



Economic shifts and religious transformation in the Mankirdia tribe of Mayurbhanj District, Odisha

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Abstract

The Mankirdia are the semi-nomadic hunter-gatherer tribe of Mayurbhanj residing in the Similipal Biosphere Region of Odisha. Their livelihood mainly depends upon the forest. Collecting NTFPs like roots, shoots, and tubers from the forest is their primary livelihood. They collect the Siali creeper from the forest and make rope using its bark. They are extremely skilled in catching monkeys using the Siali rope. Their traditional occupation is gradually dying out due to conservation policies. The Forest Rights Act 2006 seeks to reclaim tribal rights regarding forest land and resources. Over the past few decades, there has been a significant change in their lifestyle and belief system. After coming into contact with the outside world, they converted to Christianity. The present study aims to focus on how their economic transformation has influenced religious change, leading to a reconstructed cultural identity. It revolves around the transformation from subsistence livelihoods to market-based activities due to deforestation and external economic processes. At the same time, it analyses the shift from indigenous beliefs to Christianity and enables us to explore how these processes reshape cultural identity, social structure, and belief systems, revealing patterns of adaptation, continuity, and syncretism among the people.

Keywords: Economy, forest, ecology, tradition, religion, christianity, indigenous, worship

Introduction

Odisha is the third largest tribal populated state of India after Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra (According to the 2011 census) ^[1]. It is home to 64 Scheduled Tribes (STs) and 13 Primitive Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), constituting 22.85% of Odisha's total population. The Mankirdia tribe of Odisha majorly resides in Mayurbhanj. Besides Mayurbhanj, they also live in Balasore, Jajpur, Sambalpur, Kalahandi and Sundargarh districts in Odisha. Their population is 2,222 in Odisha according to the 2011 census. In Mayurbhanj, the community inhabits primarily in and around the Similipal Biosphere Region. They have a rich cultural history and distinct social practices, like other tribes in this region. They constitute a semi-nomadic section of the Birhor Tribe. We can say that Mankirdia are the offshoot of the Birhor Tribe. Here, *Bir* means forest, and *Hor* means people, (P.K. Mohanty, 2004) ^[3]. Birhors are the people of the forest and Birhors of Mayurbhanj are called Mankirdias. Traditionally, they used to catch monkeys. They are also known for their skill in rope making using Siali (*Bauhinia Vahlia*) bark. They used these ropes to catch monkeys. The term Mankirdia comes from the Odia word 'Mankada', which means monkey. Traditionally, these people used to kill monkeys and eat their meat. They speak the Munda language (Austroasiatic language family). Due to contact with the outside society, they have now started speaking in Odia and Hindi as well.

Objectives of The Study

The major aim of this paper is

- To understand the reason behind their economic shift.

- To identify the interrelationship between their economic variation and religious change.

Review of Literature

Sahoo (2014) ^[7] says that the need of development as pushed the Mankirdia tribes to the extent that many of the youth are becoming seasonal migrants for their survival. Sahoo and Dubey (2018) ^[8] addressed the challenges of implementing the barriers of implementation livelihood projects under Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006. They said that while the Act recognizes individual and collective rights over forest land, a lot of hurdles remain in implementing it. Parida (2016) ^[5] said that compared to other communities, the Mankirdia tribe of Odisha is significantly deprived in educational and economic status. Patra (2019) ^[6] said that Mankirdia's spiritual beliefs play a major role in their lifestyle and health status. Singha and Murmu (2020) ^[10] noted that the adoption of Christianity helped bring basic changes in their life cycle ceremonies, magico-religious customs and worshipping nature. The researchers illustrate that the Mankirdia tribe experiences difficulties with respect to their sustenance, health, and rights as they adjust to present day social and environmental transformations.

Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative methods have been used for the study. The primary data were collected through anthropological approaches, which include participant observation, focus group discussions (FGDs), personal interviews, and household surveys. Secondary data has been

obtained from census reports, governmental articles, literature, various journals, research investigations, and other relevant online and offline sources. This methodology has been adopted to gain a holistic, in-depth understanding of their economic and cultural life and to track the changes of the Mankirdia tribe's traditional lifestyle.

