

## The Socio-Cultural Aspects of Kharia- Shabar in Purulia (1870-1950)

Nilanjan Chaki<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup>Department Of History, ChhatnaChandidas Mahavidyalaya, Bankura, e-mail : nilanjan\_chaki1985@yahoo.in

### Abstract

*Purulia which is considered as the most backward district of West Bengal in which the majority of Kharia-Shabar reside. Among the various tribes in West Bengal Kharias- Shabars are most abused and oppressed from the time immemorial. Shabars are anyway announced as Criminal Tribe by British Raj. They are ostracized and isolated from the mainstream society even today. The society keeps them beside all social cooperation and absorption. The present investigation expects to concentrate on the socio-cultural status of Kharia-Shabar.*

**Keywords:** Criminal Tribe, De-notified Tribe (DNT), Austro-Asiatic, Mufassil, Acculturation, Sanskritization, Autochthonous, Assimilation

### Introduction

In the Pre-Vedic society in India, there is a growth of a group of tribes who used to depend on nature totally and accordingly their culture developed. The District of Purulia in West Bengal is inhabited by more than a dozen of ethnic communities, the least known among whom are the Shabar. There has been very little attention so far paid to the study and development of the tribe. Except being represented in the census reports, they have not yet been brought into focus by any initiative from any corner. At the time of Independence Government of India found that there were 13 million people and 127 communities who were classified as Criminal Tribes act of 1924. Prior to the Independence, the British Government ascribed the Shabar as Criminal Tribe. In 1952 this Criminal Tribe Act was replaced and communities were designated as De-notified Communities. The Shabars are also among the de-notified communities. Shabars were classified as Scheduled Tribe by the Government of India during the time of Independence and acknowledged them as the most primitive group among the tribal as "Independent Tribe"<sup>1</sup>

The ancestral individuals of West Bengal comprise 5.6 percent of the all out populace of the state with as evaluated in the most recent statistics. There are forty Scheduled Tribes and three Primitive Tribal gatherings found in West Bengal as per the most

recent authority records of the state.<sup>2</sup> Three Tribal people group specifically Birhor, Toto and Shabar were pronounced as Primitive Tribal Groups. Some other inborn networks like Lodha and Kharia have additionally been guaranteed the name of Shabar. In this way the identity of Shabar as an autonomous ST people group of West Bengal makes disarray with another ST people group of West-Bengal, for example, Lodha. The Lodha like to call them as Lodha-Shabar or Kheria-Shabar. Truth be told, they are two particular endogamous clans with various conventions and traditions. They live in the sprinkled among other non innate networks of south West Bengal. They are expectedly assigned as food gatherers, who have lost their language and great number of conventional traditions and customs. Kharia-Sabars or all the more basically Sabars of Purulia are a standout amongst the most in reverse Tribal people group principally found in the eastern level area of India They were not autochthonous in the district, their history of settling in the village outskirts goes back not more than 110-120 years prior. They are founding in majority in Bandwan, Hura, Bagmundi, Barabazar, Manbazar and Chandil area of Purulia district.

### **KHARIA NOMENCLATURE**

The word, 'Khaida/Kheda' has etymologically gotten from rabbit. The general population of Manbhum called them kheda unexpectedly. Prior they were regularly child of forest and stayed in profound wilderness. They camouflaged in the profound wilderness, seeing any man (madas) they fled in the wilderness. Later the word Kheda was altered and differently formed to Kheria or Kharia. ManbhumiSabdokosh altered by Basuroy and Chattopadhyay<sup>4</sup> likewise refers to that Kheda is utilized in both terms as a network called Kharia (noun) and as rabbit (noun).

