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Rethinking Tribal Identity through Case Studies from West Bengal

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Abstract

Social identity is primarily explained in terms of the idea of self-consciousness and belongingness of the members in a group. But in India tribal identity as a form of social identity has remained a debatable proposition for long. The dynamic nature of tribal identity has been examined by several eminent scholars from different perspectives. The present study aims to understand the change of tribal identity through selected case studies in West Bengal. The data were collected during field work in different parts of West Bengal from 2015 to 2023. Various traditional anthropological methods like observation, interviews and group discussions were used in data collection. The study covered identity related issues associated with the Scheduled Tribes (STs), namely, the Mahli, Mahali, Parhaiya, Mru, Rabha, Savar and Lodha. It may be mentioned that apart from the Scheduled Tribe, there are other terminologies in use to identify various tribal groups like PVTG, Nomadic and Semi- nomadic tribes, De-notified communities. The problem of identity starts from such terminological juxtaposition. There is no denying the fact that tribal identity in India in its diverse manifestations is the product of colonial rule. Through ages the so-called tribes have experienced loss of identity, change and mixing of identity as a result of interplay of various factors. As per rational choice theory of ethnicity, identity is often attributed to the prevailing socio-political situation and choice of individuals. Tribal people also exercise their choice in selecting an identity suitable for deriving socio-economic benefits. Sometimes identity is changed due to institutional apathy, more as a reaction to it. The cross section of case studies included here revel the present state of tribal identity in West Bengal. Deviance from the normative cultural behaviour and acceptance of a new set of traits lead to the formation of new group identities in specific cases. This is an ongoing process of change triggered by the

continuous interaction with increasing out-group presence, giving rise to instrumental needs which result in formation of a new ethnic identity.

Keywords: Tribe, Identity, Interaction, Deviance, West Bengal.

Introduction

When we talk about a social group, we try to identify it through a set of characteristics. As is evident, members of each group carry at least one or more identifying characters of the same group. Generally speaking, social identity is the manifestation of a person's realization that he or she belongs to a particular social category or a social group (Hogg and Abrams, 1988). As identity is the product of social comparison and self-categorization, the very idea of social identity is relative. Social identity theory deals with inter-group relations leading to a sense of belongingness to one's in-group, distinct from his or her out-group attachment (Stets and Burke, 2000). Ideally, social identity describes and prescribes the behaviour pattern of the group members (Hogg, Terry and White, 1995). According to Mondal (2020), 'Group identity is a social artifact that can be molded, reformed and mobilized on the basis of available cultural attributes out of the forces of power'. In this connection, the connotation 'ethnocultural group' has been used to distinguish one group from another. The state on its part often attempts to impose the concept of 'ethnic gloss' to negate the direct effects of socio-cultural boundary between the groups by overgeneralizing the cultural identity of indigenous groups (Trimble, 2005). Regarding negation of ethnic boundaries, Nagel (1994) notes ethnic boundaries as the result of a dialectical process involving internal and external opinions held and expressions dependent on individual's self-identification and outsider's ethnic designation. Actually, the whole question of ethnicity is grounded in the matrix of social and political change. Theories of ethnicity suggest three assumptions, viz. primordial school to support ascribed status of ethnic identity, constructionist school focusing on the social construct and emergent ethnicity, and instrumentalist school where identity is thought to be influenced by social, economic and political factors (Yang, 2000). What is important is to remember that ethnic identity is essentially contextual. Individuals can choose among a number of identities based on varying degrees of stigma or advantages attached to it. The logic behind this choice can well be explained by the 'Rational Choice Theory' of ethnicity, where ethnic identity is seen as driven by self-interest as it is intentional. This theory explains how people act to promote their socio–economic position by minimizing the costs and maximizing the potential benefits of their action (Tamang, 2018). The concept of maximization over optimization simply neglects the attitudes, beliefs, cultural values and ideologies of people or perceived as a 'second order

reality' (Malesevic, 2002). Gellner (1997) believes that ethnic identity is an unnecessary construct as it is considered to be a sign of backwardness. This is no less applicable in the case of the tribal people of India. Mitra Channa (2015) notes that the typological classification of different communities in India is an administrative agenda taken under political compulsion. State accords identities as per what is admissible according to its estimation, while people create identities to uphold their dignity and glorification of the self. Some identities are accepted for negotiation, seeking privileges, deriving economic and political gains.