Area of The Study

Intensive field investigations were done in Ambadali (21.93°N and 86.71°E) village of Shamakhunta block, Dengam (21.78°N and 86.53°E) and Mahalibasa (21.65°N and 86.51°E) village of Khunta block, and Uthanisahi (21.51°N and 86.53°E) and Baliposi (21.72°N and 86.10°E) village of Kaptipada block, Mayurbhanj district of Odisha. All these villages are widely scattered within the vicinity of the Similipal Biosphere Reserve. Living near the forest helps them rely even more heavily on the forest.

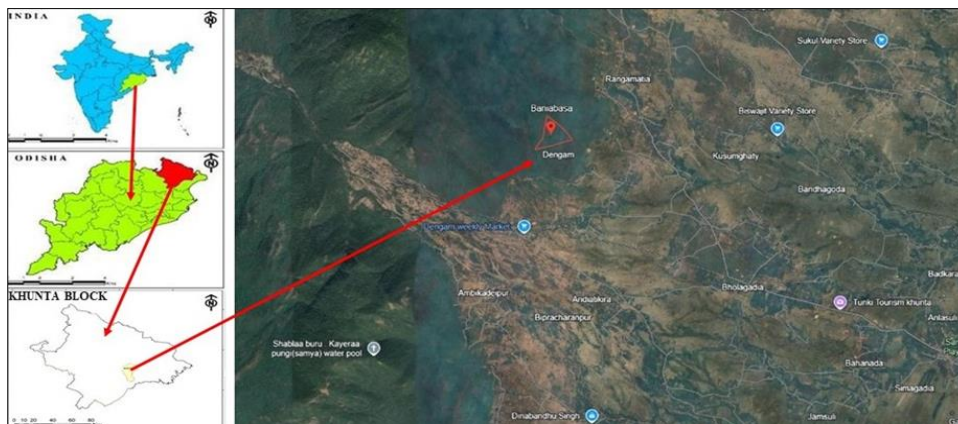


Fig 1: Dengam village of Khunta Block, Mayurbhanj



Fig 2: Ambadali village of Shamakhunta block

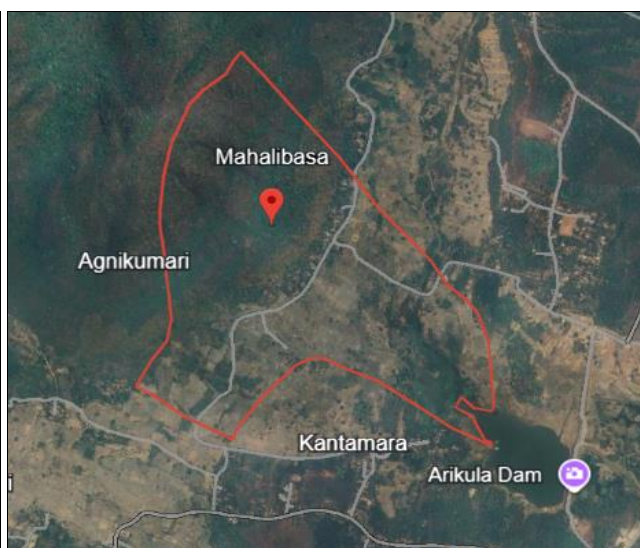


Fig 3: Mahalibasa village of Khunta block

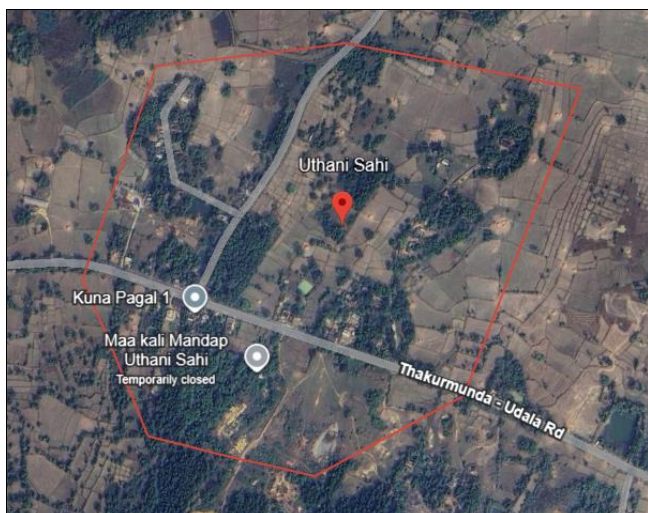


Fig 4: Uthanisahi village of Kaptipada block

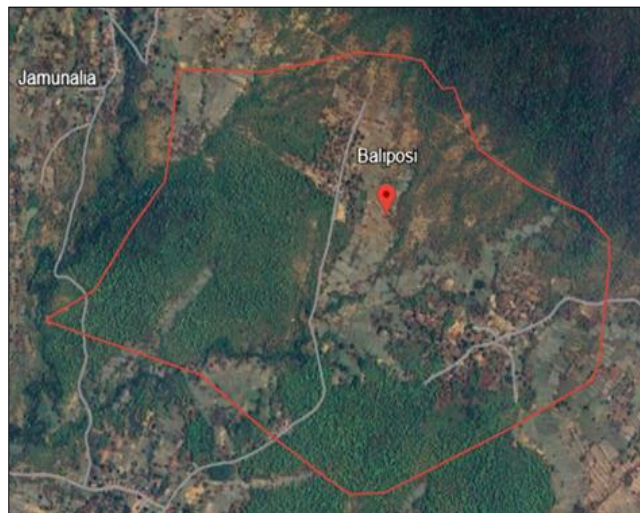


Fig 5: Damasahi colony (Baliposi village) of Kaptipada block

Historical Background

The Mankirdia tribe is a semi-nomadic hunter-gatherer tribal group. Their economy is mainly dependent upon the forest around them. They became the sixth PVTG in Odisha to receive habitat rights under the Forest Rights Act of 2006^[2] in 2016 within the Similipal Biosphere Reserve. They are one of the minor tribes of Odisha because of their small population. The forest is an integral part of their lives because they have depended on it for their livelihood for generations. They gather wild roots and tubers from the forest and consume them. Traditionally, they lived in temporary leaf huts known as 'Kumbha'. They mostly built these huts using Siali leaves and branches. Their small temporary settlement is called Tanda. They build their Tanda's close to water sources and nearby marketplaces. An average, there are 15 to 20 kumbhas in a Tanda. They change their Tanda's after every two to three months in search of Siali bark and other food resources. Mankirdia are skilled monkey catchers. Whenever monkeys create any disturbance in their locality, local people usually call the Mankirdia people to catch them. They catch them and eat their meat. But now, due to the new forest policies, they no longer catch monkeys, but many of them still haven't