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## Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Identity of Different Tribal Communities of Eastern India : A Study

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**Abstract:** *The term 'traditional knowledge' which refers to the vast area of knowledge and accumulated belief textured in the cultural traditions of indigenous, local communities and based on interaction with the natural environment has been orally passed for generations from person to person and may also be expressed through various performing folk art forms. Cultural identity is the feeling of belonging to a group and part of a person's self-conception and perception that has its own distinct culture. Different types of traditional performing folk art forms along with tribal garments and ornaments, puppetry and tribal wall art have become indicators of cultural identity of different tribal communities of Eastern India. However, with the 21<sup>st</sup> century global world there is a strong need to preserve this indigenous knowledge and culture. The present paper, therefore, is an attempt to bring out the relation between indigenous knowledge and the cultural identity of the tribal community and the means of preservation and propagation of the tribal culture of Eastern India.*

**Keywords:** *Traditional knowledge, Cultural Identity, Tribal Community, Preservation.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

In very simple analysis, the terms 'traditional knowledge', 'indigenous knowledge' and 'local knowledge' refer to the wide and broad area of knowledge, collected and gathered belief system, innovations and applications rooted in the long established cultural traditions of indigenous, regional or local bodies embodying their traditional life-styles. In our day to day life, anything 'traditional' refers to a kind of knowledge system that have been transmitted (both in written and oral form) for generation from community to community / person to person and territory to territory. It is based on empirical observation and very innovative in nature. Accordingly, it is classified into many segments : literature, arts, science, agriculture, technical, ecological, medicinal and cultural and any knowledge that is based on any one of these segments is called 'traditional knowledge' of that particular field. Thus, traditional knowledge is always community / particular society based knowledge and as a matter of fact is in a mode of constant change / transformation to an environment that is always changing and flexible in nature. As already stated, traditional knowledge has always been deeply interlinked with culture and may well be expressed through different cultural expressions like dance, music, legends, folklore, customs, rituals and all other visual and performing arts in tribal life. Traditional knowledge, therefore, is an integral part of the tribal cultural life in any part of the world.

#### EASTERN INDIA AND THE TRIBAL COMMUNITY

India's tribal population covering 30 states/UTs totalling about 104.3 million people as per the Census Report,2011<sup>1</sup> which constitutes 8.6 percent of the total population of the country comprises about 705 distinct tribal communities. There are mainly two tribal groups in the eastern Indian states like Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal & Orissa and the parts of Andaman. These racial groups are – (i) Proto-Austroloid and (ii) Mongoloid distinctly identified and separated by certain physical, behavioural and residential pattern. Among the different tribal communities the most dominant group is Santal residing chiefly in the states like Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal & Orissa. Some other tribal communities in these states are Munda, Oraon, and Ho in Jharkhand ; the Bhumij, Bhuiya, Gond, Kandha, Santal and Saora in Orissa; the Bhumij, Santal, Kora, Lepcha, Bhutia, Munda, and Oraon in West Bengal; Santal, Munda, Ho, Bhumij, Oraon and Gond in Bihar.

#### CULTURAL IDENTITY

From time immemorial India is uniquely identified for a special feature of its own ,i.e; 'Unity in Diversity'. Naturally every group be it tribal or non tribal inhabiting here is separated from other by certain distinctive features which

are in a way expressed through tradition of art, dance, music, language, rituals and customs etc, in short, under a bigger umbrella term 'culture' while necessarily there remains divergences and discrepancies among these communities on various issues. So each group is distinguished by a kind of unique cultural identity which is exactly their own and not to be mixed ever with other. 'Cultural identity' is, therefore, a feeling of belonging to a group. In today's world where every nation is trying to make an identity of their own and the country of their living a cultural construct, it should be intermingled with a sense of nationality, religion, class, locality of the people residing there. It is thus a bridge / bond among the people who have shared the same culture. To put it in other words, it is a common stage where maximum number of people share same cultural values and the root of which is hidden under the cultural ethos of that particular tribal community. It helps a/an community/individual in understanding the relationships around it and is shaped by the people within its culture and the surroundings to better understand the world. From the postcolonial perspective 'cultural identity', therefore, may be interpreted as a tool for constructive response to colonialism and the hegemonic 'cultural imperialism' in the name of pre-colonial values for defining one's domain as a cultural construct with certain shared identical cultural values and norms.

