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Vanishing Voices: Exploring the Contribution and Decline of Birhor Oral Traditions in the Context of Indian Knowledge System

Abstract:

The Birhor tribe's knowledge, education and culture are predominantly passed down orally from one generation to the next. This oral tradition is an integral part of their identity and existence. For centuries, they have derived this knowledge from nature and have worked to preserve it. This oral tradition holds a significant place within the Indian knowledge system, making it essential to preserve and protect this wisdom. This long-accumulated knowledge is now at risk as the traditional process of knowledge transferring is gradually fading away. Globalization and the influence of western culture, lack of representation, changing livelihoods, generation gap etc. have caused the younger generation of the Birhor community to gradually lose touch with their traditional wisdom. This research article aims to analyze the contribution of Birhor oral tradition to the Indian knowledge system, by drawing parallels between the tribal culture and practices of the Birhor community and Indian ancient culture as depicted in various ancient Indian texts, while also examining the generational gap that is contributing to the decline of this invaluable culture and intellectual legacy. The study seeks to identify way to prevent further loss and ensure the continuation of this rich tradition.

Keywords: Oral Tradition, Indian knowledge System, Birhor Tribe, Generational Gap, Indigenous Knowledge.

Introduction:

Indian knowledge system can be defined as a framework that represents the systematic and logical relationship between the huge repository of knowledge and practices that was developed, used and transferred from generation to generation in the Indian subcontinent

(Mahadevan, Bhat & Pavana, 2023). This system is broadly categorized into two main traditions: literary and non-literary. The literary tradition includes Sanatana dharma, other dharmic traditions and regional traditions, while the non-literary traditions primarily comprised of the oral traditions (Mahadevan et al., 2023). Indian oral tradition, undeniably, serves as the cornerstone of the Indian knowledge system. For instance, the Vedas contains no reference to writing as it was transmitted orally through chanting for centuries before being written down (Cenkner, 1982). Similarly, in the Gurukul system, knowledge was transmitted orally from the Guru (teacher) to the shishya (student) and focus was given on Shravan (listening with absolute focus), Manan (the process of memorizing without manipulating emotions) and Nidhidyasan (a continuous process of questioning, re-learning, rejecting and re-affirming everything one has learned in the light of truth). A good pupil (Sishya) must have the qualities of smriti (memory), medha (intelligence), shlanga (merit), raga (devotion), sangharsha (hardwork) and utsaha (enthusiasm) (Behl and Pattiaratchi, 2023). Furthermore, the Indian epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata were transmitted orally for generations to generation which indicates to the importance given to oral tradition of knowledge.

In various indigenous cultures around the world, this oral tradition of knowledge still exists. Oral methods are used for the creation and preservation of knowledge as well as transmission of the accumulated knowledge. The Birhor tribe of Purulia district is a notable example who don't have any written history of their own (Bandyopadhyay, 2015). The knowledge they have gathered over centuries through experience has been transmitted orally from the elders to the younger generation of the Birhor tribe. It includes their knowledge of fishing and hunting, preparation of the Kumha (leaf house), various spiritual practices, songs, folktales, dance, rituals of birth, marriage and death etc. (Gorai et al, 2022). For generations, this cultural repository has been transmitted from elders to the youth through oral tradition. However, with time and increased contact with dominant mainstream or westernized forms of Indian culture, a gradual decline in these traditions has been observed. Researchers have noted that the influence of external cultures, coupled with a growing generational gap, has led to the younger Birhor population becoming increasingly disconnected from their heritage and traditions (Bose, 2024).

This research article aims to document the contributions of Birhor oral traditions to the Indian knowledge system while addressing the issue of cultural erosion caused by the generational divide within the Birhor community.