forgotten that skill. Mankirdia's are primarily reliant on the Siali creeper to make ropes. Besides rope, they also make baskets, mats, bags, pagha (halter for cow and cattle), Sika (Sling) and many more craft items. They made these items using mature Siali bark and sell them in the nearby local markets. But currently, the tribals are restricted from accessing the non-timber forest products due to wildlife protection laws. Because of this, their forest dependency is gradually decreasing. They started working as wage labourers and drivers. In the agricultural season, they also work on the fields of others for their survival.

Traditional Religion of Mankirdias

Earlier, the Mankirdia people practised animistic beliefs and worshipped nature. They consider the Sun to be their supreme deity and worship it for good health. They used to worship many gods and goddesses throughout the year for their well-being. Before going for hunting, they usually worship forest and hills and offer prayer to the God for a successful hunt. They also worship their ancestors to get their blessing and to achieve success in hunting and in the collection of better forest products. They believe in both benevolent and malevolent spirits. Thus, we can say that the Mankirdia's traditional religion may identify the presence of animism, animatism, nature worship and belief in supernatural entities. But now almost every Mankirdia household has adopted Christianity. They have discontinued their traditional religious practices and, in accordance with Christianity, offer prayers only in Church.

Economic Shifts

They relied entirely on the forest for their survival. Siali (*Bauhinia vahlii* Wight & Arn) creeper is the main source of their livelihood. They make ropes and baskets from the bark of Siali creeper. Siali is an abundant natural resource in and around the Similipal forest. To make Siali crafts, first they go to the forest and look for mature Siali fibre based on its size and length. After identifying the cut, the creeper using axes. Then they strip away the outer bark using the same axe. After that, the outer bark layer is also removed. Once the fibre is separated, they carry it using bamboo and return

