



## CHANGING SOCIAL CULTURAL ASPECTS OF MAHALI TRIBE: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPRAISAL

*Prokash Kumar Palit*<sup>1\*</sup> & *Bijoy Bitan Saha*<sup>2</sup>

1. **Prokash Kumar Palit**, Asst. Professor, Bangabasi Evening College, Garpara, Po. Gobardanga, W.B.
2. **Bijoy Bitan Saha**, M.Sc Student, University of Calcutta

### Abstract:

The Mahali tribe, as an artisan group of West Bengal, lives in Choukpathra village of Jhargram. Basketry is their traditional occupation. They are patrilineal tribe. They prefer monogamy. As their products are no more demanding and technologically they are not developing their products for variety, their income status is being in stagnant. That is not sufficient for livelihood in good condition. The markets of their products of basketry are being exchanged with products of alloy metals and plastic materials. The crisis is responsible for social cultural changes in various aspects.

**Keywords:** Artisan, Mahali, Social cultural, demand, basketry, social change.

### Introduction:

The Mahalis of Choukpathra village, Nayagram Block, Jhargram District of West Bengal are 253 in population and 58 in households. According to Grierson (1904) the dialects of Santali and Mahali and are closely related. Mahalis are distributed in districts of Jhargram, Bankura, Purulia, Birbhum, Jalpaiguri, Dakshin Dinajpur and Uttar Dinajpur of West Bengal. They prefer more Santhal to live in small hamlets nearer at tribal peasant or caste peasant villages. Mahali tribe

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:	RESEARCH ARTICLE
<b>Prokash Kumar Palit</b> , Asst. Professor, Bangabasi Evening College, Garpara, Po. Gobardanga, W.B. Email: <a href="mailto:prokash_palit@rediffmail.com">prokash_palit@rediffmail.com</a>	

### ***Changing social cultural aspects of Mahali tribe: An anthropological appraisal***

has a specialized occupation and they are identified for the occupation, artisan and basketry. Total Mahali population of the village is 253. They are 125 (49.40%) males and 128 (50.59%) are females out of total 253. The age group of 25 years to 39 years is highest numbers of population. The Choukathra village is nearby location of Orissa state. Jungle and bush is their preferable habitat as they can avail bamboos easily from jungle or bush. They also collect bamboos from locale. Vendors from various districts come to them for buying the products of the Mahali people. The vendors are their main buyers. The Mahalis also sell their products at local markets. Their low income status and technically backwardness is an issue for their development. Their low income status does not support to their education. They are acquiring lots of things from society of general caste people, but their backwardness is still remaining in their society.

#### **Literature Review:**

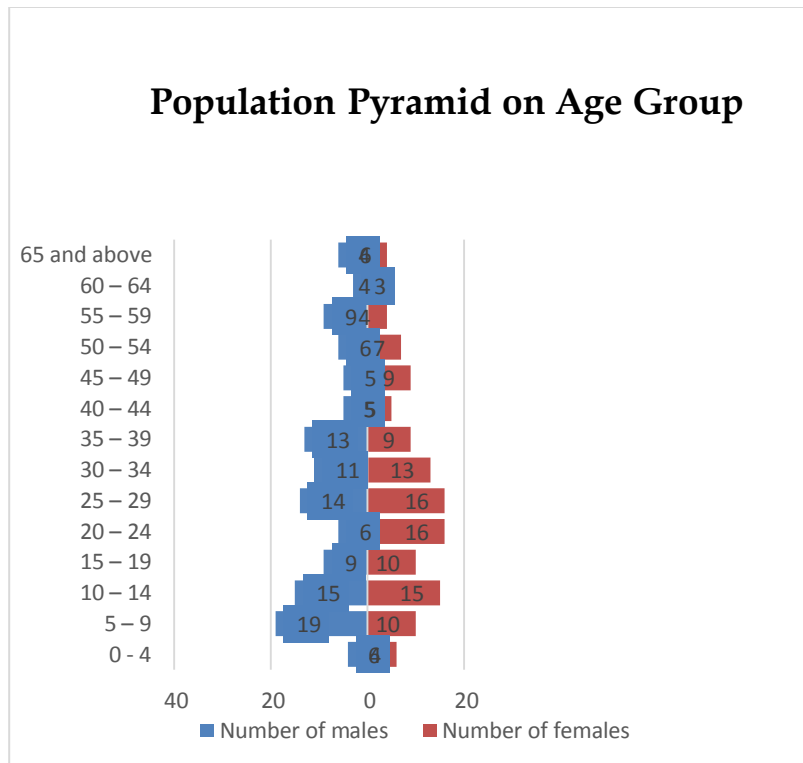
Mahalis prefer multi caste villages in separate hamlets. They prefer to live with the Santhal, Munda, Ho, Bhuia, Kurmi, Bhumij and others. Their standard of living was uplifted little bit by various facilities and programs of tribal developmental and that provided for the Mahalis or other tribals. But still they are sustaining in low socio economic condition. (Soni 2016). The Mahalis are specialized in making products of baskets of bamboos for their livelihood. They engage as agricultural labourers in the time of agricultural season (Rapti).