Background

Like many countries around the world, tribes of India share a prolonged history with Indian civilization as they coexisted with each other for centuries, which is evident in the term 'Adivasi' or the earliest inhabitants of the land. Virginius Xaxa aptly observes that defining 'tribe' poses both conceptual and empirical challenges. (Xaxa, 1999). This is evident in the numerous accounts written about tribes, where most anthropologist, historian and sociologists viewed them through the administrative lens of the British, ended up 'identifying' the tribes as the inferior other, rather than 'define' the intricacies of their culture (Beteille, 1986). The earlier literature available on the tribes of India described them as violent, uncivilized and childlike (Bhukya, 2008), it was the British who started categorizing them as 'Scheduled Tribes' in the Govt of India Act 1935. Today, India is home to over 730 scheduled tribes recognized under article 342 of the Indian constitution which constitute to 8.6% of the total population (Census, 2011). These tribes possess a rich cultural heritage, characterized by unique customs, dietary practices, dress and ornaments, dialects, dance and music, artworks and belief system. (Victoriamma, 2018). But among these tribes there are a few who remains the most backward and their condition is so critical that they will cease to exist if not taken care properly. That's why, based on the recommendations of Dhebar Commission (1960-61), the Govt. of India started to identify most vulnerable tribal groups as separate category in 1975 and recognized 52 tribal communities, upon which 23 more groups were added on 1993, making it 75 PVTGs in India (Debbarman, 2015).

Birhors are one of the three PVTGs of West Bengal. The term Bir means jungle, and hor signifies Man in Mundari language, thus Birhor means Man of the Jungle (Adhikary, 1984). Birhors belongs to Proto-Australoid race and have their own language called 'Birhori' which falls under Mundari group of languages (Debbarman, 2015). In India, Birhors are mainly found in the states of Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal and Chhattisgarh. In West Bengal, people from the Birhor tribe are only found in Purulia district (Gorai, Dey & Modak, 2022). Earlier they used to be hunter gatherers but now gradually shifting to agricultural practices (Debbarman, 2008).

Review of Literature

E.T. Dalton (1872) in his work 'Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal' mentions Bihor as a tribe that lives in forest and hill areas. He observed similarity of Birhor tribe with the Kharwar tribe and explored the mythological genesis of the tribe. On the same note, L.R. Forbes in his account mentions Bihors as the earliest settlers in the forests and hills of Chot Nagpur area, he explored their lifestyle as hunter-gatherers who don't cultivate any crops rather survives by hunting birds.

and monkey and collecting wild roots and herbs. They also capture monkeys and teach them dance and makes a living in this way. He provided an account of the Birhor marriage rituals and practices (Forbes. 1872). The economic condition and social structure of the Birhor tribe was explored in detail by H.H Risley (1891) in his work 'Tribes and Caste of Bengal'. Though all these literature mentions about Birhors partially but none has captured the essence of Birhor life and culture and done by S.C Roy (1925) in his work 'The Birhor: A little-known jungle tribe of chotonagpur'. In his work Roy studied in detail about the social and cultural life of the Birhor tribe, their classification, administrative (Tanda) system, social practices, spiritual practices, customs of birth, marriage and death, funeral practices, the folktales associated with them, their language and vocabulary, family size and structure, profession, eating practices and how their worldview is shaped by the cultural practices (Roy, 1925). It was Roy who first mentions about the two divisions of Birhors known as Uthlus (wanderers) and Janghis or (settlers). He mentions Birhor language has similarly with the Mundari and Santhal language. He also explored the Tanda system, the various clans of Birhor and how their head (Naya) performs the administrative duties of the Tribe (Roy, 1925).

In the post-independence literature, A.K Adhikary (1984) in his book "Society and Worldview of the Birhor' investigated on the economy, ecology, social structure, social relationship and worldview of the Birhor tribe. S.K Chowdhury (2004) in his work explored the poor socio-economic condition and educational challenges of the Birhor tribe in Purulia and focused on the need for govt initiatives for their upliftment. Barman (2017) in her study showed the gap that exists between the policies taken by the govt for the welfare of the Birhor tribe and their implementation in Purulia district. Mathew & Kasi (2021) in their ethnographic study showed how the Birhor tribal people are slowing moving from their traditional life of hunting and gathering to a settled life. Oraon (2024) in her work highlighted several key factors for the socio-economic and educational backwardness of the Birhor tribe, which include limited access to education and healthcare facilities, extreme poverty, lack of employment opportunities, lack of infrastructure etc.

Objectives

The principal aim of this article is to explore the contribution of Birhor oral tradition to the Indian knowledge system, while also examining the generational gap that is contributing to the decline of this invaluable culture and intellectual legacy. The study seeks to identify way to prevent further loss and ensure the continuation of this rich tradition.

