



Full Length Review Article

BIRHORE TRIBES IN NATURAL ENVIRONMENT-A SPECIAL CASE STUDY IN PURULIA DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL

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INTRODUCTION

Today, in this paper I would try to draw an attention to a very reclusive tribe of people who reside very close and yet are quite unknown to us. We are more or less familiar with the ancient tribes of Jaroa and Ongee of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, But, The Birhore tribes who hail from the Purulia District of West Bengal are very rarely brought into the lime-light. The Life of these people are yet to be touched or (if you allow me say) “to be tainted” by the so-called Global Urban civilisation of modern times. They are still quite successfully nurturing their own culture amid the beautiful environment provided by mother-nature herself.

In this essay, I would try to highlight on defferent facets of the lives of the Birhores like their sufferings and their joys, their agonies and their ecstasies, their desires and dreams and ofcourse about the shattering of those dreams. The essay has been written only after I had personal acquaintance with some members of the tribe. From the district town of Purulia if one travels almost 49 kms. in North-West Direction he would reach Jhalda town and Municipality.^{** 1} And a journey of 32 Kms. from Purulia town in the South-West direction would lead you to Barabhum (Balarampur). In between these to tiny towns of Balarampur and Jhalda there is the vast expanse of hilly area, dominated primarily by Ayodhya range of hills which has an area of 945 sq. kms. In the vicinity of Ayodhya ‘Pahar’ (Mountain) and at the heart of Ayodhya ‘Pahar’ itself we have a good number of villages in which resided lakhs of tribal people. To name a few of those title we might mention the names of Sing Mura, Sing Babu, Sing Sardar, Mura, Karjee, Murmu, HansdaSoren, Tudu, Hembram and certainly the Birhores^{**2} However, one must remember that the Birhores are very different from all other tribes of this locality. When, all the other tribes slowly but certainly are trying to get themselves

assimilated into what we call “Mainstream” of society (at times at the cost of their own identities), the Birhore people are engaged in a solitary journey of their own. And precisely this is where lies the uniqueness of the Birhore tribe of people. First, let me introduce you to the geographical location of the villages in which the Birhore tribes reside. Following is the chart that might be helpful in understanding this :-

Place	Nearest Town	No. of Families
Bhupatipally	Baghmundi	42 Families
Bareria	Baghmundi / Laharia	12 Families.
Ulgara	Jhalda	04 Families.
Khamar	Jhalda	06 Families.

But, I would now talk not about the above mentioned places but only about that part of Birhore tribes who are in greatest of difficulties. They hail from Moultarh locality of Hesahatu Gram Panchayet. From Jhalda Municipality, If one travels approximately 11 kms. along the road that goes towards Brajapur, it reaches Tanasi more , from Tanasi More, on the Eastern direction at about 10 Kms. distance (In Motor cycle mile mitres) lies LatuaPahar, surrounded by forest on every side, Such is the density of Latua Forest that wild animals like Elephants, Tigers, Jackels can still be traced in it. Moultarh village, dominated primarily by tribal people of different tribes live in different parts of this village. Ten Birhores families reside together at a tiny part of the village almost at the lap of the hills and forests. ^{*7} Together they would number to a megre 28 persons ^{*8} .

Only 25 yrs. back the whole tribe of the Birhores of this part had their dwellings amid the deep jungle, accompanied by only violent animals. At present, they have this Moultarh village of LatuaPahar as their only abode. This village is under ChhotoBakadmouza of Jhalda P.S. SadarPurulia. In the leisurely winter afternoon of 26th January, 2011, along with Mr. Tapan Kumar Sahu, a local resident who accompanied me to Moultarh to make me understand their dialect reached the Birhore village by his Motorcycle at around 1 p.m. Some members of the tribe with whom we met and talked there at that afternoon are detailed below :-

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- 1) GejeraSikari - Age - 51 Yrs.-- Handicapped because of the lack of of medical facility
- 2) KankaSikari - 51 Yrs.
- 3) JhuruaSikari - 58 Yrs.-- Getting slowly blind in one eye.
- 4) VethorSikari - 68 Yrs.



Here, I must mention that though these people, carry 'Sikari' as their surname, none of them is hunter in profession. Apart from them, there were some women with whom we managed to talk. They are, to name only the adults, (aged between 18 to 60 years) - NankiSikari (Birhorin), SaralaSikari, PanoSikari, SamriSikari, MalatiSikari, ReetaSikari. Along with them their seven children were also present. Rest of the tribe were either in Jungle or were at some where else.). From the information that I gleaned from my conversation with these people. I came to know that a five-room concrete house was built for these tribals in the year 2002-03. It was inaugurated by the then

District Magistrate of Purulia District, Mr. Debaprasad Jana *11

a. Though there were 10 Birhorefamilies at the village, only five families got the ownership of the home. The other five families had to be satisfied with cottages made of mud and clay. Need and penury have always been there with these ten families. According to the Birhores, when the D.M. came to inaugurate the house there has been a flood of promises. But then, as happens with so many Government efforts, the tribe is still groping around an immense darkness. Though, government 'Babus' come to make regular routine visit, nothing has changed for these people.

