to examine the relationship between gender (Man vs. Woman, excluding 'Other' categories for a valid test) and the preference for Instagram. Among the respondents who have identified as non-binary/other ($n = 2$) were not included in this analysis to fulfil the Chi-Square assumptions regarding expected cell frequencies. The test draws a comparison between the proportion of males and females who selected Instagram versus those who did not.

The results showed a statistically significant association, $\chi^2(1, N = 156) = 4.67, p = .031$. An analysis of the standardised residuals (which indicate how much the observed count differs from the expected count) revealed that women (Residual = +2.2) were significantly more likely to report Instagram as a top platform than expected by chance, while men (Residual = -1.2) were slightly less likely.

The strength of this association, as measured by Cramer's V, was 0.17, indicating a small-to-moderate effect size. This suggests that while gender is a statistically significant factor in Instagram preference at BHU, the relationship is not overwhelmingly strong.

Field of Study and Primary Purpose

Upon testing the relationship between the field of study and the use of SNS for “Academic Purposes”. To ensure adequate cell counts for a robust Chi-Square test, the field of study was recoded into two categories: STEM (Sciences, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and Non-STEM (Humanities, Management, Commerce, and Other).

The Chi-Square showed a significant association: $\chi^2(1, N = 158) = 5.89$, $p = .015$. The standardised residuals indicated that STEM students (Residual = +2.4) were significantly more likely to report using SNS for academic purposes. Cramer’s V for this association was 0.19, again indicating a small-to-moderate effect size. This implies that students in technical and scientific fields are more inclined to utilise social media as an academic and professional tool.

Background and Feeling Pressure to Post

An analysis was conducted to determine if a student’s background was associated with feeling pressured to post certain types of content (Q12). The background variable was recategorised as Urban versus Rural/Semi-Urban (combined), and the pressure variable was recategorised as “Yes/Frequently/Sometimes” versus “Rarely/Never”.

The Chi-Square test revealed a significant association: $\chi^2(1, N = 158) = 7.42$, $p = .006$. The standardised residuals showed that students from urban backgrounds (Residual = +2.7) reported feeling pressure to post more frequently than their rural and semi-urban counterparts. Cramer’s V was 0.22, indicating a small-to-moderate effect size. This points to a potentially different social media culture that exists in the urban surroundings and is further experienced only by the urban Gen Z student. These students may be more embedded in networks where curated self-presentation is the norm.

Discussion

Above statistical findings depict a detailed and nuanced portrait of Gen Z students. usage at Banaras Hindu University. The discourse is beyond mere description; this discussion interprets these statistical results, trying to relate them to the broader theoretical and societal context and integrating the insights gained from inferential statistical testing.

The Hegemony of Instagram and the Mobile-First Self

The overarching dominance of Instagram (84.8%) among SNSs is arguably the most defining characteristic of this digital world. This is not just a selection of a platform; it is more of an adoption of a specific mode of communication that is inherently visual, curated, and algorithmic. The

individual self that is constructed and presented on Instagram is one mediated through images, filters, and stories. This has profound implications for individual identity construction. It benefits aesthetic presentation, encourages a culture of visual comparison, and shapes self-narrative into a highlight reel of ephemeral “Stories” and carefully composed grid posts. In this context, the self becomes a brand that requires management (Marwick, 2013). Nearly 94.9% of individuals rely on smartphones for their SNS requirements. This creates a scenario where identity performance is not just confined to a desktop in a private settings room but is a portable, continuous, and integrated part of everyday life. The “front stage”, as articulated by Goffman’s term, is portably carried in one’s pocket, always accessible for performance or audience monitoring.

The “Informed Connector”: Utility over Validation

The single most compelling finding of this paper is the clear pattern of motivations that prioritises utility and connection over external validation. The statistics of using SNSs for “News & Information” (64.6%), “Staying updated with trends” (62.7%), and “Professional/Academic growth” (51.3%) position these students as “informed connectors”. Gen Z are actively using these platforms as tools to navigate their academic, professional, and social worlds. This closely aligns with the cognitive and social integrative gratifications of Uses and Gratifications theory previously discussed.

The significantly low emphasis on “Seeking validation” (15.8%) is a corrective to the popularly held description of Gen Z. It suggests that BHU students, being active participants, may possess a more critical and utilitarian approach to SNSs. Their engagement is less about a fragile ego dependent on likes but more about a practical use of a powerful informational and social network. This finding further pushes researchers and academicians to move beyond simplistic narratives of vanity and anxiety and recognise the strategic, resource-orientated ways in which this demographic leverages digital tools.

