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Changes in Cultural Life of Kora Community: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract:

The Kora is a little known tribal community of India. They are mostly lived in the eastern state of India namely of Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal. Even now they are also founded in Assam, Tripura, Bangladesh. India has been inhabited by many tribal communities since immemorial past and has traced of their traditional culture. This rich culture of tribal people is also one of the unique an element of Indian culture. The Kora has their cultural identity and way of life. However, due to the influence of modernity and globalization, the culture of this community is gradually changing because the so-called modern culture is taking over the indigenous language, religion, festivals, rituals and culture. The cultures of various indigenous communities today are on the verge of extinction or facing crisis. Today, the traditional culture of the Kora community has followed this same path. This present research paper traces the continuity and change in the cultural life of the Kora community through a historical perspective.

Keywords: Colonial rule, Cultural life, Globalization, Kora community, Mainstream society, Modernization.

Introduction: Culture is not only the imprint of people's religious philosophy and spirituality. Culture is the expression which is expressed through the customs, livelihood, music, dance, literature, social relation, religious practices etc. of the people of a particular geographical region in the larger perspectives. Culture is generally a survival strategy and humans are the only cultured animals on earth. These human strategies depend on various characteristics including geographical, social, biological matter. In human society descendant inherit these techniques from their ancestor from generation to generation. Taylor noted that culture is a composite combination of behaviours, abilities and knowledge, beliefs, arts, principles, ideals, laws, customs, etc. which is acquired as members of society.¹ Kora is one of the ethnic groups of India. The Koras lived mainly in Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal in eastern India. According to the 2011 census, the total population of Kora in India is 2,46,598 persons. However, their population is much higher in West Bengal as compared to other states. According to the 2011 census the total Kora population of West Bengal is 1,59,404 persons which is 3.2 percent of the total tribal population of

West Bengal.² Koras lived in different districts of West Bengal namely Bankura, Purulia, West Midnapore, Hooghly, Burdwan, South 24 Parganas. Therefore regarding the ethnographic identity of the Kora people, Mr. Risley suggested that the Koras are a Dravidian caste of earth-workers and cultivators in Chhotonagpur, Western and Central Bengal, probably, an offshoot from the Munda tribe. The Koras of Manbhum and Bankura have well marked totemistic clans of the same as Mundas, and the latter admit that some sort of affinity may at one time have been recognized. The Koras of Santalparganas claim to have come from Nagpur.³ The linguistic and cultural similarities between the Koras are extensive. However there is inconsistency in Mr. Risley statement because Dravidian is not the name of an ethnic group. Therefore it is associated with a language group. In this context, D. B. Banerjee mentioned that the Kora community of the western part of Bankura, Medinipur and Burdwan districts and Purulia district is known as Mudi Kora and the word Mudi is derived from Mundari. Hence the word Mudi Kora means Mundari son. He discussed the comparative similarities with the branch languages of the Munda tribe namely Mundari, Santal, Kora, Kheria and showed that the Kora community and the Munda community belong to it.⁴ So it is concluded that the Kora people living in West Bengal are one of the primitive living tribal groups of India who are the original inhabitant in terms of caste classification. More specifically, they belong to the Munda clan.

Main scope of research: Through this present study an attempt has been made to discussing the cultural life of the Kora community in Bankura and Purulia districts which is located in the southwest corner of West Bengal through the context of historical change. The key questions that have been attempted to be explored in this context are mentioned below.

- 1) What is the traditional cultural identity of the Kora community?
- 2) How much is the significance of the Koras community life practices in their traditional culture?
- 3) Is the culture of this community endangered by the influence of colonial rule?
- 4) How much have they been influenced by the culture of the current society?
- 5) Is the Kora community moving towards the language and culture of mainstream society?
- 6) How much has modernization and globalization affected their culture?
- 7) How conscious are they about preserving their culture?