to their home. Next day, they clean and dry the fibres under the Sun for a day or two. Subsequently, the dried fibres are torn apart by hand to extract numerous thin fibrils. Finally, those thin fibrils are twisted together to form long ropes. They also make mats, bags, halter for cattle and goats, sling and other craft items from Siali creeper. The decline in the abundance of the Siali creeper in the forest is a major reason for the gradual decrease in dependence on their traditional occupation. Interacting with people outside the village is also one of the reasons the younger generation is stepping out of the village to take up other work. Many of them have left the village to work as construction labourers in other cities, while those unable to go out are working as daily wage labourers in nearby villages. In the agricultural season, especially the women work in the fields of others. They engage in ploughing, sowing, weeding and harvesting. Deforestation is also one of the reasons for the gradual disappearance of their traditional livelihoods. The gradual changes in their economy transformed their ancient settled life into an unstable and dependent system. They are now mostly Rely on external sources such as the markets for their food. Under the 'Right to Food' law the government also provides them with rice at a very low price through various schemes. Some of them are now increasingly turning towards small businesses. Due to their dependence on the market, their traditional ecological knowledge declining and becoming irrelevant. Due to a lack of education, they are forced to work as manual labourers and agricultural workers. Irregularity in such work keeps their financial security unstable and does not alleviate their poverty. Poverty is also a major factor behind their low literacy rate. Limited awareness and economic hardship contribute to the early marriage of young boys and girls. The Mankirdia have traditionally depended on hunting and gathering. After converting to Christianity and gaining better access to modern education and markets, many households have gradually shifted to settled agriculture, wage labour, small businesses, and market-oriented economic activities.

Effect of Christianity

As their economic lives changed, they encountered external influences such as missionaries. Most of them converted to Christianity to take benefits like financial aid, modern education, and improved medical care. Conversion also liberated them from caste-based discrimination and marginalisation, at the same time it taught them about equality and living a life of dignity; opportunities that had been denied to them for generations. This has led to gradual cultural and religious changes within the community. They have built Church in their vicinity. Every Sunday, Mankirdia men, women, and children go to church and pray. At the church, along with offering prayers, they share the good and bad experiences of their lives with everyone. Instead of following their traditional customs, they now pray together in the church whenever they face a problem. When someone in their community falls sick, everyone gathers to pray for their speedy recovery, strengthening their sense of unity. During traditional festivals, instead of worshipping deities, they now celebrate by singing, dancing, and praying in Church. They also joyfully celebrate Christian festivals such as Christmas, Good Friday, and New Year. They are now observing life-cycle rituals such as weddings, birth ceremonies, and funerals, in accordance

with Christian traditions. In this way, their new faith has blended with traditional festivals, allowing both to coexist and creating a syncretic identity. The thought of abandoning their traditional roots never even crosses their minds. Another positive outcome of embracing Christianity is the reduction in alcohol and tobacco consumption, which has led to significant improvements in their health. Since quitting alcohol, their relationships with other tribals and non-tribals have also improved. Those who used to look down on them because of their alcohol consumption now treat them very well.

Impacts on Community and Identity

The most obvious result of Christianity was the replacement of native tribal religions by Christian teaching. Traditionally, they worshipped nature, village deities, ancestral spirits and sacred groves. Following conversion, Christian beliefs often replaced traditional religious customs, leading to a decline in indigenous rituals, sacrificial practices, and festivals. The adoption of Christianity has also influenced tribal customs, including attire, music, wedding ceremonies, and festivals. Christian rituals are now replacing traditional customs associated with birth, marriage, and death. However, in many areas, Christian practices have been blended with elements of tribal culture, creating a unique fusion of Christian and tribal identities. Christian missionaries have provided facilities for education, healthcare, and social welfare, leading to improved living standards and increased social mobility. Consequently, many tribals have adopted modern professions and institutions. However, religious conversion can also undermine traditional tribal leadership structures, customs, and religious authorities. In many cases church groups become important centres of social and community activity, sometimes replacing traditional bodies. The effect on tribal identity is not all good or all bad. While some of the old customs and religious beliefs may be vanishing, many of the Christian tribal people retain their languages, kinship systems, traditional dress, folk songs and ethnic identity. So, conversion does not necessarily mean the end of tribal identity but a transformation of it.

Conclusion

Mankirdia's identity now becomes a blend of traditional and new substructure due to the ongoing social, economic and cultural change. Although they started participating in the modern economy, the majority of them continue their traditional activity, especially the collection of forest products. However, hunting has now almost entirely ceased. The Mankirdias still depend on the forest for their daily needs, such as collecting firewood, leaves, and roots. Although they have embraced Christianity, their economic practices and religious transformation influence one another, creating a continuous cycle of cause and effect. They adopted Christianity due to their poor economic condition, and following their conversion, the influence of outsiders led to a decline in their interest in traditional livelihoods. Since they are still struggling for survival, it will take considerable time for them to be fully integrated into the mainstream.

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