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Trends of Change among the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group: An Account of the Hill Korwas of Chhattisgarh

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Abstract

Primarily a foraging tribe belonging to the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), Hill Korwas of Chhattisgarh live in the tribal pockets and hilly terrains with a pre-agriculture level of technology, zero or negative growth of population and a distinct pattern of living. Over time, in the process of contact with outside world and mainstream society, the ways of life of the Hill Korwas got influenced and subsequently changed. The paper deals with trends of changes among this tribal group and their responses to the forces of change. The analysis is based on intensive fieldwork conducted in the year 2018-19.

Introduction

The Hill Korwas, one of the notified particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs), have their settlement and prominence majorly in hilly terrains of Jaspur, Sarguja and Korba districts of Chhattisgarh. Mainly hunters, gatherers and forest collectors, they have a pre-agriculture level of technology, zero or negative growth of population and extremely low level of literacy. They live in the tribal pockets and their original places of habitation with a very distinct style of living. Over time, in the process of contact with the outside world and mainstream society, the life processes and social institutions of the Hill Korwas got influenced and subsequently changed. Though the government's economic and social developmental initiatives for the Hill Korwas remained unsuccessful with this PVTG having very limited necessities, the situation is changing slowly, and the tribals who were initially reluctant to mingle with the mainstream, desired the needs of consumer goods and are becoming acquainted with affairs of the outside world.

Hill Korwas as a PVTG in Chhattisgarh

The Dhebar Commission in 1973, created 'Primitive Tribal Groups' (PTGs) as a separate category. In 1975, the Government of India initiated to identify them and

declared 52 such groups. While in 1993, an additional 23 groups were added to the category, making it a total of 75 out of 705 Scheduled Tribes, spread over 17 states and one Union Territory in the country (Government of India 2019). This category got renamed in 2006 as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). They are 'less-developed' among other prominent tribal groups, have primordial ways of livelihood and subsistence, zero or retarding population growth, and are placed quite low in the human developed indicators (Singh 2017).

Hill Korwas are one of the PVTGs living mainly in the central India, hills, hillocks, bushes and forests. They majorly live in appalling conditions of poverty, illiteracy, lack of safe drinking water, bad sanitary conditions, difficult terrain, malnutrition, poor maternal and child health services, unavailability of health and nutritional services, deforestation and superstitions. Literacy rates among the Hill Korwas of Chhattisgarh are extremely low (24.71%), much lower than even the State average for the Scheduled Tribe population (CGTRI 2016). This is largely due to the abysmal educational infrastructure in tribal areas, poorly trained or absentee teachers, lack of teaching in tribal languages and irrelevant and alienating curriculum.

A separate population figure of the Hill Korwas is not available. According to the 1901 Census, the population of both Hill and Dehari Korwas was 10,000 in Jashpur State and 16,000 in Sarguja State. The Census handbook of 1941 reveals the population of both Korwas as 8217 i.e., 24.5% of the total tribal population of Jashpur State. In 1961, the total population of both the Korwas was 19000 in old Raigarh district and out of it, Hill Korwas were 4998. The Population of Hill Korwas increased by 15.31 percent during the years 1961-1975. A survey was conducted in 1992 by the Madhya Pradesh Tribal Research and Development Institute and the population of Hill Korwas was 27109 in Jashpur Tahsil and old Sarguja district and that increased by 17.35% to 31814 in the year 2002 (Srivastava 2007).

During this span of time, a small population of the tribe had also migrated to Korba district. Despite Hill Korwas' high birth rate, their population is declining because of a high child mortality rate and absence of healthcare facilities or their access to it. 'Hardly any of them cross 45 years of age. Most fall prey to cholera or jaundice', district officials admit that despite large investment, the condition of the tribals has not changed. Presently, Hill Korwa tribe numbers 33,000 (approx.) and they live in the hilly terrain and mountainous pockets of Jashpur, Surguja and Korba districts of Chhattisgarh (CGTRI 2016).