Traditional Cultural identity of Kora community: A lack of adequate information about the traditional homeland of the Kora people can be observed. However, field survey data is also used here to adequately an illustrated this point. This information is also known through their generations of collective music, which is mainly preserved in oral tradition. Several aspects of their lifestyle come up through the song, on the one hand, as a reflection of their independent mind-set; on the other hand, the reference to their ancient settlement, Nagpur, is clear here.⁵ Here Nagpur refers to Chotanagpur. Here there are indications of work at Kharagpur which they refer to as being mainly involved in the expansion of railways during the colonial period. There is more information about the original home of the Kora, in this context a person of this tribe said that the Nagpur region is remembered as

the original home of the Mundari language chants during their social ceremony called 'Saaluhula'.⁶

Highlighting their traditional habitation area it appeared that these oral records point to the Chotanagpur region as the original abode and traditional settlement of the Kora, but no written record has been found in this regard. There is a lot of evidence that prehistoric human culture originated, evolved and developed in different areas of Bankura, Purulia district in the distant past. In this context Paresh Chandra Das Gupta commented that this human culture that once prevailed in the distant past around the Shushunia Hills and on the banks of the streams such as Gandeshwari, Dhankora, Bankajor, Haroka, Amagora which is comparable to the very ancient clan way of life.⁷ Yajneshwar Chowdhury is also highlighting the habitation patterns of Austric language group people here. According to him, the aboriginal inhabitants of Rarh were originally people of Austric language group in anthropological terms this population is identified as Proto-australoid and the Santal, Munda, Onrao, Lohar, Bhumij etc. tribes of Rarh region belong to this group.⁸ However these tribal groups moved from the hilly areas of Chotanagpur to South Bankura, Manbhum, Barahbhum, Shikharbhum regions. All these clans traced their prehistoric lifestyles around the Kansai River. These tribes who gave up their nomadic mentality acquired forest land and started agriculture. Thus through a series of processes they developed permanent settlements. In this way small kingdoms were formed in Rarh region divided into several small regional Kingdom like Dhalbhum, Brahman Bhum, Aditya Bhum, Senbhum, Shikharbhum, Manbhum, Samanta Bhum etc.⁹

All these areas were inhabited by the Kora people. In this context Mr. Risley say that once the Koras were divided into various groups like Dhalo, Malo, Shikaria, Sona Rekha etc.¹⁰ However, such divisions are not common today. Villages inhabited by the Kora people formed their own village organizations. This village organization had two levels namely Gram Panchayat and Region Panchayat. This village organization plays a special role in social problem solving and festival related matters. In Koras society village Panchayat headman known as 'Mahato', 'Parmanik' and messenger 'Gorait' and a member assisting the Panchayat member known as 'Neki'. Area Panchayat Heads are known as 'Pandes'. 'Chandridar' is the mentor and 'Einmaral' is the regional ruler.¹¹ The traditional livelihood of the Kora community is digging the soil. Risley believe that the Koras are very skilled at digging the soil and that it is hereditary.¹² According to Dhirendranath Baske, the Kora caste is an aborigine of the original Astal class and a separate branch of the Munda community. Perhaps they have become separated from the Munda society by taking up the occupation of earth digging.¹³ Subodh Devasen mentioned that the Koras are mainly working as a labour. They are also cultivate the land and are good at tilling the soil.¹⁴ The Kora community tries to highlight their traditional livelihood through various festivals and rituals and acknowledges that their community name is Kora based on the cutting of soil. These tribal communities have mother tongues. However, despite not being recognized as 'Alchiki script' and language at the official level like the language of the Santal community the

Koras present their language as 'Korabhasha' to other people and name their language as 'Korabhasha' in their own language.¹⁵

Now let us highlight the aspect of traditional religion and worshiped Gods and Goddesses of Kora community:¹⁶

Shalui Hula: The Shalui Hula festival is celebrated in the month of Phalgun, Chaitra with the flowers of the *Shal* tree. Shallflower, shal leaves, new earthen pots, atap rice, lamps made of shal leaves etc. are used as worship materials. The north-east corner inside the house is used as a place of worship. The elder person of the house chants his own mantra in Mundari language and performs the puja.

