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## **Death and Resurrection of a Tribe – Study of a Birhor Tanda in the Coalfield area of Jharkhand**

By

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**Keywords :-** Birhor, Durukasmar, hunters and food gatherer, S.C. Roy Coalfield.

### **Abstract :-**

There are a number of Birhor Tandas in and near the coal field area of Jharkhand around Hazaribagh. They are facing challenges to their survival because of shrinking natural resources. They are trying to take to alternative sources of livelihood in order to survive. Their number is small as compared to other tribes. Their readiness to adopt alternative sources of livelihood is proving helpful to their survival.

### **Introduction :-**

Death and resurrection of Birhor is the basic theme of our study, Death is what S.C. Roy feared as a result of increasing deforestation and industrialisation. We see resurrection in their struggle for existence and their readiness to adopt alternative sources of livelihood.

We have taken up the present study of the Birhor tribe in a coal field area of Jharkhand with fears and apprehensive regarding their survive expressed by S.C. Roy about a hundred years back. The study of Roy contained in his monograph The Birhor. A Little known Jungle Tribe of Chotanagpur. It was a work of research based on a close study of Birhor life spread over a period of nearly ten years and has so far been a most authentic work on the tribe. No Birhor study can ignore it.

We have tried to examine and study the factors affecting Birhor tribe living in a coal field area, which has been one of the causes of degradation of forests and caused

hardships to the forest dwelling tribe. We have tried to assess the possibilities of their survival and improvement in their living conditions by taking into account the very factors which were feared as lethal to their future by S.C. Roy.

### **Research area – Land And The People**

The old Hazaribagh district (now split into Koderma, Chatra, Ramgarh, Hazaribag, Giridih and Bokaro) is home to the largest number of Birhor tribe in India. It spreads over a vast span over the entire area of North Chotanagpur division except Dhanbad district where Birhor population is nearly insignificant. The part of Jharkhand which had been very rich in flora and fauna embraces National Park in the Northern part of the district by the side of NH-33. It is broadly divided into three natural divisions in the form of central plateau, lower plateau and Damodar valley. Konar and Damodar rivers flow through it. What was once one of the richest forest zones of Jharkhand is gradually losing its wealth of natural resources due to mining especially coal mining operations and consequent deforestation. The forest district has virtually turned into a mining district. Mining operations have recently spread over Barkagaon, Keredari and Tandva Blocks which have been preeminently agricultural and rich in forests and accommodate a number of Birhor settlements.

Tigers which were frequently spotted in the past are rare, but leopards are still there even in the vicinity of mining operation of west Bokaro Ghatotar where they have frequently been trapped and shifted to the zoo. Bears, Jackals, Hyna, Foxes, Wild Boar, Monkeys, Hare Peacock, Jungle Fowl and Kotra have still not left this field, their number, however, has decreased. Wild elephants are there but due to their forest support shrinking are more than ever coming near villages, not only forest villages but beyond in search of food.

Even as the traditional store house of food from the trees and small games is disappearing the Birhor tribe are struggling to hunt for new ways of support and survival.

They are numerically small, socially isolated, economically insecure but culturally rich, tempera mentally gentle inhabiting several localities around Hazaribagh.

The Birhor Tandas were till recent times recognized by the typical leaf and twig huts known as Kumbhas which were small huts with low openings at the bottom constructed with tree leaves of Sal, Sakhua, Palas and Mahua etc and designed to protect their inmates against sun and rain. A Kumbha was a one room structure accommodating hearth, cooking utensils, a small store of medicinal herb, rope making tools and a few clothes. They don't have cots to sleep or relax on as a rule and always sleep on ground.

A Tanda is normally situated on the fringe of the jungle and outskirts of the neighboring villages. It consists of families belonging to one or more lineages. Life in a Birhor Tanda is peaceful but active and vibrates with the sound of dance and music on festive occasions.

Social, Academic and Welfare Activities :-

Ever since the days of S.C. Roy Birhor community in Hazaribagh area has been center of attention and activities, social, academics, welfare and of anthropological studies by scholars of all hues national, local and international. Homestead land and land for community farming have been settled. Bullocks with ploughs and seeds provided. Cows and goats given from time to time as well as rope making material. Food grains as well as cash are given to Birhor family as a part of monthly ration. Even solar panels and community toilets provided as a part of sanitary measures by the Government. Every Birhor Tanda has an Anganwari center and school for primary education where school dresses and books and mid-day meal are provided to the Birhor children. In nearly every Birhor Tanda pucca one room house with veranda have replaced the traditional Birhor Kumbhas. The colonies are mostly small and full of children whose numbers is apparently much greater than that of elders.

The Anthropology Department of Vinoba Bhave University at Hazaribagh headed by Professor(Dr.) Ganga Nath Jha has made field work in Birhor areas a part of academic

and research activities and is faithfully engaged in promoting welfare of the Birhor community almost on a regular basis encouraged and supported by the Vice Chancellor.

**Review of literature :-**

A comprehensive research by Chaturbhuj Sahu during the years 1977-1981 and subsequently published as Birhor Tribe – Dimensions of Development (Sahu 1995) discerns the prospect of development of the Birhor in organized agriculture through project to be sponsored by the Government.

A recent study by Edward Moon- Little published as a photo essay in the South Asianist presents an ethnographic record of the life of Birhor in the vicinity of Hazaribagh and is optimistic about the future of the tribe in technology as an aid to hunting.

A paper by Jaikumar and Rajnikant Kumar makes a few suggestions regarding the development of Birhor community through cluster development model.