The tribal village setting and methodology of the study

The paper is based on intensive fieldwork carried out at Kadamjheriya, a tribal village solely inhabited by the Hill Korwa tribe in Korba district of Chhattisgarh. The current settlers of the hamlet are reported to have descended from nearby Devpahari hill and as per the accounts of the locals, the nearest hills and the river Hasdeo always played vital roles in their existence and survival. The hamlet is surrounded by hills on the west, river Hasdeo at the north, Devpahari motorable road at the south and some other tribal and

non-tribal village habitations at the south and eastern sides. The village is situated 45 km away from the industrial town Korba (Primary Data 2018).¹

The origin, existence, life processes, preferences, daily life activities from dawn to dusk of the Pahari Korwa community, their food patterns, ritualistic practices, entertainments, days of celebration—all are envisaged and documented through the qualitative field enquiry to understand the ethnographic profile of the tribe. The trends of change culminated into the lives of the tribals and their response to the corresponding facets of change vis-a-vis their very identity are also delineated in the process. Secondary data and information are collected from the handful sources of information on the tribe, previous research studies and information available at the Chhattisgarh Tribal Research Institute (CGTRI), State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) Chhattisgarh, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) State Project Office, Raipur. The first-hand understanding of the village set up, social institutions, dynamics of community relations and aspirations of the tribals are obtained by village visits over a period, gaining access into their life processes and activities and interacting with the inhabitants to essay their accounts and narrations. The objective of the study is to understand their ways and means of living and reactions to exposure contact, acculturation and change.

Profile of the Hill Korwas

Origin

Tracing the origin, Hill Korwas are a branch of Mundas, a branch of Astro-Asiatic sub-family of Austric family of tribes of Chhotanagpur, which is the central habitation place of many aboriginal tribes in India. It is said that Hill Korwas moved westward to the Khudia region of Jashpur State (at present Jashpur district of Chhattisgarh) from Chhotanagpur at a date which cannot be fixed and are the original settlers in the Khudia region of Jashpur, when it consisted of virgin forests. From Khudia, in due course of time, they migrated further to adjoining regions (Srivastava 2007). There were certain groups among Korwas tagged as a criminal class used to be involved in committing theft, robbery etc. in the forested regions. They were called 'Wild Hill Tribe'. When their activities started increasing, the landlords of Khudia allotted lands for livelihood to them, to settle them peacefully. The group stepping down from the hills and settling in the villages was called '*Dehari Korwas*', and those who remained on the hills and did not leave shifting cultivation, maintaining their nomad and wildlife with primitive culture were called '*Pahari Korwas*' or Hill Korwas (CGTRI 2016).

These groups of Hill Korwas settled down in the mountain highs and deep forests, started living by *Jhum* cultivation, occupying jungle land and resources. High mountains, thereby, became their native place and habitation. They all claimed descent from *Khudia Rani* (a deity of Hill Korwa, seated in a cave) and Khudia as their native country and looked upon landlords of Khudia region as their Head. They had been always wild and dangerous to people with whom they came into contact. Since their early days they lived mainly by hunting and shifting cultivation and had been in the habit of breaking down

¹Primary data are collected through a brief census of the study area, documentation, observation, field notes and semi-structured interviews in the village settlement Kadamjheriya. The settlement is hundreds of years old. As per the brief census of study area carried out in the year 2018, there are 120 people living at the habitation with nearly 28-30 numbers of households.

into crime by attacking travellers and passing traders through jungle and hillocks with bow and arrow (Majumdar 1944). The present socio-economic condition of the tribe revealed that they are not at the hunting stage, but still away from the pastoral stage. They are moving towards settled cultivation but their religious usages and economies are not connected with agriculture.

Physical features, dialect, house type and food habits

Physically, Hill Korwas are not very stout or thin, but are rough. The colour of their skin is dark brown to black with black coarse hair. The mother tongue of Korwas is called *Korwai* strictly spoken by the Hill Korwas. The *Korwai* is very close to *Asuri* and resembles with *Mundari* and *Santhali* dialects. But over the last few decades, their population growth had been very slow and the local dialect *Korwai* is also gradually being replaced by the local *dehati* Hindi dialect.