Methodology

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted by the researchers to explore the oral tradition of Birhor tribe from Bhupatipalli village of Baghmundi CD Block. The sample consists of 5 elders from the Birhor tribe. This study utilizes interpretive and critical paradigms to explore the research problem. Interpretive paradigm is based on the assumption that social reality does not exist objectively rather it is shaped by the human experiences and social contexts and thus in order to understand the social reality the researcher needs to understand the issue in its socio-historic context through subjective interpretation of its various participants (Bhattacharjee, 2019). Thus, Interpretive Paradigm provides a way for researchers to have contextual understanding of the people from real-life experiences (Taylor & Medina, 2011; Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). Here, the researcher as a social participant tries to understand the inconsistencies that exists between people, events and thoughts and uses their viewpoints to interpret the phenomena. (Bhattacharjee, 2019). Therefore, in this study, the researchers have analyzed and interpreted the participants' narratives to understand the lived experiences of the Birhor oral culture and practices and how that contributes to Indian knowledge system. Similarly Critical Paradigm provides a space for researchers to critically examine the existing power imbalances, loss of cultural capital and cultural identity amongst ethnic minorities and become change agents by advocating for an equitable, fair and sustainable society (Taylor & Medina, 2011; Willis, 2007). This study seeks to explore the oral traditional practices of the Birhor tribe, examining its contribution in Indian knowledge system and the gradual declining of the oral tradition, thereby emphasizing the need to safeguard their culture and identity as minority indigenous groups.

The researchers have utilized the narrative inquiry method in order to document the lived experiences of the Birhor people regarding their oral tradition. Narrative inquiry is as explained by Savin-Baden & Niekerk (2007), 'an approach that focuses on the use of stories as data… where stories are collected as a means of understanding experiences as lived and told, through both research and literature' (p.459). It is explained as a continuous process of understanding people, places, and events (Clandinin & Rosiek,2007; Schwandt,2007) that provides a thorough understanding of the participants experiences in a specific time and situation (Smit, 2017; Ylijoki,2001). Besides, Clandinin (2022) asserts that, 'the focus of narrative inquiry is not only valorizing individuals' experience but is also an exploration of the social, cultural, familial, linguistic and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences were and are constituted, shaped, expressed and enacted.' (p.7).

In this study, the narrators are five elderly Birhor people, who has worked tirelessly to preserve their oral tradition over six to seven decades. The narrative inquiry is done as laid down by

Sharp et al (2019). The researchers shared the purpose of the study with the participants and their consent was taken for the interview. After taking their consent, a semi-structured questionnaire was prepared for the in-depth interview. The researchers took field notes during the interview and it was recorded to be transcribed later on (sharp et al.2019). The transcribed data was dissected using open coding and identification of the relationship between the data was done through axial coding, and the main themes emerged from the data. The narratives were arranged chronologically, the stories were contextualized and analyzed using rich descriptions. Next, Thematic analysis was done according to Braun & Clarke (2006) to identify recurring themes, patterns and key insights from the stories.

Findings & Analysis

1. Birhor Spiritual Beliefs and Worldview: In Birhor oral tradition, different folktales are there which talks about the existence of spirit in the world. The people of the Birhor tribe believes that every object in the world such as the trees, mountains, stones, animals and rivers, holds in them the spiritual energy of the supreme being, which they refer to as 'Bonga' (Singh, 2022). For them, everything above, below or around has spiritual energy and every living being has a soul (Roy, 1925). This belief manifests in their daily lives and interactions with nature. For instance, when they travel, they invoke Dahar Bonga (the spirit of the roads) for protection, At home, the blessings of Oda bonga ensure their safety, preventing spirits from entering their rooms. In the jungle, it is Ajodhiya Buru (the spirit of the Ayodhya hills) that protects them during their hunts.

This worldview is in deep resonance with the Bhagavad Gita and the Jain philosophy of the presence of soul in every object. In the Gita, Lord Krishna explains the omnipresence of the divine soul, Paramatma, which resides not only in humans but also in every being of the cosmos (Prabhupada, 2021). In chapter 10, verse 20, Sri Krishna says, *"Aham atma gudaakesha sarvabhutaashayasthitah| Aham adishcha madhyamcha bhutanam anta eva cha||"* Which translates to, "I am the self (Atma) o Gudakesha (Arjuna), that dwells in the hearts of all creatures. I am the beginning, the middle, and the end of all beings." Similarly, Jainism upholds the belief in the existence of the soul (jiva) in all entities, living or non-living, which reflects that interconnectedness and respect for all forms of existence (Doley, 2015).

