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TRIBAL PERCEPTION IN MODERN WORLD BY TRANSFORMED SOCIAL PERCEPTION INDEX: A CASE STUDY OF PURULIA DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL, INDIA

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Abstract:

Tribal identity has always been under tremendous challenges since the introduction of the different facets of materialistic development. The outrage of this development affects the habits and habitats of the tribal communities. The tribes have lost their soil and presently live in a multi-ethnic society. This cultural assimilation with controls of Hinduism in the rural society brings forth the transition in the life and living of these indigenous people. The paper highlights first the socio-ecological characteristics of three tribal communities of Purulia district, namely, Santhal, Kharia Sabar, and Birhor. It further investigates possible transition and transformation in the social perception among the selected tribal communities by introducing the Transformed Social Perception Index (TSPI). For statistical validation, the index has been computed based on extensive field observation and a purposive sample survey of 600 tribal households of the Purulia district. The result exhibits that despite the processes of different agents of transformation, the tribal communities restore their age-old inherent social perception. The paper in fine prescribes some measures for holistic tribal development in the district.

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1.0 Introduction:

The socio-ecological character of the tribes is under threat due to the process of different agents of transformation. The important agents of transformations are industrialization, globalization, liberalization, modernization, politicization, materialistic development policies, etc. These agents have created ecological and social changes and directly affected the tribal communities of India. Orans (1958) made a study on the influence of industrialization on the Santhals. Orans argued that apart from the disintegration of age-old culture, the Santhals had adopted the rhythm of the modern ethics of an industrial society. According to Hoselitz and Moore (1963), "in the process of economic growth of an under-developed society, the norms of social action take over the characteristic pattern of industrial society" (pp.11-13). Das and Banerjee (1964) also argued that industrialization had a role towards transition and transformation in the economic, social, and physiological life of the tribes of West Bengal. According to Banerjee (1981), the process of economic growth had a role in the disintegration of the traditional culture of India. Sarkar (2003),

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however, argued that in the age of assimilation, the strength of tribalism helped the tribes to retain their tradition. The paper with the doctrine of social ecology at first highlights the tribal identity of the three tribal communities of the Purulia district, namely Santhal, Kharia Sabar, and Birhor. Social ecology helps to understand human society by the interrelationship between ecology and human society. Guha (2008) made two valuable divisions of the social ecology, the ecological infrastructure, and the social models. According to Guha, the habits and habitats of human society showed better through the surrounding ecology and the elements of social models such as social structure, culture, economy, and polity. The paper also tries to understand the state of transition and transformation vis-à-vis the restoration of the social perception of the tribal communities of the Purulia district. The author has developed an index known as Transformed Social Perception Index (TSPI) for this study. The result reflects that despite the outrages of agents of transition and transformation, the tribal communities restore their perception of tribalism in the Purulia district.

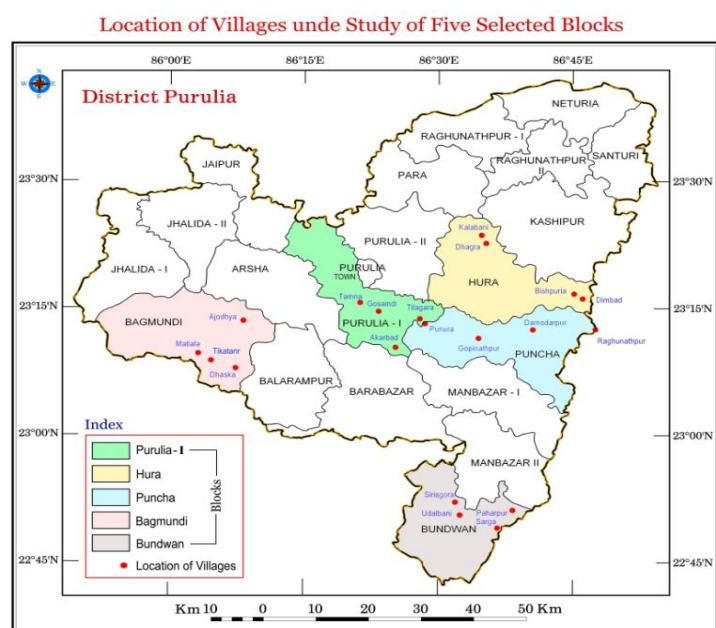
2.0 Objectives:

The main objective of this study is to understand the state of transition in the social perception of the tribal communities of the Purulia district. The paper at first highlights the traditional characteristics of the tribes of the district based on social ecology. The know-how of the traditional culture through the lenses of social ecology perhaps helps to surmise the tribal communities and their perception in this era of ecological and social breakdown. The author further has developed an index known as the Transformed Social Perception Index (TSPI) to understand the state of social perception of the tribes of the Purulia district quantitatively.

3.0 The Study Area:

The author has taken the Purulia district as the study area. The Purulia district is an extended eastern part of the Chotanagpur plateau. The geographical extension of the Purulia district is extending from 22°42'35" North to 23°42'00" North latitudes and from 85°49'25" East to 86°54'37" East longitudes (Fig.1). "The total administrative area of this district is 6259 sq. km." (Bhattacharya et al., 1985, p.2). The Purulia district is selected especially due to its aboriginal roots. The district is having the second highest tribal population after the Jalpaiguri district in West Bengal. According to the 2011 Census, the district has about 18.45% tribal population of the total population.

Fig. 1: Location Map of the Study Area



(Source: Prepared by the Author)

4.0 Materials and Methods:

The study has selected 5 Community Development Blocks of the Purulia district like Purulia-I, Hura, Pancha, Bundwan, and Bagmundi. These blocks have been selected based on their levels of development. Here the study has used the work of Roy (2008), who categorized all the blocks of the Purulia district based on different levels of human development. Roy had classified the blocks as Developed, Moderately Developed, Less Developed, and Underdeveloped. Purulia-I, Hura, Pancha, and Bundwan fell into the developed, moderately developed, less developed, and underdeveloped categories. The Bagmundi block is selected exclusively to observe the Birhor tribal community of the Purulia district. Bhupatipalli *tanda* (the word *tanda* used by the Birhor as a social unit combined with half a dozen huts) of the Bagmundi block is purely a Birhor habitat. Further, among these blocks, 20 villages have been selected. Then among the villages, 600 tribal households have been surveyed based on the purposive sampling method.

The available literature on tribal transformation and restoration is mainly explanatory and narrative. The author has prepared the Transformed Social Perception Index (TSPI) for quantitative analysis of the transformation vis-à-vis restoration of the culture of the selected tribes of the Purulia district. The index helps to understand the degree of changes in social perception among Santhal, Kharia Sabar, and Birhor tribal communities on a comparative ground. The TSPI is a combination of 4 indices. For example, Index 1 highlights the cases of childbirth in hospitals or nearby health centers. Traditionally, the birth of a tribal child happens in their tola or hut by a foster mother who cuts the umbilical cord with an arrowhead. The author has taken the idea of formatting the indices from the work of Roy (2008), where he prepared the modified HDI (Human Development Index) of the Purulia district. Keeping this idea in mind, the author has developed the indices based on some parameters. The formula for the calculation of Index 1 is as follows -

$$\frac{\text{No. of households where child births taken place in hospitals or health centers}}{\text{Total no. of households surveyed in each village}} \times 100$$

Further, dimension index is calculated by the following formula -

$$\text{Dimension Index} = \text{Actual} \div 100$$

Hypothetically, the lowest percentage is 0%, and the highest is 100%.

Similarly, Index 2 can be calculated by the following formula -

$$\frac{\text{No. of households where the time of marriage ceremony shortened}}{\text{Total no. of households surveyed in each village}} \times 100$$

Further, dimension index is calculated by the following formula -

$$\text{Dimension Index} = \text{Actual} \div 100$$

Hypothetically, the lowest percentage is 0%, and the highest is 100%.