#### **Methodologies:**

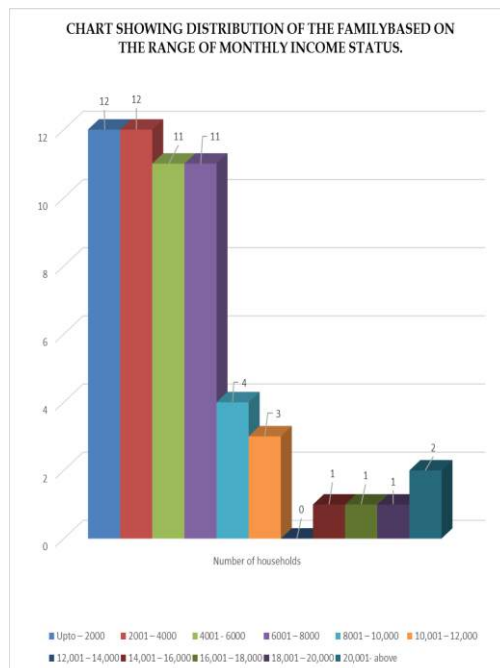
The Ethnographic study is based on numbers of interview case study and non participant and participant observation methods. The data of all the 58 families were gathered by using each of the methods. The various aspects of society of the Mahali people like Marriage, Clan and Religion, Rituals of Birth, Death and other Rituals and Festivals etc of Mahali people, were considered. The data about social coordination for producing the basketry products of the community were gathered by using the methods.

#### **Discussion:**

There are 253 population and 58 households in Choukathra village of Jhargram district. Out of 253 population 125 (49.40%) are males, 128 (50.59%) are females. Highest numbers of population are from 25 years of age to 39 years of age. Out of 58 households there are 7 types of clans in the village. They are 'Murmu', 'Baske', and 'Kanti', 'Mandi', 'Beshra', 'Ganesh', 'Hasda', 'Shankha'.



From the above graph i.e., Graph 01, which shows the age and sex distribution of the total 253 Mahalis (100%). Mahali of Choukapatra village there it shows that there are 125 (49.40%) males and 128 (50.59%) are females. Highest range of population is between 25 years of age to 39 years of age.



### *Changing social cultural aspects of Mahali tribe: An anthropological appraisal*

Graph 02 represents the distribution of income status of the Mahalis according to the households. The graph also shows that out of 58 families 12 families earn up to - Rs 2 000. Another 12 families earn Rs 2001 - 4000. 11 families earn monthly Rs 4001 - 6000. Another 11 families earn monthly Rs 6001 – 8000. Only 4 families earn monthly. Rs 8001 - 10000. Only 3 families earn monthly Rs 10001 - 12000. No family earns monthly Rs 12001 -14000. Only 1 family earns Rs 14001 -16000. Another 1 family earn monthly. Rs 16001-18000. Only 1 family earns Rs 18001 -20000. Only 2 families earn Rs. 20001 & above.

In Mahalis of the village the prime sources income is basketry. The basketry occupation is not only their subsistence but it is their traditional occupation followed by their ancestors. Present generation also maintain this old tradition. Most of them are maintaining this basket making. Baskets are their main product of the Mahali people. There are some other products that are produced only on demand and that needs to pre ordered are small kula or '*choto hatah*' , bamboo made bags, dolls, bamboo made cap etc. which are mostly artistic and are sold as show pieces.

The above graph shows that their income is very poor or on an average; the income is not supporting them to sustain livelihood properly. They are changing their occupation, their pattern of rituals. Their mixing among the inter community and intra community is being changed. Some people are going for jobs in another place. Some people are leaving their own occupation; some people are giving less importance to the clans. Digital life also changes their social cultural aspects. They are being transformed from nature based society to general caste based society.