2. Ecological Knowledge: The Birhors are often referred to as the 'children of the jungle'. Living in the forest and relying on its resources for survival, they possess a deep knowledge of the environment, this knowledge is passed down through stories and teachings from the elders to the younger generation of the tribe. These teachings include guidance on how to prepare the

leaf house or Kumha by using resources from the jungle, which trees to worship before going for hunting, how to hunt without disturbing the ecological balance of the jungle etc. They consider the forest as their mother and pray before the Jungle Buru and take the permission before entering into the jungle. They hold the believe that the Jungle Buru or the God of the Jungle allows them to hunt in order to survive, but they should not disturb the ecological balance of the jungle, that's why they always collect the resources from the jungle in a sustainable way, not to harm the jungle. In fact, before constructing the Kumha or leaf house Infront of the jungle and river, they pray before the spirits of the jungle to allow them to build the house and protect them.

In Buddhism, we find the idea of living in harmony with the nature and treating all forms of life with respect. Lord Buddha taught people to conduct their lives in an orderly manner, such as 1. Consume less and only that much which is necessary to sustain the body. 2. Live in harmony with nature its various creatures and other people and understand the natural cycle of birth, old age, sickness and dealth. And 3. Learn from nature to improve your mind and behavior (Thathong, 2012). Jainism also teaches that all forms of existence is important and harming them disrupts the balance of the universe (Doley, 2015). In the Vedic samhitas nature is considered as 'divine entities and earth is being referred to as 'Mother', and humans are referred to as the sons of earth. *"O Prithivi, auspicious be thy woodlands, auspicious be thy hills and snow-clad mountains. Unslain, unwounded, unsubdued, I have set foot upon the earth." (Atharvaveda 12:1:11)* (Griffith, 1917). The first mantra of the Isha Upanishad also speaks of God's presence in nature. *"Isha vasyam idam sarvam yat kincha jagatyam jagat, Tena tyaktena bhunjitha ma gridhah kasyasvid dhanam" (Chapter 1: Verse 1)* which denotes, 'God is in everything that exists in this universe. Enjoy what is given, but do not exploit the resources of others' (Hiriyanna, 1911). In Bhagavad Gita chapter 3 verse 14, Shri Krishna said, *"annad bhavanti Bhutani parjanyad anna-sambhavah | yajnad bhavati parjanyo yajnah karma-samudbhavah ||" (Prabhupada, 2021)* which means all living beings are born from food, food is produced by rain, and rain is produced by Yajna. Yajna is the source of all action.

Through this verse, Shri Krishna has highlighted the interconnectedness of all living beings and how the proper flow of energy through human actions, sacrifices, or reverence for nature sustains the balance of life.

3. Knowledge of Traditional Medicine: The Birhors doesn't have any written account of their medicinal practices. In their oral culture they share their medicinal knowledge with the family members. They still use various roots, flowers, wild fruits, and bones of different animals and birds to cure illnesses. As needed, they collect these items from nearby forests and use them at the time of illness. As collected from the ethnographic field survey, some of the medicinal treatments used by the Birhor tribal people are as follows. For curing diarrhea, a mixture of Polash bark, Jam bark, Kumhi bark, Jod bark, and Aam bark is prepared first, to which raw line and sugar are added and given to the patient. Similarly, to cure red urine, a mixture of Ram daton, swetmuli, taalmuli and Sega root is prepared with sugar and given three time a day to the patient. For back sprain they use a mixture of the roots of the Tinsotna plant, beewax and mustard oil and massaged it onto the back. To cure night blindness, Puti fish and Sahra bark are mixed with rice, made into cakes, roasted over a fire, and then given to eat. In case of snakebite, leaves of Isarol tree and black pepper are made into a paste and applied to the bite area, and the mixture is given to consume for several days. Similarly, for curing epilepsy, sonchiyadi binding, fruit of Goigotro tree, Siviota, Akondo insect, Dhula Bhurdi and Ulti Dhanuk are ground together, boiled in the stomach of a young rooster, and then given to consume.