The Indian society is pluralistic in nature where different social and cultural identities of people and groups find representation. The hierarchical arrangement of the societies in India owes its origin to the colonial rule. The nomenclature 'caste' and 'tribe' were actually imposed by the administration (Mitra Channa, 2024). That's why, tribal identity always remained a matter of controversy. Different terms were used to designate the 'Adivasis' (local term) of India during colonial period ranging from 1881 to 1941. The term 'Aboriginal' was the first administrative term used in the Census of India, 1881. In 1891 they were termed as the 'Forest Tribe'; in 1901 the term 'Animist' was used to highlight their religious identity, and with a slight modification they were called 'Tribal Animists' in 1911. The term was again changed to 'Hill and Forest Tribe' in the year 1921, followed by the terms 'Primitive Tribes' in 1931, 'Backward Tribes' in 1935 and only 'Tribes' in 1941. To an extent, this terminological puzzle got fixed only after Independence when the Constitution of India defined a specific group of people as the Scheduled Tribe under the Article 342. The very idea of scheduling them speaks of certain privileges or benefits attached to it in order to expedite their pace of development. Thereafter, ethnic groups or tribes have been assigned a Scheduled Tribe status based on their territorial affiliation. But that was not the end of all controversies. The problem persisted with the use of categories like more backward, less backward, Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), Nomadic, Semi-Nomadic and De-notified Communities. There were 705 enlisted Scheduled Tribes (STs) in India and 40 STs in West Bengal as per 2011 Census. In the ST list of West Bengal, seven hill communities have been clubbed together - Bhutia, Sherpa, Toto, Dukpa, Kagatay, Tibetan, Yolmo in one group and Lodha, Kheria, Kharia in the other. Apparently, this categorization might signify broad cultural similarities. While the Lodha are PVTG in West Bengal, the Kheria and Kharia are not, although they reveal some similar features. The Kheria and Kharia tribes are also called Kheria Savar and Kharia Savar. At present, many Savar tribes call themselves Lodha Savar to enjoy the status of PVTG. Mahli and Mahali tribes are posited separately in the state list, but due to terminological resemblance they have been mixed up. Since the population of the Mahli tribe in West Bengal is very small, they remain

almost unrecognised. One of a few surviving matrilineal tribes of India, the Rabhas living in West Bengal have gradually been aligned to patrilineal ideology, which is indicative of structural change of wider implications. Tribes having very small population often face social exclusion and remain unnoticed, if not unrecognised. Broadly speaking, socio-economic situation, migration, acculturation, administrative adjustments are some of the factors behind loss of cultural elements among tribes. Anthropologists have always pleaded for protection of tribal culture and heritage. Xaxa (2016) opines that marginalization of tribes in India which started during the British period is still continuing through interaction with the non-tribal people who are enjoying a dominant position, prompted by their increasing control over the new political and economic system. The tribes remained conscious about their in-group feeling, developed a sense of belongingness, fought together for their rights in the past, but with the changing socio-political scenario of India, ethnic boundaries have become somewhat ambiguous. The identity of a tribal group rests on multiple levels of articulation, because it had to pass through different levels through diverse processes of negotiation (Bandyopadhyay, 2020). The policy of reservation and the policy of inclusion through different provisions offered by the state to safeguard the interests of tribes or ethnic groups have attracted such groups of people and, more specifically, the individuals representing such groups to find a suitable identity under the rubric of Nation State. Chhetri's (2024) work on the immigrant Nepali communities of Darjeeling is a unique example of this process, which shows that their changing ethnic identity is the result of political transition and transformation through time. The complex process of re-territorialization is rooted in the failure of the Gorkhaland movement to achieve desired results. Their demands for exclusive ethnic recognition as ST are actually to secure identities as citizens and nationals, without compromising their basic in-group character. While studying the ethnicity of North East India, Ramirez (2014) observed the boundaries and margins (ecological, cultural and ethnic) are more flexible, discrete or even continuous with others. Although tribes are usually understood through labelled cultures which are arbitrary entities, such an understanding is not without its utility and may be useful at certain stages of the description, even if ontologically subjective. Obviously, there are other mechanisms operating at a level above the ethnic group.

Ethnic identities and boundaries are always fluid and in constant negotiation with the power structure (Tamang, 2018). In Sarkar and Chakraborty's (2003) opinion, the tribal communities in India prefer to identify themselves as a part or constituent of the neighbouring communities of contemporary importance by borrowing some of their cultural traits and leaving a few of their own. Since interaction is repetitive and structured in case of some situations of common importance, its symbolic nature allows entry of

new elements in place of old ones. The result is reinterpretation, redefinition, remapping and so on (Turner, 1987). The dynamic nature of culture and change of tribal identity can be explained interchangeably in some specific contexts. The question is whether it is necessary to categorise every ethnic group separately, each based on the cultural pattern displayed by it? Can acceptance of a new identity by the members of a group affect the structure and function of the society they originally belong to? And if so, to what extent? What are its implications? What would happen if a group become victim of an ethnic gloss? This study aims to understand the micro level problems of tribal identity through case studies from West Bengal.