The Performance of Identity: Acknowledging the Curated Self

While the previous points are grounded on data related to motivations and platforms, they also reveal a critical insight about identity. The architecture of Instagram and the time invested in these platforms naturally lead to questions about authenticity. Although this paper focuses on descriptive patterns, one conclusion from the data offers a powerful preliminary glimpse into identity perception. Although not tabulated in the earlier tables, responses to the identity perception question revealed that only 30.7% of students reported no difference between their real-life personality and their social media persona. The majority, 50.7%, reported being “Slightly different”, and 18.7% stated “Completely different”. This means that 69.4% of respondents consciously

acknowledge a disconnect between their online and offline selves.

This is a clear empirical indicator of identity performance in action, which strongly supports a Goffmanian interpretation. Students are not simply transposing their offline identity online; they are meticulously curating, editing, and performing a version of themselves specifically tailored for the digital “front stage”. This performance should not necessarily be negative; it can be a natural part of identity exploration. However, it evidently demonstrates that for a large majority, the online self is a managed project. This finding creates a crucial bridge for the next phase of this research, which will further examine the ‘managed project’, mechanisms and psychological impacts of this identity work.

Statistical Nuances: Demographics Shape Digital Behavior

By employing inferential analysis, it adds an extra layer of precision, revealing that the overall patterns are not monolithic but are infused by demographic characteristics. The use of Chi-Square tests allows us to state these relationships with statistical confidence. Given the near-ubiquitous adoption of Instagram across the sample, the observed gender association reflects a relative difference in likelihood rather than exclusive or polarised platform use.

The significant association between gender and Instagram preference ($\chi^2(1)=4.67$, $p=.031$, $V=0.17$) aligns with global research suggesting that visual platforms like Instagram often have a higher appeal among women, potentially due to differing socialisation patterns and communication styles (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016). This finding suggests that the “visual identity economy” of Instagram is gendered at BHU, with female students being more active participants in this specific mode of self-presentation.

Additionally, the link between field of study and academic use of SNS ($\chi^2(1)=5.89$, $p=.015$, $V=0.19$) indicates that STEM students are more actively integrating these platforms into their educational and professional development. This could be because STEM fields have a strong culture of using online platforms like LinkedIn for networking and engaging with key influencers and journals on Twitter/X; they also access tutorial content on YouTube, which they broadly classify under “social media” in the survey. This correlation reflects a pragmatic engagement of digital tools to meet their daily academic and professional needs.

The most significant social finding is the correlation between background and perceived pressure to post ($\chi^2(1)=7.42$, $p=.006$, $V=0.22$). The moderate effect size indicates that students from urban backgrounds experience a distinctively different pressure-cooked environment on SNS. This may be attributed to a more known culture of social comparison, higher exposure to influencer content, or stronger peer networks that are deeply

associated with curated online personas. This particular result opens up important questions about the digital divide, which is primarily about access to the internet and related resources. But it's also about the psychological burdens and social expectations associated with the easy availability

The Paradox of High Engagement and Nuanced Impact

The data presents a potential paradox: students are investing significant time and cognitive energy in these platforms (high frequency, long duration), yet their motivations are largely functional rather than deeply emotional or validation-seeking. This indicates a complex, perhaps ambivalent, relationship with SNSs. They are indispensable tools for connectivity and information. The act of maintaining a curated persona (as acknowledged by 69.4%) and the demographic-specific pressures (as revealed by the inferential analysis) carry their own cognitive load. This duality of SNSs as both a utility and a stage for performance characterises the contemporary student experience. Gen Z are sharp navigators of this digital space; however, this navigation requires continuous negotiation between authenticity (who you are) and social expectation (who you can be) and between consuming information and managing one's own digital footprint, with these negotiations being shaped by their gender, field of study, and background.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to map the social media landscape for Gen Z students at Banaras Hindu University, and the data-driven descriptive results provide a clear profile of the cohort in focus that is further enhanced by statistical testing. The typical BHU student in this sample is a frequent, daily user of social media, primarily accessing visual-based platforms like Instagram on their smartphone for over an hour each day. Their engagement is driven not by a thirst for validation but by a desire to stay informed, connect with peers, and grow their academic and professional interests. Furthermore, most of them are aware that their online presence is a curated performance, distinct in some way from their offline self.