**1. Objective and Methodology :-**

Our objective in the study is to collect first hand information about the Birhor tribe in order to reach an objective conclusion regarding their life, culture, problems and response to the social, cultural and ecological changes. Our study methodology includes observation, interview and case study.

**2. Facts and findings :-**

Our study area DURUKASMAR BIRHOR TANDA is situated in the heart of Kedla, Laiyo and west Bokaro, Ghatotanr coal field in the Mandu Block of newly formed Ramgarh district. The specific details of the Tanda are as follows:

Table no. - 01

S. No.	Demographic Profile of Research area Durukasmar G.P.- Basantpur District - Ramgarh					
1	Number of residential Birhor houses	Houses	Male	Female	Children under 10 year	
		56	49	52	Boys 56	Girls 62
2	Oldest Birhor alive age	Male	Female			
		75 years	67 years			

3	Kumbhas	Only 1			
4	Community hall	1			
5	Primary school	1			
6	T.V. Sets (all second hand)	15			
7	Power transformer	1			
8	Electricity connection	All families			
9	Jalminar	1			
10	Christian Birhor	1			
11	Non - Christian Birhor Family	51			
12	Major religion	Sarna			
13	Day Labour	Four Wheeler Vechicle driving			
14	Major professions in hunting and food gathering				
15	Education Matriculation	1			
16	Students visiting high school at Hazaribag	Boys - 10	Girls - 9		
10	Live Stock	Pigs and goats			

**Table No. 2(a) : Distribution of Population of the Birhore Tribe in India in 1911 and 2011**

S. No.	Total Population in 1911	Total Population in 2011
1	2026	17241

**Table No. 2(b) : Distribution of Population of the Birhor Tribe in India and the states in India in vide 2011 Census**

S. No.	Name of the States	Total Population	Percent n=17241	Rural Population	Percent n=16089	Urban population	Percent n=1115
1	Jharkhand	10,726	62.21	10,230	63.58	496	44.48
2	Bihar	377	2.18	323	2	54	4.84
3	Madhya Pradesh	52	0.3	11	0.06	41	3.37
4	Maharashtra	145	0.84	45	0.27	100	8.96
5	Odisha	596	3.45	555	3.44	4	0.35
6	Chhattisgarh	3104	18	3015	18.73	89	7.98
7	West Bengal	2241	12.99	1910	11.87	331	29.68
8	India	17241	100	16089	100	1115	100

In course of our study we interacted with the individuals and groups of the tribe men, women, boys and girls of all age groups and observed their responses, their mutual interactions, their households and living conditions and observed their reactions, responses and relationships within their own society and outside the Birhor community.

We tried to assess their social, political, religious awareness including domestic and social norms and values. Our interaction with young women individually and in groups reveals the following –

1. Marriage relations take place between boys and girls belonging to the same Tanda or even between those living in difference Tandas.
2. Ingotra marriage relations are avoided.
3. Divorces are not uncommon. There is no formal rule or practice for divorce.
4. A man generally takes another wife after he breaks relations with his wife. A wife generally avoids a second marriage and prefers to live with her children rather than form a new tie.
5. A deserted wife is very sensitive and particular regarding herself respect. She shall not afford to fall in the estimations of her children by making them feel that her own personal interests as a woman count more than the interest of her children.
6. Women take care of the households while men go out to work or to the jungle for hunting and collecting food.
7. No woman if she has a dependent son or daughter would like to remarry if she is divorced while every young man would prefer to marry a second time if he loses his wife due to death or separation.
8. In case of second or subsequent marriage of a widow or widower the decision lies with the man or woman rather than village or family elders.
9. If for any special reason the wife herself chooses to separate from his husband, the infant if she has any will continue with her. The husband may claim the children after sometime when he/she is weaned away. If not claimed by the father the child would continue with the separated mother.

Our interaction with boys in adolescent or early manhood reveals the following:

1. A Birhor in early man hood prefers to mix with non-Birhor.
  2. He prefers work in the coal field as a loader, coal cutter, day laborer or tempo or tractor driver because income is more secure in the work in the coal field than games.
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3. A maturing Birhor in adolescent or post adolescent period, would like to marry a girl of his choice.
4. Alcohol is less prevalent in early and young age Birkors than in those in the middle age.
5. A young Birhor after marriage prefers to remain in separation from parents.
6. A Birhor boy or girl, man or woman has least political awareness and does not cast his or her vote in favour of a candidate by his or her choice but as asked by some person who has influence over the Tanda.

The Tanda has a Christian Birhor family which came to their colony nearly twenty years back and settled there, but no conversion to Christianity has so far taken place. No Birhor is favour of conversion.

They celebrate both Hindu and Sarna festivals, have images of hanuman, Ramchandra, Lord Shiva and Durga and celebrates Holi, Dipawali and Durga Puja as well as Karma and Sarhul.

In course of our study we identified two representative faces of optimism and change in Aghan and Sudhan Birhor respectively. Burdened with a large family of Children Aghan is interested in a better life and education for his children and tries to save money for their future while Sudhan, married at the age of 12-13 years, has only two children by the time he is 29 years old. A labourer, he spends Rs 1500/- a month on the education of his daughter attending classes at Hazaribag. He does not take alcoholic drinks, an exception for the Birhor and is trying to convince others against this evil habit. He is a Christian by faith but Birhor by culture, celebrates all the Birhor rituals and customs including Hindu festivals in Hindu neighbourhood. He is a change agent of the government as well as of development society of TATA Steel as well as a natural leader of his community.

### **Conclusion :-**

The Birhor are a living community not dead. They are struggling for existence and have will to survive. They are an intelligent and progressive community capable of survival by their Readiness to find alternative ways of life and livelihood in the face of deforestation and industrialisation once feared to cause their end.

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