Different tribal communities are saliently identified by their own traditional and age old culture that are expressed through different forms of tribal artistic genres. It is really nice to observe how each tribal group is separated from other only by virtue of their life style largely dominated by culture and identity associated to it. Therefore, with a view to establishing a close association between traditional knowledge and tribal culture a kind of categorisation of the umbrella term 'tribal culture' is essential. The notion of 'tribal culture' therefore may be categorised into certain sub categories like (i) Festivals and Ceremonies (ii) Performing arts including different types of tribal dance, music and musical instruments (iii) Garments and Ornaments, (iv) tribal art forms like puppetry and tribal wall art etc .

### **FESTIVALS & CEREMONIES**

Since there goes a proverb, "old is gold", tribal people have been carrying on their age old rich cultural heritage even to day in this global world and amidst such 'e' life. They have a separate and distinct cultural identity of their own majority of which is constituted by the share of their festivals and ceremonies in life and through taking part in the tribal cultural occasions and celebrations. At the same time, the nature of tribals' celebration of festivals is primarily congregational and approach is collective. The festivals always have been closed community festival with little scope for non tribals to join and integrate with them expressing their traditional custom and culture and are interconnected to the cultural identity and solidarity of the tribal society at large.

Baha, the Flower Festival and the second biggest festival of the Santals after Sohrai is celebrated in the beginning of spring. The ritual observed revolves around man's communion with nature and the celebration of beauty. This is the time, Santals believe from time immemorial, when the trees become reproductive and one should not disturb their body and soul by plucking or cutting off their buds, flowers, leaves and branches.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it has become a part of their traditional knowledge that Santals never pluck or eat the flowers or fruits of Mango trees, never tear off the leaves of Peepal and Neem trees before celebrating Baha. Women do not use Sal flowers in their hair for decoration and trees are not cut for firewood at this time. If it does happen, the firewood is not brought to the village but is kept outside. As per the tribal traditional belief, any family who breaks such rules will not be visited by the village priest who normally enters every family's house during the Baha rituals. Sohrai which is a harvest and cattle festival of santals, Oraon and Munda people in Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha and West Bengal is mainly celebrated at the beginning of winter harvest<sup>3</sup> when the paddy has ripened on the new moon day of the Bengali month of *Kartik*, coinciding with Diwali or Kali puja, in the month of October-November. The age old traditional belief/knowledge that marks this festival with a unique distinctiveness that Marang Buru (God of mountain), Jaher Ayo (Goddess of forest) and the elder sister of the Santhals would descend on earth from heaven to visit their brothers on this festive occasion. Santals pay homage to their gods and their ancestors as a thanksgiving for their crops, their cattle, their ploughs, and everything that has helped them to attain the harvest. Sarhul, celebrated in the beginning of New Year is one of the grand festivals of tribes (Oraon) in Jharkhand as part of the traditional knowledge regarding the Sal tree and its leaves and their productive role in it. Sarhul which literally means 'Worship of Sal' is dedicated to Mother Earth (Dharti Mata) with the belief that good yield of Sal fruit means bumper agricultural harvest for them. Sarhul festival is very old and traditional in nature and believed to have its roots/origin during the age of Mahabharata. It has thus been carrying the age old tradition and tribal identity from