Method

The present study is based on qualitative approach. For this study, data was collected from different tribal communities while working on ethnography of selected Scheduled Tribes of West Bengal. Problems related to identity emerged from these studies. The first step towards understanding such problem is to get an idea about the variation in demographic size that exists between Scheduled Tribes. There are a number of Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal having very small population, particularly below one percent of the state's tribal population (Table No. 1). Population and literacy rate of the Scheduled Tribes of West Bengal were enumerated from the Census of India, 2011. The government records on caste certificate were consulted for justifying the cases.

Table 1: The population figures of enlisted Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal as per 2011 Census

Sl. No.	STs in WB	Population	Percentage
	All Scheduled Tribes	52,96,953	5.80%
1	Asur	3,864	0.07
2	Baiga	13,423	0.25
3	Bedia, Bediya	88,772	1.68
4	Bhumij	3,76,296	7.10
5	Bhutia, Sherpa, Toto, Dukpa, Kagatay, Tibetan, Yolmo	66,627	1.26
6	Birhor	2,241	0.04
7	Birjia	1,123	0.02
8	Chakma	466	0.01
9	Chero	5,477	0.10

10	Chik Baraik	21,376	0.40
11	Garo	2,039	0.04
12	Gond	13,535	0.26
13	Gorait	2,498	0.05
14	Hajang	621	0.01
15	Ho	23,483	0.44
16	Karmali	2,466	0.05
17	Kharwar	20,270	0.38
18	Khond	660	0.01
19	Kisan	98,434	1.86
20	Kora	1,59,404	3.01
21	Korwa	2,912	0.05
22	Lepcha	33,962	0.64
23	**Lodha, Kheria, Kharia**	**1,08,707**	**2.05**
24	Lohara, Lohra	24,783	0.47
25	Magh	8,032	0.15
26	Mahali	81,594	1.54
27	**Mahli**	**2,609**	**0.05**
28	Mal Pahariya	44,538	0.84
29	Mech	41,242	0.78
30	**Mru**	**197**	**0.004**
31	Munda	3,66,386	6.92
32	Nagesia	16,378	0.31
33	Oraon	6,43,510	12.15
34	**Parhaiya**	**921**	**0.02**
35	**Rabha**	**27,820**	**0.53**
36	Santal	25,12,331	47.43
37	Sauria Paharia	3,480	0.07
38	**Savar**	**40,374**	**0.76**
39	Limbu (Subba)	46,847	0.88
40	Tamang	1,46,203	2.76
	Total	**50,55,901**	

In the total population of West Bengal, Scheduled Tribes (ST) constitute only a small segment (5.80% of the total population as per 2011 Census). The Santals are the numerically dominant ST in West Bengal. Other major tribes are the Munda, the Oraon, the Kora and the Bhumij. There are a few communities having small population as well as low literacy rate. Of them, mention may be made of the Asur, Birjia, Garo, Lohra, Mahli, Mal Pahariya, Mru, Nagesia, Parhaiya, Rabha, Sauria Paharia, Savar. Fieldwork was conducted in tribal villages located in different districts. The present study focused on six different tribal communities of West Bengal, among whom fieldwork was done from 2015 to 2023. The tribes considered for this research were the Mahli and Mahali (confusion in names), the Parhaiya and the Mru (identification problem), the Rabha/Rava (changing matrilineal system) and the Lodha-Shabar/Savar (controversy regarding caste certificate). One of the main reasons for selecting these communities was the small size of their population in contrast to other tribes of West Bengal, which was in a sense advantageous to the researcher to go for prolonged or protracted observation and participation. Some of them had a very low literacy rate (Table No. 2) and these were the tribes who have been facing certain problematic issues related to identity more acutely.