Another fact that must be mentioned here is that five lavatories*11 b were constructed for these tribal which they never made use of. These children of nature had rather opted for the vast expanse of nature when they felt it necessary. We, the members of so called 'civilized society' would certainly be shocked if we ever witness the long catalogue of 'nothings' with which the lives of the Birhores are imbued. They don't have any land for agriculture; they don't possess any domestic animals like cow, goat or even pigs; they have no medical facility; they have no mode of transport any and every kind of electronic media like T.V. Radio or even electricity itself is alien to them. They are all residents of a surprising and shocking domain of 'No'. In the chilly winter they can not even dream of weary proper woolen clothings. Here I cannot help adding that we just shivered in the dreary winter of that locality. Yet, it was not to be their situation. They were promised of a land of milk and honey. To quote JhuruaSikari-"Government has built five homes for us but has done nothing to make us fight with starvation. What is the utility of such homes if we don't have anything to eat" [I am quoting the dialect also -



But it was not that nothing could be done for these marginalised people. No political party ever tried to meet the minimum needs of these helpless people. Some N.G.O. (Non Government Organisation) work for different other tribes at Purulia district. Yet they are surprisingly indifferent to the Birhores. To quote Kanka Sikari-"No one ever talks to us" *14.

I, on my own initiative told them in nut-shell, what the Govt. of West Bengal under the system of Panchayat Raj proposes to do for the poorer people. But the Birhores (all of them, I assure you) were quite disillusioned at those information as they already had very bitter trust with this whole Govt. spon-sored programme. Many a times, they have prayed to the office of B.D.O. And each time the B.D.O. of Jhalda-I Block*15 has told them to come on some other day. When will that day arrive? Will that day ever arrive? Wise now, these Birhores no more waste their time on visiting the B.D.O.

However, the B.D.O. time and again visits the Birhore village and thus fulfilling his official duty just forgets them*16. The shattering of dreams was too palpable in the sad despondant words of VethorSikari when he said, let me quote him - "He visits us to see either we are dead or alive; that would end all the responsibilities of the Government". Though these tribals live at the forests they have already developed quite an understanding of how the political system works. They are, for a long time casting their votes in favour of one political party, but even that party has never shown any sense of responsibility to their cause. To ice the cake, even to get their well-deserved B.P.L Card they had to bribe (the political workers). They were quite candid in discussing this matter with me. And yes, some of them by virtue of their hard earned money, given as bribes have received B.P.L. Cards. Yet once again, no facility has ever reached upto the far-off village. However, the most dreadful and agonising has been their experiences with the Govt. medical facilities. Any sensible human being aware of the phenomena would tend to believe that the system of our civilized society is 'conspiring' to wipe out this tribe out of the face of earth. Yes, I am consciously using the word 'conspiring'. According to VethorSikari, sisters (Didimoni) of health deptt.come to the locality twice or thrice in the whole year to provide them with tablets (which they tenderly term as - ). And believe me, the sisters just tell them to make use of those tablets according to their necessity.

Without any education how can these helpless people understand which medicine is to be taken and for what disease? At times, some of them ask other semi-literate persons and use those medicines according to their advice which I guess is even more dangerous. But, more often than not those medicines are just thrown away. And so they have no other option but to be back to the traditional knowledge of medicine derived from herbs and roots of plants from the jungle. Is it anything less than a 'conspiracy'? And now listen to the results, Jhurua cannot see any more in one of his eyes; Nanki has turned deaf and Gejera's spinal cord has been damaged and damaged permanently. And perhaps his twisted spinal cord is an ironic comment on the medical facility that we the 'civilized people' provide to them which has brought them so close to death. As far as pregnant women are concerned, their condition is equally wretched. In a long 24 hours day they can never have meals more than two times. And what kind of a meal I am referring to? It is nothing but 'Marbhat', the whole rice including the soup. Even at such state of pregnancy they are very much outside all medical provisions. Even in this 21st century their children are being born in that very way in which thousands of

years ago children used to see the first light of life. And we all have heard of so many special packages' for pregnant women of poorer stratum of the society. Even after a child is born, the mother has to lead the same life as before. Now, let us try to visualise their daily life. From morning till dusk all of them are engaged in searching and earning for little bit of food that is available to them from any possible source. Male folks generally use the forest as source and they collect 'ram daton', 'saldaton' (branches of different trees to be used as tooth-brush), leaves of sal tree, honey and roots and skin of a special plant named 'Ghong'. From the roots of this 'Ghong' plant, they prepare cords. The main occupation of the whole tribe including the women is to prepare this cord. From their own words, I have understood that the raw material for this cord is collected from 'Ghong' plant by male members of the tribe. And when the actual work of preparing the cord is done, women also actively participate in the whole process. This cord is used by people of other areas to tend their domestic animals. With hard labour of a full day, one family can prepare 8 such cords which they can sell at a price of Rs.32/- each piece of such cord is sold for Rs.4/- only.