As on account of different other formal people, places or things the name of a native clan alters in course of history. It was first referenced by E.T. Dalton<sup>5</sup> as 'Kheriah' in 1866 in the Journal of Asiatic Society. Thusly, when the Anthropologists looked into the enquiry about the clan, they articulated and spelt it as 'Kharia'. At present the word speaks to the classification of the tribe. Famous Bengali Novelist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in his book 'BibidhoPrabandho' referenced about a clan 'Kheroa'. He anyway made close to nothing reference about them; just alluded they are non-Aryan individuals and love Goddess Kali. Russel (1916) recommended that the name Kharia is gotten from Kharkhari, a palanquine or litter, and that the first name Kharkharia been contracted into Kharia. This deduction is in understanding with the convention of the Kharias. Banerjee (1984) referenced that the predecessors of the clan once originated from spots lying among Rohtas and Patna. It is conventional with them that they at the season of migration touched base at some

spot called Kharia Ghat and henceforth is the name. Das<sup>6</sup> likewise referenced the Hill Kharias as Shabars as he composed Hill Kharia or Chabbar. It is evident that he misspoke the Sabar as Chabbar. Roy (1937) infers that the name Shabar in prior time all the distinctive Kolarian groups.

### **Historical Background of Kharia- Shabar Tribe**

In West Bengal we find 38 Scheduled Tribe distributed in South west and northern part of the state. Among the Scheduled Tribes of West Bengal, Shabars were found in Purulia, Bankura and West Midnapore. The Shabars generally lived in forested areas of Western part of Purulia district. We get references of Shabar tribe in Ramayana, Mahabharata, HarshaCharita of BanaBhatta, Rig-veda and Katha SaritSagara. We get to know about their chivalry from the above mentioned references. In the Epic of Mahabharata, we get references of Jarasura, who wanted to kill the Lord ShriKrishna. There is a story where Lord Shiva, due to a treachery against him by Shabar, cursed them of constant distress and poverty. According to Hindu Mythology, they are still suffering and struggling for their survival. Suhrud Kumar Bhowmick opined that the Shabars were considered equal to demons in ancient scripture. He has cited a song written in Magdhi script.

**“Bara BhaiyaAsur, TerBhaiyaLodha  
Bar Mahina ye Pujapathhaya the”**

It means, we among the thirteen brothers, twelve are demons and one brother is Lodha. Anthropologist Sarat Chandra Roy argued that the word Asura and Lodha appear to refer to one and the same people. So, Lodha and Demons are considered of the same category. There are some similarities of cultural practice among Shabar, Asura and Lodha communities. There are two categories of Shabar – (a) LodhaShabar and (b) KhediaShabar predominant in West Bengal.

The Shabars are most primitive tribal clan of Purulia among the other tribal communities. Locally they are known as Khedia. They have their own cultural identities as they live separately from other tribal groups in their own area. Shabars are considered as semi-nomadic tribe who move one area to another area for livelihood. They mainly live on food gathering and hunting, some of them also depend on agriculture and non-agricultural activities. As forest does not provide them with adequate means of livelihood, therefore they have to depend on other means of livelihood for sustaining themselves. K.M. Kapadia<sup>7</sup>, a renowned sociologist in his article opined that the Government of India took a wrong approach towards this tribe. A) They considered wrongly this tribe as criminal. B) This tribe hereditarily practices criminal activities. C) This tribe could be transformed by ruthless

punishments and lifelong imprisonment. K.S. Singh<sup>8</sup> in his book has opined that the Shabars were settled in west Midnapore and Purulia District of West Bengal. They were harassed by many ways by the Government and due to colonisation, a large part of territory were incorporated within the colonial territory. Therefore, they had to opt for supplementary practices for their livelihood.