The Mahalis do their job as agricultural labourers in monsoon or cultivation season, or as tenants of neighboring landholding Hindu caste peasants and a few as cultivator of their own small plots of land. They generally live in and around the other tribal communities as their products are sold easily to other communities and jobs of laborers may be available in the agricultural based tribal people. The Mahalis go for in search of jobs of labour to the agricultural based tribal people in season of cultivation. Their exchange system of goods and labours with the other tribal communities and caste people are very important for their life

#### **Birth ritual:**

##### **Child birth rituals**

There are lots of changes that had taken place in every culture with the advancement of the technology, thus this had an impact on the events of the life style of the indigenous people. Mahalis are the worthy inclusion. There are a number of things related with the child birth which involves preferences, taking care of the pregnant women. It was in the past times when pregnant women involved in delivery in a particular place of the house under the presence of trained women for child birth. This event was only obseleted and maintained by the women groups and no male allowed. Now a days though this had changed a lot due to the increase in the facilities of the transport and the development of the hospitals.

### **Preferences about the Gender:**

Obviously, there is a gender preference for the child that going to born. They prefer son rather than daughter. They have two explanations for that, firstly, son is required to perform the rituals after death of a family member, and without a son this ritual will remain incomplete and leading to unhappiness of the departed soul in the afterlife. Secondly, they feel the son when grown up would earn and look after their elderly parents. The preferences were not there in early days as all of they worked as labour. Now the multi occupation based society leads them to choice male rather than female.

### **Ceremonies Performed after the Child Birth:**

There are a number of rituals performed after the birth of the child.

#### **The Ritual of 'Atur':**

Soon after the birth of the child the rituals that take place is the 'atur'. It is the process of removal of the pollution which is actually a part of the ritual intending to incorporation of the child within the society. It's a ritualistic process.

The process of observation the ceremony is being synchronized due to shortage of income and cooperation within the society.

### **Marriage ceremony**

Marriage is the social institution that provides social relationship between a man and a woman a sanction in the society. It's the institution that provides social identity to the child a man and a woman may have while staying together.

#### **❖ Concept of Marriage:**

As stated the Mahalis from the village, marriage is the bond that binds a man and a woman in an unbreakable bond that is sacred, auspicious and that last beyond this life. It is a legal procedure by which a relationship between a man and a woman gain sanction and acceptance in the society.

#### **❖ Factors Influencing Marriage:**

There are certain factors influencing the mode of marriage.

##### **➤ Season for Marriage:**

Every culture does have a particular season good for marriage which the people think most auspicious for a beginning of new life. Mahalis do have the same belief. The months as per the Bengali calendar which are very auspicious for the marriage to conduct are Falgun, Baishakh, Jaishtha and Ashar.

##### **➤ Factors involved in mate choosing:**

There are certain factors involved in mate choosing. In case of girl, she should know the household works, basket making and agricultural works a little bit.

## *Changing social cultural aspects of Mahali tribe: An anthropological appraisal*

### ➤ **Eligible age of marriage:**

- ❖ In every culture there is a specific age limit of marriage before which none can't marry nor do they able to do after that limit, though the latter part was applicable for the girls mostly. In case of the Mahalis, the range of the age for the male to marry is 18- 25 years while in case of the females, the age limit is 12-19 years.

### ❖ **Types of Marriage:**

The types of marriage based on mode of acquiring mate that are present among the Mahalis are-

- Arranged marriage**
- Marriage by elopement**
- Love marriage**
- Remarriage**

### ❖ **Rituals Associated with Marriage and the Process of Marriage:**

#### **Marriage Arrangements:**

In case of Mahalis, when the males are of eligible age then their parents used to look for good bride for their son. In that case, local neighbours or relatives also participate in finding good bride for them. Now family of that particular male can contact any official match maker so that the procedure can be efficiently handled.

In case of females, the same thing take place that is when the females are of eligible age then their parents used to look for good groom for their daughter. In that case, local neighbours or relatives also participate in finding good groom for them. The following steps are being followed by the Mahalis of Choukapatra village.

- **Selection of the mate, informing the village head about marriage, fixation of the major dates associated with marriage, invitation process, marriage exchanges, invitation process, the blessing ceremony ('horochin').**
- **Aiburo bhat' ceremony**
- **Turmeric smearing ceremony ('gaye holud'):**

- **Rituals at the Day of Marriage:** Generally, the time of marriage takes place in the morning, afternoon or at evening. It doesn't depend on any time line as those of you Bengalis have.
- **Rituals and Process of Bathing:** The ritual of marriage begins with the rituals of bathing in the morning. The process of bathing includes bringing the water from the pond by married women in the morning.
- **Journey to the Bride's House:** After the ritual of bath the groom starts his journey for the marriage toward the destination of bride's house.