Karam Parva: This festival starts from the 1st day of Bhadra month Bengali calendar and dances and songs for *karam* are performed in the middle of the village throughout the month. Mainly the branches of *Karam* tree are used as worship material. *Karam Utsav* Unmarried girls celebrate this festival on the last day of Bhadra month. Everyone in the village celebrates this festival by dancing and singing together.

Nawabahaha: It can also be called *Nabanna* festival in their society. The festival begins when the new harvest crops comes at home in the month of Ashwin-Kartika Bengali calendar. This festival is celebrated to celebrate the new harvest. The main ingredients of this festival are new rice, earthenware and a rooster. Elders of the house perform this puja chanting their own mantras in Mundari language.

Garyabonga: This festival is celebrated mainly after Kali Puja in the month of Kartik Bengali calendar. One of red colour hen as a material of worshiped and *Shall* tree are used to make new earthenware dishes, lamps, etc. This festival is celebrated in the evening with dancing and singing.

Aakhyan: This puja is held in *Garam Thane* on the first day of the month of Magh in Bengali calendar. This puja is performed for the village deity to wish for happiness and prosperity. This puja is mainly celebrated for the deity of *Garambonga*.

Saharay: In Sahara the festival is associated with agricultural work and the festival last for several days during which cattle and buffaloes are wished for growth.

One of the deities worshiped by the Kora community is *Rageshwar, Baghut* who is primarily worshiped as a forest deity. They used to enter the forests for hunting and gathering fruits, due to which the fear of death always embarrassed them while walking in the forest, the influence of gods and demigods in the depths of the forest is ingrained in the minds of these people and to get rid of it, they believe in the forest god Baghut.¹⁷ Baram is one of the goddesses worshiped by Koras. Originally worshiped as a forest goddess, ancient traditional tribal way of life emerges in this goddess worship. The Kora also worshiped *Tusu* as the grain goddess.¹⁸

Kora society also has its own marriage customs. Even before and after marriage they have their own customs. Seven days before the wedding, some people from both the bride

and groom go to each other's house for a special function which is known as *Dutam Agu*. A blessing ceremony is also held here. The events become very colourful with the sound of *Dhamsa Madal* and the rhythm of *Jhumur* dance. Another thing to mention is that tree weddings and pond weddings are practiced in this society.¹⁹ Daughters are recognized in the society. Thus, the traditional norms and festivals that are prevalent in Kora society centred on marriage make this community a separate and distinct caste. Moreover, the existence of dances and songs of the society can be traced. Songs are sung and danced around various festive occasions of daily life. In these songs and dances, the impression of traditional tribal society of Kora society is clear.²⁰ Moreover, the different types of tribal centric have cultural identities within these societies that make them unique.

Cultural life in Colonial rule: Colonial rule had a profound effect on the Kora people. The forest policy of the ruler, the land revenue system destroyed the entire social structure of these people and their rights over land and forests were lost. Losing their rights over land and forests, they became landless labourers and their livelihoods were disrupted, resulting in various famines during the Colonial period.²¹ The Colonial government employed these people in tea plantations, coal mining, railway construction, canal digging etc. to fulfil their interests and forced them to do all these works by force and extreme torture. In this context an author mentioned that most of the beggars were people of Kora tribe. They were forced to pay everything.²² Due to continuous famine, the people of this community lost a lot of lives, especially in the then Dhalbhum Barabhum and Trinabhum areas, many villages became desolate.²³ Along with this trend of migration increases. It is seen that many go to neighbouring districts and outside states especially Assam to work as tea plantation workers.²⁴ Also, in the Colonial context, the influence of Christianity in these regions increased. Most of the indigenous communities in the region were attracted to Christianity. Attracted to Christian doctrines, many became interested in adopting that ideology's philosophy of life, which intersected with indigenous life practices. This trend is particularly prevalent among the large tribal communities in the region, namely the Santal community.²⁵ However, it is noticeable here that the people of the Kora community have no interest in Christianity. In this case, as a result of living side by side with the mainstream Hindu society for a long time, the influence of Hindu and Brahminical culture and beliefs has been noticeable on them. The Koras have incorporated the gods and goddesses of mainstream Hindu society into their religious beliefs and culture. Mr. Risley's speech in this context is very significant and relevant. He pointed out that in the matters of religion, Koras effect to be orthodox Hindus, worshiping the regular gods and calling themselves shaktas or Vaishnavas accordingly as they incline to the cult of Kali, Durga, Mansa, or to that of Radha or Krishna, Mansa the heavenly patroness of snakes and Bhadu...whom goats, fowls, pigeons, rice, sugar and plantain are offered on no fixed dates, and are divided between the worshipers and the Deogharia Brahmans...village God's. In Manbhum, the Koras do not employ a Brahma.²⁶ Preliminary field research has shown that the Koras worship various gods and goddesses in addition to the mainstream Hindu society.