Table 2: The Literacy rate of selected tribes as per 2011 Census

Name of the Scheduled Tribes as per state list	Persons	Male	Female
	(In percentage)		
Lodha, Kheria, Kharia	45.46	54.62	36.21
Mahli	50.70	59.80	41.29
Mru*	61.68	70.24	53.01
Parhaiya	38.16	42.27	34.10
Rabha	61.30	68.41	53.84
Savar	40.64	49.87	31.52

*Mru is an unidentifiable community in West Bengal, so their literacy rate is ambiguous (discussed later)

Findings on the Basis of Specific Studies Made

Conventionally, the tribal people are characterized by their language, social organization, cultural practices, political system, religion and ritual-cum-festival. Territorial affiliation was given priority when they were recognized as a Scheduled Tribe as per the

Constitution of India. Most of them were educationally and economically backward. It has been found that those states having considerable tribal population could implement different programmes undertaken under the Tribal Sub- Plan better than others where tribal population was low. As is clear, West Bengal represents a state of the latter category. It appears that here region-specific socio-political background of the Scheduled Tribes contributed largely to the formation and re-formation of their identity. The cases of the Mahli, Parhaiya, Mru, Rabha, Savar and Lodha tribes have been documented here to have an in-depth understanding of the identity- related issues.

The Mahli and Mahali Confusion

The Mahli and the Mahali are two different communities residing in West Bengal. Because of the way they are pronounced, the two are often confused. According to Risley (1891), the Mahlis are a sept of the Birhors in Chotanagpur. To Singh (1994), Mahli and Mahali are the same. However, the Mahli and the Mahali are shown separately in the ST list of West Bengal. The Census of India (2011) recorded 2609 Mahli individuals in West Bengal constituting 0.05% of the total ST population. Their highest concentration was in Barddhaman district (29.82%) followed by Jalpaiguri district (15.71%). The Mahali are also known as Maheli or Mahili. As a tribe they were firmly placed in the Chotanagpur region including West Bengal. The population of the Mahalis (81594) was more than the Mahlis in West Bengal, who constituted 1.54% of the total ST population of the State. Racially, Mahalis belonged to the Dravidian group and mainly worked as palanquin-bearers, labourers and bamboo workers. Their name has been derived from the Santal word *mat* meaning bamboo. The Sulunkhi and Tanti Mahalis are probably the offshoot of the Santal. Another sub- sect Mahali-Munda is part of the larger Munda group. The Mahalis got separated from the Santal and the Munda because of their degraded occupation of palanquin carrying (Risley, 1891).

Fieldwork was done in three villages under Galsi-II Block of Bardhaman district to locate Mahli community members. It was found that people belonging to Mahali community equated themselves with the Mahli. The people having surname Mahili or Mehuli also regarded themselves as Mahali or Mahli. Those with the traditional occupation of basket making belonged to the Mahali community. Information related to issuance of caste certificates as Mahli Scheduled Tribe gathered from the Backward Classes Welfare Department regarding issuance of caste certificates as Mahli Scheduled tribe revealed that a few such certificates were issued from the Barasat Sub division of the North 24 Parganas district. Probably as a result of that, a small population of the Mahli represented by nine families was found in Mahisha Mali Para under Habra – I block. There were 32 individuals (19 males and 13 females). Clans found among them

were *Dumuriya, Hembrom, Kerketta, Keshria, Chara, Khanthia*, which have long lost their original functional value. Even as surnames they were not compulsorily used. They rather used surnames like Singh and Mali. The ancestors of the Mahlis were nomadic in nature. They lived in Rajmahal hills and the hilly regions of Ranchi. Hunting-gathering was their traditional occupation. But their descendants migrated to Purulia district in search of work. Later, unfavourable climatic condition and drought in Purulia pushed them to Sundarban where they became engaged in fishing and sailing boats. Nearly 60 years back, few families migrated from Sundarban to Habra due to recurrent flood in the Sundarban region. Now they are mainly agriculturists. The Mahlis refer themselves as Hindus, propitiate the Sun god on almost every occasion, calling it *Dharam puja*. A mud rostrum is built at the courtyard of every household for worshipping the Sun God. A *Trishul* and an earthen pitcher are placed on it. They relate their origin with the Sun god, which is also found among the Birhor. They also perform 'Tusu puja', 'Karam puja', 'Goyal puja', 'Vadu puja'. The former two rituals might have come from Purulia. *Goyal puja* is cattle worship traditionally done by many tribes and Hindu caste groups, so is 'Tusu puja'. They worship the goddess Manasa, a tradition commonly found in Sundarban and the surrounding areas. All in all, they are now trying hard to establish a cultural tradition infused with a spirit of selective adaptation, if not total assimilation.