Sometimes, they also work on contractual basis for well of families of the locality and after preparing cords from the materials provided by that family can earn anything between Rs. 30/- to 35/-. But they are not always lucky enough to get such job and we must remember, they are human beings and human bodies have their frailties. So an illness or sickness means, a day without any money. So, they are bound to go to deeper jungle to collect wood, honey or 'daton', knowing fully the risk that is involved in such a perilous journey. The forest in which they live is slowly losing its density and also is changing its character, it has made their situation all the more vulnerable.

On early days, according to them the forest was rich with trees which used to provide them with edible fruits. Even a few years back, they have collected sufficient ripe figs, yellow berry (kend), berries, 'bell' from the jungle. But now the jungle has become quite poor in this regard. A few such trees that are still visible can be a source of occasional pleasure but in no way a solution for these starving people. The stay of their suffering does not end here. To make their daily life even more complicated a group of 'terrorists' have made their base in this jungle. It has been revealed to me by the Birhores themselves, who have to lead an even more marginalised life because of them. When I, along with my companion expressed our wish to enter into the jungle, the Birhores advised us not to do so as the jungle is no more safe even for these heroes of jungle. They are losing their right, over the forest enjoyed from time immemorial. In spite of the 'chill penury' and in spite of the neglect on part of the government, these tribals are still existing but just 'existing'.

As I was present at the Birhore village at the time of their meal. I had the misfortune of watching what they get to eat. Two little sisters, were devouring up rice of cheapest variety (approx. Rs. 10/- per Kg) and there was nothing else for them and yet that colourless and perhaps tasteless rice was almost a heavenly diet for them. Isn't this picture alone sufficient to make us ashamed of our 'civilised society' which has decided not to look at such spectacles? Whenever these Birhores manage to save a little money they go to the weekly Bazar of Piprajara village under Hesahatu Gram Panchayat. There, they buy tomatoes, broiler

chickens and spices. This much far their luxury they can afford. And as the jungle no more provides them with animals to hunt they have to depend entirely on this Bazar. However, they can go to the weekly market not more than two or three times in one long year.

The market is almost 5 kms. away from their Moultarh village and there is no mode of transport. For the rest of the year they have to be satisfied with their wretched diet of cheap rice boiled with the help of wood gathered from the nearby forest. At times their meal is 'enriched' with an item prepared from a locally available vegetable called 'Gurmakhnar Chat'. Actually, they get all their strength spent only to arrange the meagre rice which they eat twice a day. Their unruly hair and untended beard made me a little curious and I asked whether they visit a barber or not. In reply, they quite placidly replied that they themselves look after their hair and beard as they in no situation can afford to pay Rs. 10/- to the barba. To know a little about their religion I asked Rita and Malati, two girls from the tribe whether they use vermilion and 'shankha' as they are Hindu. Here I also encountered the same answer -poverty. It is not that these girls don't have the desire but poverty as usual holds them back. "When there is a will, there is a way" - this oft-used saying fails to make any sense in this helpless world of Birhores. So, What we find is that these people have failed to assimilate themselves into the main stream of society and once again have gone into the tender shelter of nature.

The different projects taken by the Govt. are nothing more than tales from far-off land for them. They have got just 5 rooms and 5 lavatories. Though human civilisation, with utmost cruelty has decided to look away from these wretched people, nature is still their last source of living. But the necessity of these people were never too much. A little bit of willingness and effort from administration could have changed the entire course of their life. What do they need? Nothing more than a few small plots of lands and few cattle to look after, A good amount of land is left totally unused in the hilly area. If a little part of that land were distributed among these poor people, they could probably have smiled with some pleasure. Actually the root of the whole suffering lies hidden in one small statistics. The whole Birhore tribe of Moultarh village amounts to a mere 22 votes and who would care for these few votes? Annapurna Yojna, Antodaya Yojna. G.R., Tribal Benefit Schemes and so many other packages are there. But none of these plans has ever entered into the lives of the Birhores. They were once blessed children of Nature, we the 'civilized' people tried to put them into the glaring light of modern times. But as our effort was neither sincere, nor whole-hearted, it failed miserably.

And in the mean time the Birhores have already lost what they always had as their own grace of nature. Where would they go now? Both directions of the road now lead them to a blind end. Should we just watch them slowly vanishing into nothing- less? Time and History is in a hesitation now. One wrong step on our part might be the end of an entire tribe who are human beings as we are... In 2014, the condition of the Birhores is more or less, the same.

Source Hints

1. Indian Railways.
2. Interview with Budhu Singh Mura.
3. Statistics provided by the Birhores.

4. Milestones of Public Works Dept., W.B.
5. Interview with the Birhores.
6. Information provided by the Birhores.
7. do
8. do
9. Explanations of the Birhores
10. do
11. a.ZillaTathyaSanskritiDaftar, Purulia
- 11b.Interview with Jhurua
12. do
- 13.Quotes from the members of Birhores tribes.
14. Interview with KankaSikari.