Index 3 can be calculated by the following equation -

$$\frac{\text{No. of households where elders thought that youths have least interest on their customs}}{\text{Total no. of households surveyed in each village}} \times 100$$

Further, the dimension index is calculated by the following formula -

$$\text{Dimension Index} = \text{Actual} \div 100$$

Hypothetically, the lowest percentage is 0%, and the highest is 100%.

Index 4 can be calculated the following formula -

$$\frac{\text{No. of households where modern instruments used in marriage ceremony}}{\text{Total No. of households surveyed in each village}} \times 100$$

Further, the dimension index is calculated by the following equation -

$$\text{Dimension Index} = \text{Actual} \div 100$$

Hypothetically, the lowest percentage is 0%, and the highest is 100%.

The Tribal Social Perception Index (TSPI) is an arithmetical average of these four indices. The equation for the TSPI is as follows -

$$\text{TSPI} = \frac{(\text{Index 1} + \text{Index 2} + \text{Index 3} + \text{Index 4})}{4}$$

where, Index 1: Index of Households (at least once in recent times) found where child birth taken place in hospitals/health center; Index 2: Index of households found where norms of marriage have been shortened to some extent; Index 3: Index of households found where elders thought their youths don't have keen interest to learn their own customs and Index 4: Index of households found often play modern instrument(s) in marriage ceremony.

5.0 Social Ecology and the Tribes:

Social ecology is the philosophical idea first put forward by Radhakamal Mukherjee (1926, 1930 & 1942). He cultivated the social ecology in a significant way. Ramachandra Guha (2008) had unfolded different facets of this philosophical idea and classified the social ecology into two broad elements. Those elements were ecological infrastructures and social models. The social models had four sub-groups as social structure, culture, economy, and polity. According to Guha, environmentally oriented sociology or social ecology highlights the reciprocal relations between the ecology and these social models. According to Forlov (1984), social ecology is the branch of knowledge to understand the various aspects of the interaction between society and nature. Thus, the traditional way of life and living of the tribal people can be observed by the social ecology as they are closely associated with their immediate surroundings and society. The different segments of the social models such as social structure, culture, economy, and polity also can reflect human society in a better way. Hence the present study takes the opportunity to highlight the tribal way of life of Santhal, Kharia Sabar, and Birhor tribal communities of the Purulia district by the doctrine of social ecology.

"In Purulia district, the Santhals are concentrated highest among all tribal communities" (Mukherjee & Malik, 2021, p.180). "The Santals call themselves *Hor Hopon*, meaning child or children of human beings. It is only in the mouth of others they are regionally called Santal, Saontar, and Sotar. In the government records, they are mostly found either as Santal or Santhal. The Santhal village has the following secular officials in its hierarchical order: *Manjhi* (the village headman), *Paranik* (the deputy headman), *Jog-Manjhi* (the overseer of village morals), and *Gadet* (the village messenger). And there are two religious or sacral officials; the *Naeke* (the village priest) and *Kudam Naeke* (the assistant village priest)" (Hembram, 1996, pp.6-24). According to Bose (1985), the Santhals have a strong sense of tradition and culture. The Santhal has a very complex society and has twelve clans such as Murmu, Hembrom, Saren, Marandi, Kisku, Chore, Baske, Besra, Bedia, Hansdak, Puria, and Tudu. The Santhals practice different traditional rites and rituals in the form of birth ceremonies (*Janam Chhatiar*), marriages ceremonies (*Bapla*), and death rituals (*Bhandan*). According to Datta-Majumder (1955), these cultural practices reflect the life cycle of the Santhal tribal community.

S.C. Roy and R.C. Roy (1937), Mukherjee (1998), Sinha (2010) made a detailed study about the society of the Kharia Sabar tribal community. Alike the Santhal, the Kharia Sabar tribe also has different societal sub-groups. According to S.C. Roy and R.C. Roy (1937), the Kharia tribe has three main classes based on their nature and surrounding ecology, such as *Dudh Kharia*, *Dhelki Kharia*, and *Hill Kharia*. According to Mukherjee (1998) and Sinha (2010), the Kharia tribe still faces

tremendous social reproach due to the stigma of a criminal tribe. The social stigma of criminality deteriorates their place in the village society. The Kharia Sabars compel to live in the outskirts of the main villages with economic insufficiency and poor standard of living.