Excepting a female, all the 12 individuals including 6 females and 6 males procured caste certificates as 'Mahali' and not as 'Mahli' in the studied area. This created confusion between the two communities. Since Mahali is more common than Mahli, their actual identity was ignored. They were told that getting a certificate as ST was enough for availing government facilities. Some Scheduled Caste communities of North 24 Parganas (West Bengal) use Mali surname, which is no less confusing. There are two Scheduled Caste communities in West Bengal, namely, Mal and Malo, which again bear similarity with Mahli. This case suggests change and gradual loss of identity of the Mahlis. Identity of the Mahlis in the present case is superseded by the larger Mahali group.

The unidentifiable Parhaiya

The Parhaiya constitute a small proportion (0.02%) of the Scheduled Tribes of West Bengal. There were 921 individuals including 451 males and 470 females as per the Census of India, 2011. The decadal growth rate of the Parhaiya during 2001 to 2011 in West Bengal shows a positive trend as their population increased by 3.39%. It was still not easy to locate them. The etymological meaning of the term 'Parhaiya' or 'Paraiya' is 'a mountaineer', while Parhaiya in Gondi means 'burner of the jungles' (Crooke, 1896). Probably the Parhaiya once practiced slush and burn system of cultivation (*jhum*). It is said that the Parhaiya are the descendants of the Pandavas of the Mahabhabharata, the

Hindu Epic, for which they are called 'Pandawabansi Parhaiya'. Lahkur or Nakul is believed to be their ancestor (Prasad, 1988). The Parhaiya are divided into several endogamous, hierarchical groups (*Pari*), like *Pandavabansi, Narkatma, Pakphor* and *Cheroyan*. These groups are divided into several exogamous lineages (*Khut*). Risley (1891) identified several clans among them such as *Bag, Gachai, Gidh, Faniga, Kaua, Maina, Nag, Ophia* and *Tetenga*, only traces of which may be found today in some other context.

As per the 2011 Census, their main concentration was in Nadia district (35.61%) followed by Malda district (14.66%). A pilot survey was done in these two districts to identify the Parhaiya population. The survey revealed that there was none in the name of 'Parhaiya' in Nadia. A number of people belonging to Mal Paharia community referred themselves as 'Paharia'. Similarly, in Malda district Sauria Paharia was found instead of Parhaiya. The search continued on the basis of caste certificates issued in the name of Parhaiya and only three families could be identified, two from Darjeeling and one from Jalpaiguri district. Information received from the Sub Divisional Office, Siliguri revealed that a few caste certificates were issued to the Parhaiya people living in three blocks of Darjeeling district, namely, Matigara, Naxalbari and Phansideoa. It was found that only the certificate holders of Matigara Block were shown as members of the Parhaiya community. Krishan Parhaiya (informant) was the only representative of the Parhaiya community in Salbari. Krishan Parhaiya's nephew Shyam Parhaiya and Dinesh Parhaiya lived in the Fitter line of Gulma Tea Garden. Their ancestors came here for working in tea gardens. Krishan Parhaiya's forefathers worked as priests in the king's house and they were called *Baiga*. His father was a priest as well as a medicine man. They were also believed to be the descendants of *Pandavas*, but they could not reclaim their tradition and even forgot their clan names. They claimed their clan *or gotra* to be Kashyapa, which is actually a Hindu *gotra*. Due to prolonged co-existence with the Hindu caste groups, Nepali speaking people and tribal communities, they lost their original cultural traits. Their mother tongue Parhaiya (also called *Bagani)* belonged to the Indo-Aryan family of languages. Now the people living in tea gardens speak 'Sadri', instead of their own language. There were cases of Parhaiyas getting married to the Oraons and Nepalis. They were unable to continue with their traditional endogamous practice due to non-availability of bride and groom from their own community. Some of them moved to other states, especially Jharkhand, where their kin live. Because of their small number reduced to a handful, they have been facing a crisis of existence. That they are sometimes mistaken as Mal Paharia and Sauria Paharia could be attributed to their rather uncertain community structure. Naturally, their very identity is at stake. One is afraid that time is not far off when there will be none to be recognised as Parhaiya in West Bengal. This

case points towards decreasing population and loss of identity due to repetitive interactions with other communities.