We find numerous similar examples of the use of medicinal plants in our ancient texts. In Rig Veda emphasis has been given to the use of herbal medicinal plants (Sardar & Giri, 2022). Rig Veda 10.97 (Hymn to Divine Herbs) says,

" *Vanaspate shatakratena vayam*

indraya datram grihneema svasti naha bhavatu |

Yaa oshadhih purvya uta nuu tanya oshadhih,

Taa oshadhih shataviratiirbhishagbhirabhinishtitaa||"

which means "we accept these herbs with faith in Indra, the hundred-powered Lord; may they bring well-being to us. Those ancient herbs, and those fresh and new ones, those endowed with a hundred-fold strength by divine healers, let them save us. Similarly, we find various Indian herbalist like Maharshi Charaka who authored Charaka Samhita, and gave the holistic approach to Ayurveda and talked about the imbalance of doshas (Dass, 2013). Another Herbalist called Sushruta, known as the father of Surgery, wrote the Sushruta Samhita where he presented a

systematic approach to surgical procedures, human anatomy, use of herbal anesthesia and techniques like dissection of cadavers etc. His surgical instruments laid the foundation for modern surgical practices (Gandhi & Patil, 2024).

4. Ethno-Pedagogical Techniques: Since Birhor live in the jungle, nature is their teacher. In the Birhor tribe, the male children are taught about various rituals and techniques of hunting by the male members of the family. The male child accompanies their father in the jungle for hunting. From an early age, they are taught the use of 'Gulti', a v shaped instrument used to hunt birds, and little animals. As they grow older, they are gradually taught the use of bow and arrow, spear, different types of nets etc. In the jungle, through experiential learning method they are taught the skills of trapping an animal and hunt it. The female child is taught the skills of cooking and caring of their siblings (Singh,2022). Besides, they were taught about moral lessons through various stories and tales by their elders.

Much like the Birhors, in the Vedic period, the Gurukul system of education emphasized on hands on practical learning based on real life experiences. In the Guru-Shishya Parampara, the students lived with their teacher or Guru in a close-knit natural environment where learning was not confined to theoretical knowledge, but extended to practical applications in daily life (Joshi, 2021). Skills such as archery, agriculture, cooking and other crafts were taught through observation, practice and direct involvement. Similarly, moral and spiritual lessons were imparted through stories, discussions and rituals that the students actively participated in (Sharma & Saini, 2024). This immersive method allowed students to internalize knowledge by doing, much like the Birhor children learn hunting and survival skills by accompanying their elders into the jungle.

5. Decline of Birhor Oral Tradition: The decline of the Birhor oral tradition, as revealed during the ethnographic field study, is a result of several interconnected factors. One major reason is the influence of Western culture, which has drawn the younger generation away from their traditional heritage. The focus on mainstream education has also contributed, as schools prioritize standard subjects while neglecting indigenous knowledge and practices. With young Birhor children spending more time in formal education, there is less exposure to traditional stories, songs, and cultural practices. Further, urbanization and migration have increased this chasm as families move to towns or semi-urban centers in search of better livelihoods, having left behind the environment where these oral traditions thrived. Economic pressures play a role as well, with the need for stable incomes pushing families toward modern occupations that

often disconnect them from traditional lifestyles. Additionally, the rise of digital technology and social media has exposed the younger generation to globalized content, shifting their attention away from their own cultural heritage. Many young Birhor individuals also feel a sense of inferiority, seeing their traditions as outdated or backward, which discourages them from engaging with their cultural roots. During our study, we came across a Birhor youth who though a graduate, didn't manage to get a job, due to which he has ended up taking the responsibility of their village dance group. Societal attitudes and lack of representation of indigenous communities has further deepen this alienation. Changing livelihoods, deforestation, and modernization have reduced the relevance of certain traditional practices, making it harder for younger generations to see their value. The generational gap between elders and youth further complicates the transmission of oral traditions, as elders struggle to make their knowledge relatable. Moreover, there is a lack of organized efforts within the community to document and preserve these traditions. Collaborative efforts to revive pride in their identity, bridge generational divides, and safeguard their oral traditions are essential to ensuring their survival.

Conclusion: To conclude, it can be said that in order to address the decline of the Birhor oral tradition, steps need to be taken by both the community members and Govt and Non-Govt. organizations. At the outset, initiatives should be taken by the Government to document and preserve the oral traditions of the Birhor tribe such as digitally recording the stories, songs and folklores for future generations. Schools that are near the community should integrate the indigenous knowledge into their curriculum which will develop a sense of pride among the young Birhor children and they will feel included in the classroom. At the same time cultural festivals can be organized at the Govt or NGO level in order to the youth to engage with their tradition in a celebratory manner. Lastly, empowering the community through more job creation, economic and social support can help them maintain traditional practices while adapting to modern challenges.

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