According to AjitDanda, Shabars resided mainly Singhbhum district of Jharkhand, Mayurbhanj district of Orissa and Purulia district of West Bengal. These places were mainly forest area commonly called 'Jungle Mahal'. These Shabar speak distorted Bengali and words of Mundari origin. They have the population of nearly 4485 accordingly the census report of 1981. According to Risley<sup>9</sup>, in 1881 the population of Shabar in manbhum areas was 197, which rose to 4485 in 1981. According to Census Report of 1941, the population of Shabar was 6900 in Purulia. Risley also opined that there is conglomeration of many cultural practices in Shabar culture from the mainstream culture. They practice many religious activities which are reflection of Brahmanical Culture. Compared to other tribal communities the Shabar are minority (Tribal Health Bulletin). They mainly reside in Jungle Areas and they speak Shabar language, an Astro Asiatic language. Shabar can also speak Bengali.

Bhowmick has suggested that shabars of Purulia have never been incorporated in the mainstream Hindu culture, although after the withdrawal of Criminal Act in 1952, the Government has taken many initiatives for their upliftment.

In the Medieval India Purulia was infested with forest. Purulia was incorporated within Manbhum area previously<sup>10</sup>. According to Ain-i-Akbari, this area incorporated within the Mandaran Government (Bengal), with its head quarter at Tamralipta. Among the 19 provinces in Bengal, Mandarin Province is mention worthy. The areas which fall under the mandarin jurisdiction were Bankura, Dhalbhum, Manbhum, Singbhum and Panchakot. The KhediaShabar used to reside among the above mentioned areas. They were the son of the soil and they had adopted their simple lifestyle from the nature which was their habitant. Though these people's features are humanlike, their activities are wild like. They have not been able to come out from their nature habitat and not been able to come out from their nature habitat and not been able to come to the mainstream life. The Shabars are on the verge of extinction. The Colonial Government initiated Criminal Tribal Act of 1871 in Chotonagpur area. Therefore this tribe used to get afraid of mainstream community, and became mere isolated and started to settle in deserted forest area. As they were close to forest culture, therefore they had to learn shooting by bow and arrow for their survival. Animal Planting and Pastoralism is their main livelihood. We get

reference of Shabars in the earliest ancient Indian epic like Ramayana. In the writings of Balmiki, we get references of a shabar woman who was waiting for the arrival of the great incarnate God Ramachandra. The story goes like that God Ramachandra who also represents Aryan Culture, came along with his brother in the hut of Shabar woman and took few fruits offered by her. In the moral of the story was that Ramachandra, even though belong to a higher caste, did not believe in untouchability which is unbelievable still in modern society. Renowned Greek scholar Pliny also mentioned about Shabar in his book Indica in 1st century AD. We also get references of Goddess named ParnaShabari and a writer named Shabar Pad in Charyapada of 10th century. The number 18th verse of Charyapada is mentioned as 'ShabarPadanam'.

Alexander Cunningham, the great archaeologist, E. T. Dalton and H. H. Risley has done lots of research work on the life of Shabar throughout nineteenth century. They have referred the Shabar as untouchables and people of lower caste. Famous Anthropologist Atul Krishna Sur<sup>11</sup>, In his article, has written about the astroloid culture like Shabar, Santal, Munda, Ho, etc and also has referred the primitiveness of these tribes. He has further noted in his article that these tribes have lost their cultural superiority. Even the Brahmanical culture was very much influenced by the tribal culture and many cultural activities and rituals of the mainstream culture give reflection of tribal culture as there is acculturation of Brahmanical and Tribal culture. The various activities like floor decoration (Alpana), worship of Nabapatrika, blowing of Shankha, keeping of Banana leaf is all extracted from Shabar culture to Brahmanical Culture. Nihar Ranjan Roy<sup>12</sup> in his book opined that Shabar resided in hill and forest and wrapped themselves with feather of peacock. They used to decorate themselves with floral necklaces and earring made of seeds of fruits. There is mention of song 'Shabari Rag'. The terracotta designs found in stupas of Paharpur (Pala Dynasty) reflect the societal life of the Shabar.