They live in small huts which are non-permanent and fragile. In Kadamjheriya village, those are very small, single roomed, low in height, lack ventilation and remain damp due to climate for eight to ten months per year. The place near *chullah* (furnace) is used for sitting, dining or sleeping. They do not essentially light up their houses in the night and the fire wood remains burning all the night in their *chullah*. After returning from forest or work, they take their meal and set the fire at large dimly lighting the house to do the chores. Kerosene is rarely used, and if used it is in the lamps and hanging lanterns which they occasionally use. The households collect the fuel woods from the nearby forest and store firewood in large quantities in summer for the rainy seasons. They also sell these firewoods to the *Ahirs* (landed upper caste) and get butter milk to consume in lieu of it.

The village houses have minimal belongings and most of them are made by the dwellers themselves. The mat to sit and sleep in the night is either made with the date leaves or *Chind* leaves brought from the jungle and woven by the lady in the household. Certain houses have wooden seats or *pirah* offered to a visitor from community of outside. Apart from that the houses in general have *Khapora* (earthen pot used in cooking), *Tihari* (earthen small pots), *Tawa* (flat utensil for cooking), *Dubha* (aluminium bowl), *Chitua*, *Lokari* (wooden made used in cooking), *Tumba* (rind of gourd), *Tukka*, *Nachu* (bamboo container), *Barni* (broom to sweep), *Khumra* (made of bamboo and leaves and used as umbrella), *Jalkhar*, *Bedh* (rope made to keep paddy) and *Jata* (grinders). Many of the articles are purchased from the local markets by the inhabitants.

Food habit of the tribe varies from one season to other. In the habitation, for the months of April to June, they entirely depend upon different kinds of fruits and roots – *mahua*, *tendu* fruits, *aam*, *jamun*, leaves and flowers of *sal* and *sal* seeds. Seeds of mango and *mahua* are dried and also stored for other seasons. During July to September heavy rains take place and the tribe is unable to go to jungles to collect different roots, leaves or minor forest products. During that time, they depend upon *matta* (butter milk), mango seeds, gate *kanda*, *nakahakanda*, and fishes. The months of October to December are supposed to be the best period for Hill Korwas. This is the season when small millets like *kutaki*, *gondali* and *gora* are harvested in the small patches of land available in and around the village, along with the crop of *macca* (maize). They have sufficient food and also celebrate the festivals associated with the harvesting. Throughout the year, fishing is

done by the tribesmen from the nearby Hasdeo River. They also catch or kill birds with bow and arrow. Among the drinks, the Hill Korwas are extremely fond of *Hadia*, a drink prepared from rice, *mahua*, and *gondali*.

Economic activities and livelihood

The main economic activities of the Hill Korwa village dwellers are hunting, gathering, forest collecting, livestock rearing, small scale agriculture, and forest labour. Throughout the year, the families collect minor forest produce and firewood, seasonal fruits, various roots, leaves, flowers, herbs, seeds etc. for their livelihood. Income from agriculture is meagre and it plays a minor role for the economic life of Hill Korwas of the habitation which lack shifting cultivation and availability of fertile land. Small poultry and livestock farms are kept at certain households. Many of the village dwellers also grow vegetables at small pieces of land available at their backyards. Mostly they are not in the habit of cattle rearing and even ploughing the fields. The landless people and families having less acreage of land, work as agricultural labourers for other tribes and *Ahirs* during the agriculture season. They also work as forest and PWD or MGNREGS workers for respective government departments. But in all, they work mainly as agricultural labourers, except those who are engaged as *Dhangar* (bonded labourer) to some *Ahirs*.

Political organisation and leadership

Leadership among Hill Korwas is confined to certain hereditary posts enduring generation after generation. The leadership is informal, and the nature of it is very rigid and traditional. The posts of the leaders are non-competitive and continue as social heritage. In the absence of political institutions, two posts – *Baiga* and *Devar* i.e. religious and medicinal heads enjoy the leadership among Hill Korwas. *Baiga* is a socio-religious post and the political head of the Hill Korwa community. The *Baiga* is supposed to be well informed and an expert of his socio-religious duties acting as a link between two communities and he is believed by the community members to save the whole village against epidemic and natural calamities. He maintains peace in the village and neutralizes the difference between villages. *Devar* is strictly a medicinal expert and the post is non-hereditary. He possesses deep knowledge of medicinal herbs, roots and leaves of various kinds. He performs his job of *jhaar-phoonk* and medicinal treatment to the tribe and thereby respected and obeyed by the kinsmen. By virtue of this faith over him, the *Devar* also enjoys an informal leadership over the tribe.