The Mru Question

The literal meaning of the term 'Mru' is 'human'. The tribe Mru is also known as Mro, Murung or Mrung. They were located on the border areas of Myanmar (Burma), India and Bangladesh. The Mru are mainly the inhabitants of Bandarban district of Chittagong Hill Tracts. Chakmas and Marmas call them Lengta, Kuki or Langye or wild/primitive people, while some plain people designate them as Murongs. Mro have Mongoloid features, but they are tall and strong and dark complexioned, giving credence to Risley's classification of 'Mongolo-Dravidian'. They are peaceful and somewhat timid in nature. Murongs are well known aborigines of Arakan. The Mro language got separated from the Tibeto-Burman group at an early stage; the Mro vocabulary, syntax, and grammar resembling the Kuki-Chin languages of northeastern India and north-western Myanmar to some extent.

As per the 2011 Census, the total population of Mru in West Bengal was 197 (0.004%). The highest concentration of the Mru was in Jalpaiguri district (27.92%), followed by Paschim Medinipur district (25.89%). A small number of them were also found in Barddhaman, Hugli and other districts. Following the Census guidelines, a pilot survey was done in Jalpaiguri and Paschim Medinipur districts. But no data on the Mru could be found at the office of the PO- cum- DWO, which is the nodal office for keeping community -wise records. Non availability of data led to search for caste certificates issued to the Mru individuals and six certificate holders could be identified. Of them, three certificates were issued from Barddhaman district to the people having surname 'Murmu', who belonged to the Santal community. This happened due to the confusion of surname having similarity with the tribe Mru. Two certificate holders from Choto Maniram Jote of Darjeeling District belonged to the Mech community. Other two certificate holders from Nadia district also did not match with the Mru tribe. More than the problem in identification of the Mru, their lack of awareness and ignorance about their identity was revealed in the process. The search for the Mru tribe continued through searching the electoral roll of Siliguri Sub division and the result was also negative. During the study no representative from the Mru community could be traced out in West Bengal. This case indicates lack of proper investigation before issuance of certificate. The census operation was equally to be blamed in this case.

The Lodha Savar Controversy

The Lodha represents a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group of West Bengal. They are also regarded as a de-notified community or ex-criminal tribe. The Lodhas had the status of a criminal tribe until cancelation of their criminal status came into effect with the introduction of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1952. They were recognised as a Scheduled Tribe since 1956. Risley (1891) described the Lodha as a sub-tribe of the Bhumij in Chhotonagpur. They are now concentrated in Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal, Jhargram and in Mayurbhanj and Baleswar districts of Orissa. The total population of Lodha, Kheria and Kharia as enlisted in the ST list of West Bengal was 108,707 (2.05%) as per the 2011 Census. Their major concentration was recorded from Paschim Medinipur (47.63%). It is difficult to enumerate the actual population of the Lodhas because of their dispersed distribution and the tendency to equate them with some communities on the basis of their supposed common socio-economic status. Bhaumik (1985) noted that the Lodhas have been enlisted with the Kherias without any justification because these two communities are culturally distinct. They were designated as a backward community in West Bengal, which has something to do with their earlier status as an ex-criminal tribe and which has still been haunting them from time to time, though they have been trying hard to shed off this stigma. As a forest tribe their dependence on forest first received a jolt as a result of large-scale deforestation, which compelled them to move eastward in search of food and shelter. Lack of habitat and resources for livelihood led them to be involved in robbery. The literal meaning of the term Lodha is *Lubdhaka* meaning 'trapper'. Traditionally, they were hunters. The Lodhas have exogamous totemic clans like *Bhakta, Digar, Malik, Bag, Nayek, Ahori, Bhunia, Paramanik, Dandapat, Kotal*, some of these are common with the Hindu titles associated with some caste groups. *Deheri* or village priest has an important position in the Lodha society.

In any discussion on the Lodha, mention of 'Savar' is almost inevitable. It seems the Lodhas of West Bengal are inseparably connected with the Savar, creating some confusion. The Savar or Shabar is enlisted separately in the ST list of the State of West Bengal, with a population of 40374 (0.76%), as shown in the Census, 2011. Their highest population was in Paschim Medinipur district (45%) followed by Purulia (17.12%). The study of the Savar was done in Bankura and Purulia districts. The word 'Savar' or its phonetic variation covers a larger generic group. They are Particularly Vulnerable Tribe (PVTG) in India and in States like Bihar and Jharkhand. For a long time they were not shown as PVTG in West Bengal.

In Sanskrit 'Savara' means a 'corpse', while the Scythian word 'Sagaris' stands for an axe. Cunningham believes that Savaras derive their name from their habit of carrying axes, and that the Scythian word *Sagari* has been distorted into Savari and then Savara. Traditionally, they were dependent on snake charming, hunting small games, trapping birds and fishing. Still, a large section of them depends on forest. They have clans like *Badda, Bhera, Bhuiya, Boro Bhuiya, Gulgu, Kawri Bawri, Khas Salgu, Lal Bhuyia*, but they also worship Hindu gods and goddesses. They participate in *Gajon* festival, perform 'Pahar puja', 'Manasa puja', 'Makar Sankranti' with regularity.