“The Birhor (*bir* means jungle and *hor* means man) is known as the Primitive Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) of India. This tribal group (earlier known as Primitive Tribal Group) is a Government of India classification, created with the purpose of certain communities with particularly low development indices” (Patel, 2013, p.313). According to Mukherjee (2011), traditionally, the Birhors are of two kinds, the *Uthulu*, and *Jagghi* Birhors. The *Uthulu* Birhors live in isolation in the deep forests and maintain their tradition, culture, and customs as it was. The *Jagghi* is a settled Birhor. The surrounding ecological setting of this class is different compared to the *Uthulu* Birhor. The present study attempts to observe this settled Birhor community of Bhupatipalli, situated at Bagmundi block in the Purulia district. The *Jagghi* Birhor tribe usually lives in concrete houses provided by the government with other communities like the Hindus. Adhikary (2008) had vividly highlighted the condition of this *Jagghi* Birhor tribal community. According to Adhikary, cultural assimilation has influenced the rites and rituals of the *Jagghi* Birhor tribe. Presently they use vermilion in their marriage system. The use of vermilion in the marriage system of this settled Birhor is an example of such influence of the assimilation and tribal transition.

6.0 Results of Transformed Social Perception Index (TSPI):

Social perception of a tribal community may transform by the influence of so many agents of transformation. In this study, changing social perception is included as a parameter to understand the phase of transition among the tribal communities of the Purulia district. Here an index is formulated known as ‘Transformed Social Perception Index’ (TSPI) to judge the effects of the transforming agents on the social perception, culture, norms, and customs of the tribal communities of the Purulia district (Table 1).

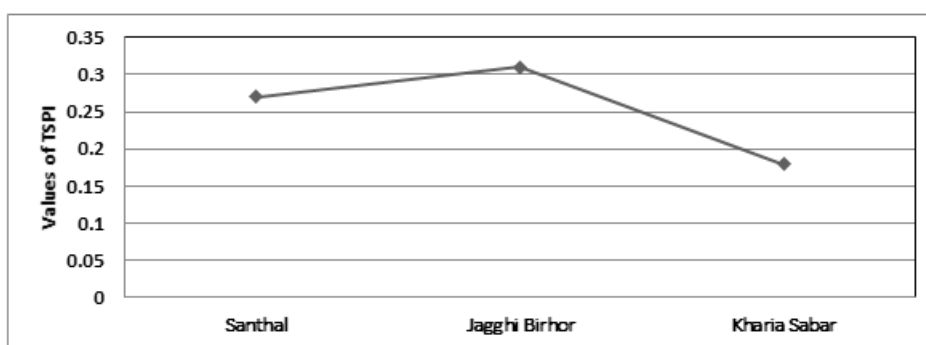
The result of TSPI highlights that the Santhals who are living in isolation are keeping their age-old tradition in the Purulia district. They maintain their traditional cultural practices in their community. There are few exceptions where the Santhals have adopted the modern facilities and amenities during childbirth and other cultural practices like marriage ceremonies etc. The *Jagghi* Birhor is a settled community who is living close to the non-tribal territory. This assimilation influences their age-old social perception. They have adopted rites and rituals of the marriage system of the local Hindus. The result of TSPI helps to identify that among these three tribal communities, the *Jagghi* Birhors are more prone to societal transition. The TSPI score of the *Jagghi* Birhor of the Bhupatipalli *tanda* of Matiala village is 0.31 (Fig. 2). It “indicates that due to ecological change and cultural assimilation, the age-old traditional cultural practices and beliefs of the Birhor tribe are influenced to some extent by relatively more dominant cultures of the non-tribal communities” (Mukherjee, 2020, p.40). The TSPI score is found lowest for the Kharia Sabar tribe of the Purulia district. In Damodarpur, the value of TSPI is only 0.19. The Kharia Sabars are living on the outskirts of multi-ethnic villages and far from cultural assimilation. They are still living with the stigma of criminality. The isolation and social reproach help the tribe to keep their socio-cultural tradition intact.