an antique period and consequently attached to the rich cultural heritage of Indian tribal folk at large. The Karam Puja<sup>4</sup> held in August-September is also a sacred festival of agriculture of the tribes like Baiga, Oraon, Kora, Munda, Ho, Kol and Santal etc in the Eastern Indian states. As part of the traditional knowledge, the tribal community believes that due to Karam Devta they have a good harvest and so they worship trees during this festival and pray to the Mother Nature to keep their farmlands green and ensure a rich harvest. Karam Puja being very traditional has also various legends and is based on the tribal indigenous knowledge and culture. Mage Parab (Festival) is the main festival of the Ho and Munda people. It is celebrated during the month of December to February with much joy and mirth among the tribal community. As in many other tribal festivals like Baha, Sohrai, here during this celebration a tribal god Singbonga (in Mage parab) who is credited with the prestige of creating the first man on earth, Luku Kola, is worshipped by the Ho and Munda community. People share their culture, expression and reciprocal understanding in these festivals which are expressive of tribal cultural identity at large. As part of the traditional belief the central idea behind this celebration of the festival is to offer new pulse and other cereals to the ancestors. The Dasae Festival of the Santal which coincides with the celebration of Durga Puja gets its name from the month in which it occurs. The celebration finds its root in the traditional knowledge for it goes back to a period in history when the Santals had to defend themselves and hide their identity behind masks. The origin of the festival may be found in the Durga Puja and the story of Mahisashur which again refer to the traditional belief and culture of the tribal people.



Fig 1: Baha Festival



Fig 2: Karam Festival



Fig 3: Mage Festival

## 2. PERFORMING ARTS - DANCE , MUSIC & INSTRUMENTS

The tribals are fond of dance, music and different types of songs for different occasions. Music and dance of the tribals are always closely associated with their rituals and festivals and reflect their collective nature, community feelings and social awareness. Many of these songs and dances as one of the major parts of folk art forms and the component factors of rich Indian tribal cultural heritage are spontaneous expression of the composers' sentiment, expression of ecstasy, melancholy and vagaries of life. Both past incidents, traditions and current events find expression in their dance and song and music. All these, in a way, portray the cultural identity of the indigenous people of the Eastern Indian states.

Most of the tribal people belonging to different states like West Bengal, Orissa, Jharkhand of Eastern India feel proud for a special kind of tribal martial folk art form that finds its expression through world famous Chhau dance which is very unique and distinctively carry certain glorious tribal cultural heritage with its own aesthetics. This kind of dance form is very traditional in nature and mostly narrate tales on Gods and deities. The vibrant Karam dance is performed during the popular Karam festival in which the Karam tree is worshipped as a symbol of productivity. This dance form with typical musical instrument 'Timki' and ethnic costumes in a circle style rhythmic pattern reflects the real cultural identity of the tribal communities like Oraon, Munda, Ho, Santal, Bhumij, Kol and Kora of the Eastern India ; 'Paata Naach' in Paata Festival (Parab) which is really an adaptation of the Hindu Charak Puja is performed in honour of the Lord Mahadeva. Thus, every tribal celebration from 'Baha' to 'Karam' have a particular kind of dance and musical associations attached to it. In addition to all these tribal dance forms, constituting a part of the local army in Bengal from at least as far back as the early middle ages, was a group of men mainly from the low caste Bagdi community highly accomplished in a particular type of art - Raibneshe, a male centric form.

Music is both externally and internally associated with the tribal performing arts and their life as a whole. Since tribal life is collective and community based in nature, they prefer using music as a medium for expressing the innermost feelings of their heart and also as a bridge to communicate with other tribal and non tribal people at large. Tribal music thus play a very dominant role in preservation of the cultural heritage of different tribal communities. Jhumur songs being both tribal and non tribal partly belong to tribal communities like Bhumij, Munda and Oraon. 'Paata Sareng' literally means songs sung at the Paata Parab of the Santal and 'Tusu gaan' usually sung at the Tusu festival is celebrated exclusively by women, young and old alike that again contribute to the formation of a unique kind of distinctive tribal cultural identity.