### **The Kharias of Purulia**

As indicated by the Census of 1981, there are 7, 000 Hill-Kharias in the area of Purulia<sup>13</sup>. They comprise 0.34% of the absolute populace of the area. Following the District Tribal Welfare Office, be that as it may, the Kharias in the region inexact 15,000, spreading more than seven Police Stations, viz., Manbazar, Bundwan, Barabazar, Pancha, Balarampur, Hura, Purulia (Mufassil): all being arranged on the south-eastern side of the area. The appropriation of Kharia families in the area is given beneath.

The Hill Kharia of Purulia are called by neighbourhood individuals in various names viz. 'Kharyas', 'Sabars', 'Bandigars'. They are for the most part called 'Kherya'. However, they want to be tended to as 'Shabar'. Truth be told, most of them use title surname of 'Shabar'. This is on the grounds that they believe themselves to be the relatives of 'Shabars', the extreme and strong timberland individuals in the Vindhya district of Central India, as referenced in the Puranas, the Ramayana just as the Vedic writing<sup>14</sup>.

These Hill Kharias who have a place with proto austroloid racial stock, talk a type of vernacular which is known as Kharia 'thar'. Obviously, they additionally uninhibitedly chat in the neighborhood type of Bengali utilized by the village people. The Kharias shrouded in our examination safeguard from ten towns under the Police Stations of Puncha, Manbazar, Purulia (H) and Bundwan. Manbazar and Puncha Police Stations remain to the extraordinary east of the area town Purulia with a separation of 50 to 60 Km from the last mentioned. They are associated with the towns under their ward for the most part through 'Kutchra' or Mud Street. Of the villages under their ward just Kuda, Damodarpur, Kumari are legitimately connected with the region town through road transport switch.

### **Eating Habits and Food**

Their main items of eating are fruits, chicks, frog, snakes etc. Reptiles are their main items of consumption. They know a definite act of catching reptiles like snake. For this purpose in the rainy season they collect frog, crabs from paddy field. They also collect honey from beehive. They also like eating fox, rabbit, cats etc. They are very close to nature. They have sound health and well built. They have round scull and blunt nose.<sup>15</sup>

### **Occupation**

Shabars used to live by their hunting and collection of fruits and vegetables from the forest. But since the Forest Preservation Act of 1952, their livelihood is in danger. Gathering a little amount of food has become a matter of luck. They do not possess any lands for farming-they are landless. Hence, they have no other livelihood apart from working as hired labourers in the farms of the nearby HinduSantal, Mahato or other Hindu farmers. In leisure time, they collect fruits, flowers, honey from the forest and sell it in the local markets. Young men wait for the chances to go out hunting.

Like Lodha and Kharias, the forest-dwelling Sabars were also exploited and neglected under British Rule. Collecting forest ingredients or going to work as landless labourer

had resulted in only indignity and exploitation for them. They had been forced to almost starve many times due to lack of work. The police, administration, and neighbours had never helped them, and had instead exploited them, and snatched their lands and possessions. Consequently, their way of life is under serious threat.

Post-independence, the hampering of forest collections has diverted the Sabars towards taking up agricultural works as their profession. In the 1971 census 10.61% of the Sabars were seen to be farmers and 79.61 % agricultural labourers. However, the latter job is not permanent: available for only two to three months per year. Most of the time they have to starve. Famine is at its height for them: in this situation, expending money in clothes, medicines just cannot be imagined, so they had to resort to superstitious rituals and dangerous experimental hack medicines. For three decades after independence, this has been the situation of Sabars: many big words have been spoken while keeping them under poverty line.<sup>17</sup>