In West Bengal the Savar are regarded as Kheria Savar and Kharia Savar with regional specificity. In Paschim Medinipur (presently Jhargram) many Savar claim themselves to be Lodha Savar to enjoy the status given by the State. Although the Lodhas had a derogatory status as ex-criminal tribe, they have now been redesignated as PVTG, thereby according certain special facilities to them which the STs in general do not have. The Savar in this region accept the caste certificate as Lodha Savar. Curiously enough, on the one hand they retain their own identity as Savar, while on the other enjoy the PVTG status for getting certain benefits. In Jhargarm, Lodhas and Savars live in neighbouring villages and both the tribes have been mixing freely with the non-tribal groups, mostly of Hindu origin. Both the Lodha and the Savar are Hinduaized tribes. But there is a cultural gap between the two communities. The Lodha and Savar have been freely exchanging their identities when it comes to realisation of certain needs. Of course, identifying Lodha as Lodha Savar gives them the relief from the social stigma attached with the name 'ex-criminal tribe'. This case is unique as an example of how a particular group, who were once excluded because of their criminal activities and now enjoying certain facilities provided by the government, has accepted the tribal status as per the provisions in the Constitution of India and at the same time have incorporated some Hindu cultural elements into their own. In this exercise, their Savar link seems to be helpful. From the Savar side, the reaction has to be different. The whole issue has now assumed a bigger political question.

Change from Matriliny to a Semblance of Patriliny among the Rabha/Rava:

A few matrilineal tribes are still in India and they mostly reside in the northeastern part of the country. Rabha or Rava are one of them. In West Bengal, Rabha and Garo are recognised as matrilineal Scheduled Tribe and they are mainly concentrated in the northern part of the State. The Rabha and the Garo belong to the larger Bodo group of tribes having close affinity with the Koch and Mech tribes. The population of the Rabha in West Bengal was 27,820 constituting 0.53% of the total tribal population of the State (the 2011 Census). A number of sub- groups have been found among the Rabhas,

namely, *Pati, Rangdania, Maitari, Koch, Dahari, Bitalia* and *Shonga*. The study on the Rabha was done in Alipurduar _I block of Alipurduar district. They were traditionally forest dependent and settled in Chilapata range during the British period. The studied Rabha people mainly belonged to Kocha Rabha. They are divided into as many as thirty exogamous clans called *Husuk* (Das and Raha, 1967). Some of these are *Banda, Bantao, Kantran Kara, Kama, Moiji, Nogora, Uni*. *Banda* clan is sub- divided into sub-*clans Bandhadhai, Bandasusuk* and *Bandasang. Moji* clan has sub clans like *Mojidong, Mojisamper, Mojinal, Mojipran, Mojibhoj and Moijibhobra*. These are strictly exogamous and totemic in nature. The members of each clan trace their lineage through maternal line. But now many families trace their lineage through patrilineal descent. The residence after marriage which was matrilocal has now been changed to patrilocal in most of the families. This change was influenced by the culture of neighbouring patrilineal communities, peer pressure and inter-community marriages. Men now feel ashamed of living in bride's house after marriage. The traditional society of the Rabhas has gradually been breaking down. Moreover, during last two decades the Rabhas of this region experienced mass religious conversion to Christianity affecting their age-old cultural practices. The main reason behind this conversion was immediate economic support received from the Christian institutions and health benefits after the adoption of certain religious norms like leaving alcoholism in the name of God. A section of the Rabhas also accepted *Sanatan Hindu Dharma* by taking oath (*Diksha*) from the religious specialist (*Guru*). Another very important dimension of change was observed in case of property inheritance. The Rabhas preferred ultimogeniture according to which the major share of the immovable property goes to the younger daughter. The daughter had to live with the parents after marriage. In case of a single daughter, the lion's share of the property goes to her. Sometimes, inheritance of property depended on the adjustment between brothers and sisters. The son does not inherit parent's property if he stays with his in-laws. But he can enjoy his wife's property. Besides the younger one, other daughters may also come to stay with their parents. In that case immovable property will be shared by the daughters. All movable properties of the mother go to the daughters. Due to increasing pressure of patrilocal residence, daughters' claim to mother's property has run into difficulties. As a matter of fact, the traditional practices, culture, and religion of the Rabhas are under the grip of change of great significance due to the out-group influence, transforming individual behaviours within the group. Loss of matrilineal identity is definitely the most important one, which has changed their orientation towards the basic identity.