The incorporation of inferential statistics, specifically Chi-Square tests and Cramer's V, has allowed this paper to move beyond mere description to identify statistically significant correlations between different variables like gender, background, and field of study. We can state with confidence that at BHU, gender, field of study, and background are not just demographic characteristics but are meaningful factors that shape how students engage with and experience social media. Women show a greater inclination for Instagram, next STEM students are more likely to utilise SNSs for academic advancement, and urban student respondents find significantly more

pressure to curate their online content. These findings give a more precise and objective foundation for understanding the digital habitat of the modern Gen Z student.

The implications of these results can be multifaceted. For instant university administrators, it is imperative to highlight the need to integrate digital literacy programmes that go beyond safety warnings, teaching students to critically engage with the curated realities they consume and produce, while being mindful of the different pressures faced by various student groups. For mental health professionals, it underscores the importance of addressing the pressures associated with identity performance and constant social comparison, particularly for students from urban backgrounds. For researchers, this study provides a statistical baseline for upcoming future longitudinal or comparative studies that can be measured.

This paper does have its own limitations. The use of a convenience sample from a single university means the findings cannot be generalised to all Indian or even Uttar Pradesh Gen Z students or even to all BHU students. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design identifies patterns and associations but cannot establish causality.

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BOOK REVIEW

DECOLONISING ENVIRONMENTALISM: Alternative Visions and Practices for Environmental Action by Prakash Kashwan and Aseem Hasnain. 2025. New York: Bloomsbury Academic. 206 Pp. Paperback. ISBN: 978-13503-3546-2.

Decolonising Environmentalism is a welcome edition to the existing literature on Ecology and Environment. Since about three decades we have been debating on various issues that are spoiling the earth. Earlier there was much importance given to Environmental Determinism which explained about the deterministic role of environment in shaping culture, i.e., variables like distance from sea, climate type, temperature, humidity, wild rivers and mountains. They determine personality, physical feature, morality, politics, government, religion, material culture, kinship, marriage, etc. Those who supported environmental possibilism they rejected determinism. However, it seems these days deterministic role of environment is reiterated. Today, we are facing the serious crisis of climate change and global warming. The world is disturbed with Israel, Iran, USA, Palestine, Russia, Ukraine, and India-Pakistan wars and skirmishes. Many countries of the world have tension within as well. Thus, we are divided. It sounds difficult to keep temperature rise within 1.5 degree Celsius, because it requires about 43 per cent cut in emission by 2030.

Imagine in about 60-70 years, hence the earth will be warmer by 4 degree Celsius, what will happen to our future generations. We have already fallen into the trap of greenhouse gases among other things, leading to climate change and global warming. From 1995, Conference of Parties have been taking place to tackle the environmental problem, and the 31st COP is going to take place in Antalya, Turkiye from November 9 to 20, 2026.

Sociologically speaking Anthony Giddens' *Politics of Climate Change* gave a new direction towards understanding the climate issues. In fact, Mainstream environmentalism emerged in the colonial era when European elites and colonial administration presented themselves as vanguards of human civilisation. In light of this, the volume discusses decolonising the mind for decolonising environmentalism. The authors say decolonising environmentalism requires reimagining the environment and environmental problems beyond the narrow confines of Eurocentrism. The frameworks of coloniality and decoloniality--a South American intellectual movement

that begun in the 1990s--offer useful insights on how colonialism and new colonialism shape environmental conservation (p. 36).

The blurb of the book rightly summarises the volume: it attempts a critical analysis of the wealthy and influential environmental groups that committed to anti-racists strategies in the wake of the racial awakening of 2020. Yet, they continue to embrace false solution like carbon markets and biodiversity offsets, which carry deeply rationalised consequences. By tracing the routes of these misplaced priorities to detrimental modernity steeped in colonialism and capitalism, the author call for transformational changes in human nature relationships. They distill lessons from the divestment movement, which has questioned the fossil fuel industry's moral standing and food sovereignty activists, who have mobilised global civil society to hold agribusiness corporations accountable. Amidst calls for "apocalyptic optimism", the author's offer a radical vision grounded in inter-sectional ecofeminism, Indigenous sovereignty, and strategies honed in the trenches of transnational environmentalism.

The book has lengthy notes to the tune of 40 pages. The notes include impressive references. Overall it is a wonderful analysis of decolonising environment and a must read for all researchers and even common man to understand the contemporary reality on environment. Kudos to the author's for producing such a brilliant discourse on a vital issue.

Sukant Kumar Chaudhury

Editor, *The Eastern Anthropologist*