Socio-cultural life after independence: In the post-colonial period, the lifestyle of the Kora people also changed in culture. They have been able to come a long way. According to the census in 2001, 43% signatures were registered in West Bengal. However, the female literacy rate is much lower at around 29%. However, even though a long time has passed after the independence of the country, there has been no change in the lives of the people of this region. These original inhabitants of the region are still below the poverty line, homeless, deprived of proper education and healthcare. Even though they are protected by the government, even today their employment opportunities are very few, so they are widely travelling to other states as labourers in search of work. Due to very low education rate and opportunities, they could not be established socially, still as landless labourers they collect forest leaves and wood and sell them as labourers in building houses. They have not been able to take proper advantage of the government facilities and thus they are further backward financially and socially. In this context, Dhirendranath Baske raised the questions no such benefits have come in the national life of this nation during the post-independence period. They are still neglected by government and society.²⁸ According to Indira Munshi, this trend continued after independence. Therefore the Indian government economic policy of globalization and liberalization has only accelerated the process of alienation of the adivasis from their natural resource and created greater insecurity. The movement of human resources commodities finance and technology across national regional and local boundaries has adversely affected these communities'.²⁹ Here also, the globalized market-oriented economy has brought about radical changes in the indigenous way of life, destroying the traditional way of life and culture. To explain this radical change, scholars are referring to the term '*civilizational change*' in indigenous life practices.³⁰ In this case, it is necessary to mention that the relationship between indigenous livelihoods and forests is closely related, the globalized market-oriented economy and the continuous deforestation due to the need for modernization are changing the indigenous society.

In Koras society violence against women has increased. Initially, the field survey observed that many women were victims of domestic violence, but many refused to admit it due to social reasons.³¹ However, considerable changes can be observed in the area of unbelief and deities. The deities of the descendants of the Koras are the village god '*Garam*' and the forest god '*Rageshwar*', remembering this deity before they went to the forest to collect forest resources, but due to contact with the Hindus, the Koras have now adopted gods like *Shiva*, *Manasa*, *Sheetala*, *Kali* etc.³² On the other hand, progressive deforestation since the colonial period has led to loss of forest resource gathering and hunting opportunities, thus reducing the importance of forests and, naturally, the social significance of these gods and goddesses. On the other hand, the mainstream society's attitude towards the Koras is largely neglected, as a result of which they are still socially and financially oppressed. In this matter it is stated that not neglecting them or leaving them behind, this society with everyone and the improvement of everyone will improve the society.

Conclusion: In this historical research paper, the life and culture of the Kora people in the context of Bankura and Purulia region is presented in a very short form. Therefore, at the end of the discussion, it is stated that Kora are the original inhabitants of this region and this people has been living in this region for a long time. In the context of their society and economic structure could not support them in their living for a long time. However, they gradually got involved with the social culture of the region and there have been many changes, but even today that change has made a noticeable difference in their living and they are gradually moving towards the main stream of society.

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