Discussion

The case studies point towards various facets of identity issues found among some of the Scheduled Tribes of West Bengal. These are as follows:

(a) Although ethnic identity is the product of social and cultural construct having a lasting and profound impact on the individual, it has been subjected to a process of sweeping changes under the pressure of external forces.

(b) Identity could be changed by the influence of dominant group, not only through the process of acculturation, but also because of lack of awareness about one's own ethnic identity.

(c) Decreasing population, increasing exogamy and lack of interaction with in-group members lead to loss of identity at individual level, which has its impact on the group as a whole.

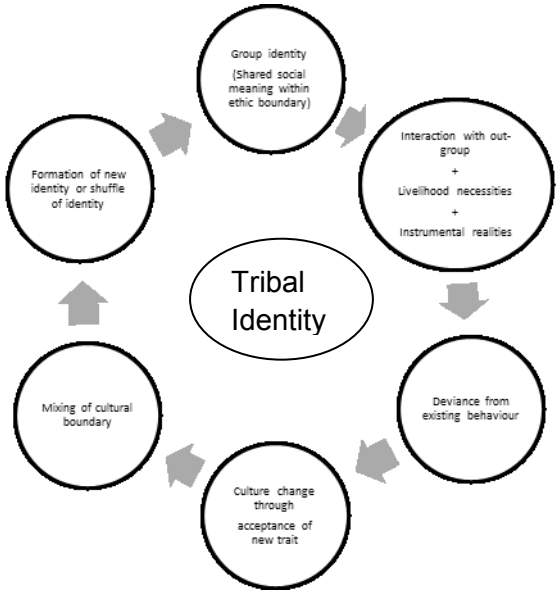
(d) One group may accept the identity of another group with the expectation of getting certain benefits provided by the government or other development agencies.

(e) Under intense out-group pressure, change of tradition, cultural practices and religion are definite hindrances to protect tribal identity.

(f) Ethnic identity has been increasingly used as an instrument for accessing resources with which the group has been emotionally linked.

Ultimately, one has to realise that in the whole identification process institutional apathy or neglect and one's own inability to have a clear understanding about how it works or is capable of working count a lot. These are responsible for creating ambiguous identities or making the identities in practice ambiguous. Some idea about the dynamics of tribal identity as it works can be had from the following schematic representation.

Figure 1: Schematic representation showing dynamics of tribal identity



Our approach to identity is often driven by the realization that it can be changed due to social dynamics and the new pattern of interaction. Deviance from the existing behaviour pattern becomes inevitable in some cases leading to acceptance of new traits and rejection of the old ones. The interplay of both may create a new identity - an identity which is shaped by individual choice. Its acceptance and application at the group level are, however, subject to getting approval or recognition from the society at large, without which group solidarity may be at stake. In-group - out-group interaction, livelihood necessities and choice-based behaviours of the group members cause deviance from and weakening of the existing normative structure. Indian tribes have varying cultures and traditions. The whimsical way of mixing identities at the administrative level or at the instance of the administration will have a telling effect on the cultural heritage of India, in which tribes have their rightful place.

Conclusion

Tribal identity is the product of common culture, language, regionality, religious attachment, social organization and so on. The boundaries of the tribal societies under investigation are found to be flexible enough giving space for intrusion of other cultures. In today's world, every individual has the scope and in some cases necessary exposure and even compulsion to interact meaningfully with other individuals across various

groups of different standing. Social interaction allows for the entry of elements of change in the society. In case of tribes, group identity as a manifestation of group orientation dominates over individual identity. Group identity may be changed through repetitive communication and interaction. Existing norms and behaviour pattern have come under serious pressure from the forces of change. In all such cases, the very survival of the small community comes first before the preservation of their identity. As far as tribal groups are concerned, their most important consideration or the priority in life seems to be accessibility to resources for living, created and made available to them by the government, and getting the status of Scheduled Tribe to prove their eligibility for such benefits. The problem of identity is a global issue, but it needs to be observed from the grass root level. Anthropological intervention is necessary to prevent dilution of ethno-cultural boundary, subjecting it only to a superficial ethnic gloss by over-simplifying the identification process. Policies should focus on awareness generation regarding ethnic identity, which is intricately connected with the whole issue of protection of small tribal cultures in India.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in this study.

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