The multi cultural tribal groups of Eastern India have their own typical instruments that bear their cultural identity. The folk drum remains an essential accompaniment for all sorts of tribal dances. The Santals of West Bengal play the 'Buang', 'Banam', 'Madal' which they call 'Tumdak', or 'Tumdah', a smaller variant of the dhamsha which they call 'Tamdak' and a variety of 'Horns' and 'Flutes' <sup>5</sup>(Tiriao) which are made in Bankura and Birbhum. The drum locally known is 'Timki' is used as the main musical instrument in Karam dance. Ankle bells (Junko) and various kinds of fiddles (Banam) are also used as accompaniment to these musical events of the tribal people. Locals of the Bhutia Basti in the hill district of Darjeeling make a variety of ornate trumpets and a blowing conch and the 'Thanchen', a unique long ceremonial trumpet.



Fig4: Chhau Dance



Fig5: Patta Dance & Music



Fig 6: Instrument (Tumdak)

### 3. GARMENTS AND ORNAMENTS

Tribal garments and ornaments are very unique and distinctive in nature. All tribal groups therefore bear certain differences from others in dress and ornaments. A Santal woman hardly leaves her traditional dress and so is with the Bhutia people of the hill districts. Bakhu is a very common and traditional dress of the male and female members of the Bhutia people in the hill districts. It is a kind of full sleeve loose and very comfortable garment to wear. Any Bhutia people in any part of the world is chiefly known for these kinds of local tribal dresses which are distinctively of their own and bear a separate cultural identity of the tribal people there. The woman prefer to put on a silken full sleeved blouse called 'Honju'.

Santal has their own way to adorn themselves with ornaments which is again very distinctive in nature and style. The change in the tribal jewellerys has come along with the evolution of clothing. Some of the ornaments that Santal women wear are 'Hasa-sakam', 'Hasa-mala', 'Methed Sakam', 'Danda jhinhri', 'Danda thumko', and 'Itil Paini' etc.



Fig 7: Bhutia Garment



Fig 8: Tribal Ornament



Fig 9: Tribal Garment



#### 4. PUPPETRY AND WALL ART

Tribals are very often skilled with the art of puppetry. There is a unique and rare form practised among some Santal communities of West Bengal and Jharkhand, the 'Chadar Badar'. They are also rich with traditional mythological stories which are based largely on the life of their ancestors like Pilchu Budhi and Pilchu Haram who shared major part in constituting most of these age old stories that Santal have been carrying with them as a part of their rich tribal cultural heritage and identity respectively. Twelve clans (Hansda, Tudu, Murmu, Hembram, Baske, Besra, marandi etc) trace their origin to these mythical ancestors.

The distinctive Sohrai wall art which is matriarchal in tradition ( handed down from mother to daughter) is very unique and hint towards the tribal cultural identity in Eastern India. With the harvest festival knocking at the door, Santal women decorate their walls with murals of sohrai arts. It's from here that Sohrai art originated, adding to the rituals and traditions of Indian glorious tribal cultural heritage. This art form is monochromatic, extremely colourful and have been in vogue from time immemorial.

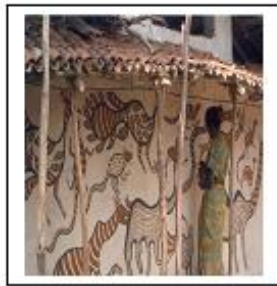


Fig10:Sohrai Wall Art



Fig 11: Santali Paintings

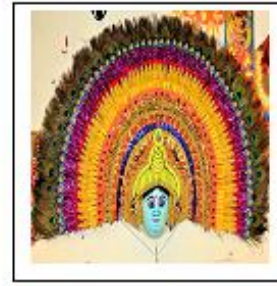


Fig 12: Chhau Mask

#### 5. CONCLUSIONS

However, with the 21<sup>st</sup> century global world the indigenous knowledge of different tribal communities of the Eastern India, preserved by the locals has either been confined to the small group of people of this region or left to subside gradually. Therefore, there is a strong need to preserve this traditional knowledge so that it can be carried forward for generations to come. Managing and documenting <sup>6</sup> indigenous knowledge will not only safeguard but also expose the hidden treasures of the region including domestic, religious and healing practices that the world has not known about. Information professionals can also play a major role in managing and documenting the indigenous knowledge of the Eastern Indian states with the proper means of preservation and propagation of the tribal culture there.

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