Hill Korwas do not have an organized political institution which may act as a Panchayat for the community to settle the disputes and differences. Disputes of households and family due to differences of opinion and arising during the state of intoxication are settled within themselves. Some disputes arising between Hill Korwa individuals or groups over land, agriculture or possession of something, are settled at a gathering on a particular day when five seniors remain present to listen to their disputes and pleas thereof. Then both the parties one by one present their matters and after hearing the five seniors announce their decision to both the parties. Whosoever is found to be the defaulter is penalized or punished. The penalty is taken in the form of liquor from him/them and not cash. That liquor is enjoyed by all assembled there. In a small village like Kadamjheriya which is aloof from other tribal and non-tribal villages in the

vicinity, matters of group disputes arise among the faction going for hunting and bird catching together and ownership over the catch. Occurrences of inter group or inter-tribe disputes are very less. Wider political awareness among the Hill Korwas otherwise is very rudimentary.

Social organization and religion

Institution of marriage is based on the totemic clan exogamy. Among the tribe, marriage between certain distant kins is allowed. Marriages between parallel cousins and cross cousins are permissible and they are preferential mates. Average age of marriage for male is 20 years and for female is 16 years. But the age of *sagai* or engagement is 11-15 years for girls and 15-18 years for boys. Divorce and polygamy are common and widow remarriage is also allowed. Levirate and sororate marriages are also indicated and they are socially sanctioned. Hill Korwas generally do not have larger composite families. They also restrict communication with other neighbouring communities and tend to live in isolation mainly.

The religion of the Hill Korwas is confined to their ancestral worship and to the worship of few Gods and deities. *Khudia Rani* is the most popular deity among Hill Korwas and they all claim their decent from *Khudia Rani*. Next important deity is *Mahadev* (Shiva) and he is worshipped as *Sigir Deo* or *Sigir Meer*. The purpose of worshipping the deities and celebrating religious occasions is to please them and get rid of all the miseries of life. The life and living of Hill Korwas are not only dependent on nature, also are governed by it. Even at this modern and technology based era, they determine the time, position, distance and weather through sky, stars, sun and moon. They also possess the skills to forecast about weather observing animals and birds.

Trends of change

Majorly preferring isolation and limited contact with modern life style of living, the society and life processes of the Hill Korwas got influenced and subsequently changed with the contact of outside world or the mainstream society. With the changing forest laws and development of communication facilities, their daily life and ways of living are slowly influenced. Depletion of forests, decline in forest catches and lack of forest produce to meet the subsistence for them, gradually made them dependent on the farm produce and local markets for their food and day to day living.

After independence, special Plans and provisions were designed for the disadvantaged and backward sections of the society to protect them from atrocities and for their overall development. In 1979-80, *Korwa Vikas Pradhikaran* was established at Jashpur city for the development of the tribe under the erstwhile Madhya Pradesh administration. The main aims were to: (i) to identify the major problems related to the Hill Korwa tribe; (ii) to develop plans and implement them for the overall development of the tribe; (iii) to free them from atrocities; (iv) to prepare development strategies for the Hill Korwas by coordinating with the other developmental initiatives.

The Scheme for Development of PVTGs came into effect from April 1, 2008. The Scheme sought to adopt a holistic approach to the socio-economic development of PVTGs and gives state governments flexibility in planning initiatives that are geared towards the specific socio-cultural imperatives of the specific groups at hand. Activities supported under the Scheme include housing, land distribution, land,

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agricultural and cattle development, construction of link roads, installation of non-conventional sources of energy, social security, etc. The economic and social developmental initiatives for the Hill Korwas remained majorly unsuccessful due to the fact that the tribe had very limited necessities unlike the mainstream and were mostly depended on the forest for their life and livelihood.