Table 1: Transformed Social Perception Index of selected twenty tribal villages

Block	Village	Index-I	Index-II	Index-III	Index-IV	TSPI	Category
Purulia-I	Gosaindi	0.47	0.13	0.53	0.40	0.38	Medium
	Tilagara	0.43	0.20	0.50	0.33	0.37	Medium
	Tamna	0.53	0.27	0.57	0.53	0.48	Medium
	Akarbad	0.00	0.00	0.63	0.00	0.16	Low
Hura	Dimbad	0.60	0.07	0.53	0.13	0.33	Medium
	Dhagra	0.37	0.10	0.43	0.00	0.23	Medium
	Kalabani	0.20	0.07	0.63	0.10	0.25	Medium
	Bishpuria	0.67	0.13	0.67	0.37	0.46	Medium
Puncha	Gopinathpur	0.17	0.07	0.43	0.13	0.20	Medium
	Raghunathpur	0.10	0.00	0.37	0.10	0.14	Low
	Punura	0.27	0.13	0.57	0.23	0.30	Medium
	Damodarapur	0.10	0.07	0.60	0.00	0.19	Low
Bagmundi	Matiala	0.33	0.27	0.63	0.00	0.31	Medium
	Dhaska	0.00	0.10	0.40	0.13	0.16	Low
	Tikatanr	0.07	0.07	0.57	0.27	0.25	Medium
	Ajodhya	0.03	0.00	0.67	0.00	0.18	Low
Bundwan	Paharpur	0.00	0.10	0.40	0.00	0.13	Low
	Sarga	0.00	0.13	0.47	0.00	0.15	Low
	Udalbani	0.17	0.17	0.60	0.23	0.29	Medium
	Sirisgora	0.27	0.23	0.67	0.27	0.36	Medium

Source: Compiled by the author from the field survey

Fig.2 Comparative study of TSPI among Santhal, Jagghi Birhor and Kharia Sabar



Source: Compiled by the author from the field survey

7.0 Conclusion:

The tribal communities of the Purulia district maintain their tradition, ethos, and taboos through different cultural practices. The paper highlights a fresh look at the socio-ecological niche of Santhal, Kharia Sabar, and Birhor tribal communities of the district. The study unfolds that the life and living of the tribal communities of this extended part of the Chotanagpur plateau are simple and based on their age-old traditions. Despite the cultural assimilation and presence of agents of transition and transformation, the tribal communities have maintained most of their unique identities. The author further quantitatively analyzes the possible changes in the social perception among the tribes of the Purulia district with the help of the Tribal Social Perception Index (TSPI). The index shows that even in the age of transition, the tribes of the district keep their traditions and age-old cultural practices. The tribal communities of the district are living both in isolation and assimilation. The differences in living conditions to some extent influence the social perception of the tribes. These two different ecological settings act differently in their society. The isolation helps the tribe to restore their tradition in a better way. Although the spillover of materialistic development actions penetrate these isolated geographical locations and forced the tribe to live in assimilation. This assimilation brings in some level of transition in the traditional social perception of the tribes. This transition is more vivid among the *Jagghi* Bihors of Bagmundi block of the Purulia district. They are now more liberal about the adaptation of the culture of other communities. Now they live in concrete houses. They have been gradually accepting all possible amenities and facilities as offered by the government. There are no issues of acceptance of modern amenities and facilities like childbirth in nearby health centers. The tribal transition and transformation should not happen at the cost of their age-old tradition. The tribal developmental policies should be qualitative and quantitative to sustain the tribal identity. The community development by keeping the tribalism intact should be the objective of future tribal developmental plans and policies.

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