### **Cultural Assimilation in Festivals of Shabar**

The society of Shabar is dependent on nature. Therefore they worshiped nature as their God. Air, Water, Sky, Forest, Mountain, tree and wild animals were their God. They fought with nature for their survival and this way fear and respect made their conception of God. Belief was the source of their religion and various rituals are generated from these beliefs. We find references of a deity / Goddess named 'KarnaShabari' in the Sahajiya Buddhist Literature. The Goddess wore leaves of trees and wrapped herself in tiger's Skin. She is epitome of youth, thunder and destroyer of diseases and epidemic. She is Primitive goddess of Shabars. According to NiharRanjan Roy, Goddess Manasa is attached to forest people, similarly Shabar Deity is also attached to forest people. Manasa is life saver of snake bite. In Charyapada, we get songs of Shabar clan, which is also similar to vajrayana Buddhist Prayers. According to local belief, there was a god named Nilmadhav who was the god of shabar dynasty. This God is worshipped with grandeur and respect. 1st January (PoilaBaishakh) is considered as New Year according to the shabar and all yearly festivals begins from that time. Each Shabar family make a ritualistic pedestral (Manch / Than) for individual family prayer. Each Head of the family on that day sit in front of pedestal and remember their forefather through fasting and animal sacrifice and through various rituals. Throughout the whole days celebration continues, that day is considered as Good for new beginning of every activity, like buying of new house building construction, digging a pond etc. This day is considered as a good day for new beginning of everything. During Kali Puja, Badhna Puja is celebrated. This

puja is also called 'Gorya Puja'. Few days before Kali Puja, every house is renovated with natural colours, flowers, and with design. Beside

this the Shabars worship Nature-God like mountain God, Dalma, Dharburu, Porapaku etc. Outside the village there are various trees which are worshipped and those are called 'Garam Than'. During the construction of new house the Tiles are devoted to the GaramThan as the people considered that Garam God would save the house from all dangers. The Shabars also prayed animals called 'Baghut Puja'. Many houses in their courtyard made 'Baghut Than'. They believe that Baghut God used to protect them from animal attack.

Among the Shabars Marriage is the same Gotra (Cow Pen) is not allowed. But Love marriages are common, but they considered marriages with same gotra would bring evil luck and even death of husband / wife. But marriage, death were accompanied with several ritualistic functions. Pregnant Women are not allowed to go outside during night hours. The birth of the child purification rites are practised like hair cutting, bathing etc. During marriage various rituals are practised. In the marriage ceremony sword, Bow- arrow, mahul tree etc are used as various holy items. The dead bodies of the shabars are buried but sometimes bodies are burned. In KalikaPuran, there is a mention of ShabarUtsav, during Durga Puja. Anthropologist Atul Krishna Sur opined that the Shabar culture were the primitive culture, even Brahmins would not dismiss their existence. Many practice of the Shabar have influenced the main stream culture of Hindus of Bengal and Orissa.

### **Traditional and Criminal Activities**

The Kharia-Shabars, the antiquated woods inhabitants of India were tossed out of the forest by the forest Act of the Colonial Government and changed into biological evacuee. The adjustments in their vocation and economy might be considered as a piece of constrained adjustment, an exogamous weight which haltered the principle current of their life. Their social life and economy spun around timberland assets. They had the ability to confront unfavourable natural condition like extreme dry spell because of their one of a kind versatile system dependent on customary environmental Knowledge. They never starved for blemish rice as they currently may be. Ringer<sup>18</sup> referenced their one of a kind adjustment to serious dry season condition. They felt outright vulnerable when they were ousted from their woods house. They were discovered not well adjusted to the new economy. Losing the ideal to gather the assets from the backwoods now and then they were compelled to gather asset from family units unauthorized. In the meantime, British rulers erroneously speculated them as criminal. Thus disgrace of culpability was joined to



the Kharia-Shabar. In this manner they were tossed out of the woodland and common society. The Forest Act of 1892 made the Kharia somewhat disabled as they had no other elective wellspring of economy. The death of CTA of 1924 (Criminal Tribe Act) turned into a method of persecution of the more extensive network. Their express dissatisfaction with respect to segregation and disconnection is reflected in various society tunes.