The success of any developmental plan is dependent on the fact that the incumbents are themselves aware of the benefits of such a plan for their purposes. But the plans intended for the Hill Korwas mostly could not benefit them because they overlooked the situation, immediate environment and aspirations of the tribals. Though the situation changed slowly and the tribals who were initially reluctant to mingle with the mainstream, desired the needs of consumer goods, daily cooking items used by the non tribals, becoming acquainted with affairs of the outside and so on. But the gap remained to impart education in them to empower and develop them as per their own needs and aspirations. Broad areas of change among this tribal group can be highlighted over the years.

Changes in the dressing patterns—Hill Korwas who once upon a time were seen in bare body with a lower cover as hunters with bow and arrow in hand and women wearing minimal clothing too, with half *saree* and body covered with that single *saree*, have now started wearing dhoti, *saree* and modern clothes in contact with the mainstream society. There are changes in how the women are draping *saree* now. Previously bare footed, they have started using slippers and sandals when they go for hunting or for work outside their villages. Some of them even started using watches and mobiles too.

Changes in the dialect—previously the tribals were introvert and hardly interacted with the outsiders. The main barrier for such interaction was the dialect and language used by them. Their main dialect is *korwari* which is different from Hindi which is majorly spoken by the mainstream. The local dialect of Jashpur was *saadri* and it had some similarities with *korwai* dialect, hence, the Hill Korwas could in a way communicate with the Sarguja people. This was not possible in Korba or other places. Without the lack of knowledge of Hindi, the people of local administration and planners could not communicate with them. Due to this fact the developmental plans were not successful and due to their shyness they used to keep aloof from the outsiders.

With the spread of education, opening up of schools and adult education centres nearby, changes in livelihood patterns and development of roads and communication systems, the habits, dialect and attitudes of Hill Korwas are slowly changing. With the increase of their economic and subsistence needs they have started mingling with the people of adjoining villages for work and also go to the local market where they need to exchange words for communication. The Korwas have slowly started learning Hindi in schools, vocational and adult education centres and in recent times, it is not difficult to communicate with them in Hindi as many of the inhabitants in the village are versed with *dehati* language similar to Hindi.

Changes due to educational development—so far the tribals could not be much benefitted from the Schemes and program devised for them due to their ignorance and illiteracy. With the spread of educational drives, incentives and initiatives by the administration and coming in contact with the well-read people their interest in education increased. Now they have started sending their children to schools set up near their habitation instead of sending them for hunting, fishing, forest collecting and

cattle rearing. Today some of them even have passed higher secondary and started teaching. The *Aadimjati Kalyan Bibhag* has even set up residential Ashram schools mainly from the upper primary stage catering the need to the tribals living in the far flung areas where high schools are not available. Due to the spread of education among this PVTG, not only they are getting benefitted by the governmental schemes it also brings changes and improvements in their social and economic conditions.

Changes in the sphere of health and medicine—being mainly hunters and foragers depending on nature and forest, their faith on traditional medicinal knowledge of plants and home treatment and even on magic performing were more than the modern medicines. Due to the lack of hygiene and health regimen, malnourishment, many of them had fallen to deadly diseases, skin problems, and premature death. Even the child birth and delivery were performed by the untrained family ladies and neighbours. Child and maternal mortality rates were high too. Though they still have faith in magical practices and forest plants for curing diseases, slowly their faith on modern health care has increased and they have started participating in the health care camps organized for them and visiting the local health centres and hospitals for treatment of their diseases. Government has initiated health schemes, vaccination camps, appointed health volunteers or trained nurses in the local health centres catering the tribal population.

Reactions to exposure, contacts and assimilation

Interaction with the mainstream and other tribal and non-tribal communities has generally been apathetic and unfavourable to a particularly vulnerable tribal group. The Hill Korwas of Kadamjheriya, the contemporary hunting and gathering tribals themselves advocate that their best chances for cultural survival depend on state governments that maintain environmentally diverse and healthy forests, provide the hunting and gathering communities access to their traditional natural resources and implements projects that foster cultural survival rather than assimilation.