Srivasta<sup>19</sup> composes that Violence against DNTs (De-Notified Tribe) has its peculiarity of being installed in the social structure of mastery by upper station. As a rule they additionally control the neighbourhood specialists to grab the DNTs. It is the standing based various leveled structure that sets out the standard of direct for human connection between its progressively special gatherings and the subdued and subordinate ones. The ground has along these lines been made progressively fruitful for pressure and turmoil to develop. The circumstance has likewise turned ready for mutual and rank powers to sow the seeds of division and dissension and enjoy viciousness the savagery takes severe structures and transforms into demonstrations of outrages against the entire gathering of individuals, for example, slaughter, assault, consuming increasingly unpretentious techniques like social blacklist, which proposed to hinder their access to essential necessities and services.

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, the assimilation of a Shabar in the territorial Hindu social framework just grows the inclusion of its basic detachment. They consider the Hindu society and its social convention another home and intentionally acclimatize inside the Hindu folds of society. They abruptly had been defied with an eye to eye contact with different networks and permit retention of factions and ceremonies. The superstitious convictions and practices of their ancestors are shed as they endeavor to change their inborn culture so as to serve the necessities of another durable distinguish fit to current occasions. Hinduism has developed by the consolidation of numerous ancestral factions, organization of religious convictions and practices. The attribution of generally fluctuating identities to goddesses is a consequence of consistent procedures of correspondence between confined little conventions and the broader, ceaselessly Sanskritizing extraordinary customs. Tribes like Shabar offered ascend to the Hinduized areas who are basically individuals from the station framework. The religious and social functions of these consumed gatherings were rebuked by Brahmanical rehearses. The Shabar become closer to Hindu religious Caste society and possess a status in Tribe-standing worker continuum.

## References

- 1.Singh K.S. The Scheduled Tribes, Oxford University Press , 1994 pp32
- 2.Das A.K. and Raha M.K. Handbook of SC And ST of West Bengal, Bulletin of Cultural Research Institute, Calcutta, 1966.
- 3.Risley H.H. The Tribes And Castes of Bengal, Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891 pp 496
- 4.Basuroy And Chattopadhyay.N (Ed) ManbhumiSabdokosh ,Chhatrak Prakashani,1990 pp 38
- 5.Dalton E.T. The Kols of Chotonagpur, Journals of Asiatic Society, Part – 2, pp 153
- 6.Das. T. The Bhumij of Sharaikhela, The Wild Kherias of Dhalbhum, University of Calcutta, 1931
- 7.Kapadia K.M. The Criminal Tribes Of india, Sage Publication , New Delhi, 2005, pp 221
- 8.Singh K.S. The Tribal Situation in India, IIAS ,Simla, 2002
- 9.Risley H.H. The Tribes And Castes of Bengal, Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891, pp 496
- 10.Jana Debshankar, AhalyaBhumi Purulia, Deep Prakasan, Calcutta,
- 11.Sur Atul Krishna, Folk Elements in Bengali Life, Indian Publication, Calcutta, 1975.
- 12.Roy NiharRanjan, BangalirItihas- AdiParba, Dey"s Publishing, Calcutta, Bangabdo 1400, pp 139.
- 13.Sinha D, The Hill Kharias Of Purulia : A Study on the impact on Poverty on a hunting and Gathering Tribe, Anthropological Survey Of India, Govt.Of India, pp 64.
- 14.Ball V, Notes on Kharia,an Aboriginal Race Living in the hill tract of Manbhumi, Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal.
- 15.Russell R.V, The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces Of India, Macmillan, 1916.
- 16.Risley H.H. The Tribes And Castes of Bengal, Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891, pp 498.
- 17.Sinha D, The Hill Kharias Of Purulia : A Study on the impact on Poverty on a hunting and Gathering Tribe, Anthropological Survey Of India, Govt.Of India, pp 76
- 18.Roy S.C and Roy R.C , The Kharias , Vol.1, Man In India, 1937
- 19.Srivastava, A, The Criminal Tribes Of India, Mohit Books, New Delhi, pp 207