In India till the 1930s, the British administrators wanted to segregated and demarcate the tribal societies keeping them away from the mainstream citing the distinctiveness of their religion and following of animism. They devised the strategy of 'Isolationism' putting forward the argument that social solidarity of the tribals would be at stake by their contact with the non-tribal society. The proponent of such ideology was Verrier Elwin (1902-64) who in the 1900s strongly advocated the policy of isolationism for the tribals. He had very strongly put forward the point that opening of tribal areas had spoiled in the long run, tribal religion, art, and organisation. Proponents of this idea believed that nothing sort of absolute isolation would solve the problems of the tribals and some even extended the idea of creating protected tribal areas like the National Parks. Thakkar Bapa, a great social worker, protested against such efforts to isolate the tribals (Sengar 2001). Eminent Indian sociologist G.S. Ghurye (1893-1983) also contested this by remarking that the tribals have never been markedly different from the neighbouring non-tribes. The assimilation of tribal people with the rest of the population has been a continuous process and for it cultural contact with the neighbouring population is held responsible. The tribal people in India have come in contact with different Hindu and other communities and there have been different degrees of cultural contact leading to assimilation in different areas (Ghurye 1963).

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In case of the Hill Korwa tribe, the contact with mainstream society and culture is relatively recent phenomenon. Migration is slowly taking place. Among the total Hill Korwa population of Chhattisgarh, 4% have migrated to a different place or town leaving their original place of habitation (CGTRI 2016). This particularly vulnerable tribal group still prefers to live in the interiors and forested areas where in many instances there is no schooling facilities or reach of modern amenities of healthcare and communication. Migration to cities and cultural contact with the other tribal and non-tribal groups bring gradual changes in their outlooks, traditional cultural practices, and social institutions. In the new habitations after migration, ways of life, political outlook, relationship dynamics of the tribals within the community change in the wave of expanded electronic media and information technology, modern means of transport and road/rail connectivity. Some of the migrated tribals saw TV, music player or mobile phone for the first time once they reached to a town in search of work and livelihood.

Conclusion

Local culture of these tribal groups cannot remain uninfluenced by the process of globalization, market economy and powers of media or information technology revolution in a longer course of time. They are bound to experience pressures leading to some degree of acceleration towards homogenization of cultural forms and activities. To quote M.N. Srinivas, 'Indian culture is characterized by enormous diversity'. This provides tremendous cultural resilience to communities, including local cultures particularly tribes in India to filter the effects of globalisation through refractory and prismatic adaptations. The other source of resilience to local cultures is through the institution of democracy (Srinivas 1996). It has been observed that people respond to any movement towards modernization taken by the states in India with an enhanced sense of self-consciousness and awareness of identity. 'Cultural modernization sponsored by forces of globalization is resented if it encroaches upon or does not promote the core cultural values of society, its language, social practices and styles of life' (Singh 2000).

The tribal policy of the government always directed towards encouraging their autonomous growth with protection of their local culture. 'To protect their rights in land and forest resources etc. there have been two types of legislations—one is protective, intended to prevent non-tribals from acquiring tribal land and the other deals with the question of land reforms' (Government of India 2018). These laws prohibit outsiders from purchasing their property and settling down on their land by purchasing estate, which is their preserve. Tribals also enjoy privileges in running their own educational, cultural and social institutions.

While tribal identity should be preserved, tribals should develop in their own way without hindrance. For a tribal group like Hill Korwas with distinct life and processes, integration must be sharply differentiated from assimilation which means complete loss of cultural identity for them. Each group must be able to uphold its cultural heritage with dignity and sense of achievement. Integration is a dynamic and continuous process which necessarily involves give and take by the various sections of the national communities – this process could never be complete. Without taking the tribal ethos and sentiments into account, no development initiative might succeed. Need of education, healthcare amenities, decent livelihood and living are felt even at the most interior parts and by most vulnerable groups. Modern means are to be co-opted with modern ways of

reaching out to the vulnerable to cater their needs within their cultural ambit and distinct identities.

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