### *Changing social cultural aspects of Mahali tribe: An anthropological appraisal*

- **Welcoming the Groom:** Now as soon as the groom and the people of the groom's side arrive, the match maker, who is with the groom, and their relatives inform the bride's house by visiting there.
- **Rituals for Meeting of Groom and Bride's Brother:** While the bride is busy in decoration, another ritual takes place outside the house at the entrance of the courtyard. When the groom enters the courtyard
- **Preparing the Bride:** On the other hand, the bride is being prepared by her brother's wife and other female members of the family and relatives.
- **Preparation of 'Bidisthal'/Marriage Platform and Rituals of Marriage:** The '*bidi sthal*' is prepared earlier during the time when others were busy in various activities. It is prepared by inserting four bamboo poles at four corners of a pre-selected place forming a square booth where the marriage will take place.
- **Rituals after Marriage:** After marriage was complete, both of them take blessing from all the relatives by touching their feet. And then the grandmother of bride asked the groom if he will be look after her or not, the groom have to answer yes.
- **Rituals at the day after Marriage:** After marriage was complete, both of them take blessing from all the relatives by touching their feet.
- **Leaving the Bride's House:** In the next morning of marriage, all the members from the groom's side along with the newly married couple will leave the house of the bride.
- **Welcoming the New Wife:** When the newly married couple reached the village of the husband, they are taken to the village head's house along with the other members who had gone with the groom.
- **Death rituals:** An individual's death might be regarded as the ultimate crisis or point of separation in that person's life. Death is marked in so many ways around the world that an understanding of different rituals can be helpful, particularly in a cross-cultural environment. It's not death, as such, which is a universal experience, but the expression of grief that differs so much between cultures. The ritual associated with the phase of death varies in different culture which is a focus of ethnographic study of indigenous people. Not just that, death stands as the final stage of the life cycle which ends with the end of the life of a person.

#### **The concept of death of the Mahali of the ChoukaPathra village is quite different.**

Now the Mahalis of Chokapathra village are following the steps for observing the 'Death' rituals.

## ***Changing social cultural aspects of Mahali tribe: An anthropological appraisal***

Identification of a person being dead by the Mahalis, Funeral practices among the Mahalis, cremation of the dead body through firing, situation at the home of the dead, preparation of the body for cremation, rituals at 'dobati', rituals at home of the dead, preparation of the pyre and associate rituals, giving last rites through fire, rituals after the last rite, entering the house.

### **The Rituals of Mourning- Rituals of Profanity:**

#### **The Steps of Observing Rituals of Profanity:**

Soon after the death of a person the period of profanity begins. There are a number of restrictions that the family members of the death need to observe. All the kins from the dead person's side have to maintain the profanity and observe the rituals only if the dead person is a male. But in case of female, the family members and the close kins of the in-laws side have to observe the rituals and taboos that are the son and his wife and children have to observe the taboos in the period of profanity. The profanity is maintained partially by the whole village such as eating vegetarian food, they don't need to eat food devoid of oil or garlic because they believe that one of their close members of the village has died. So, in this way they mourn along with the family members of the dead person. During this time none of the village member visit 'jaher than' for worshipping.

### **Conclusions:**

The Mahali tribe of the Choukapatra village is trying to be changed with the new situation of new socio- economic system and digitalization system. They are giving importance to their status and income rather than cooperation with inter and intra community. Though their income does not support for good life, but they are very much inclined to TV, mobile, cable connection. They are also very much inclined to be anomy about the rituals and festivals of the society, because they want more to absorb Hindu and western culture.

### **References:**

- 1) Bose, N.K. (1941) "The Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption". *Science and Culture*, vol.8, pp. 188-198
- 2) Bose, N.K. (1956) "Some Observations on Nomadic Castes of India." *Man in India*. pp.36
- 3) Geertz, Clifford (1963) *The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States* //, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. Glencoe Free Press, New York, pp. 255-310. 16)
- 4) Geertz, Clifford (1993) *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Fontana Press, London, pp 10-21.
- 5) Grierson, G.A. (1904) *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. IV, Calcutta, pp.32.
- 6) Grierson, G.A. (1993) *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Fontana Press, London, pp 10-21.



***Changing social cultural aspects of Mahali tribe: An anthropological appraisal***

- 7) Rapti, Pan. *The Mahali an Artisan Tribe of the District Birbhum West Bengal: an Anthropological Study of Their Cosmology*. Shodhganga: A Reservoir of Indian Theses (30.05.2022).
- 8) Soni, Amit. (2005) *Sociology of Culture: Case of the Mahali of West Bengal*, Aspects of Tribal Studies (pp.145 - 153) Publisher: Sarup & Sons, New Delhi.
- 9) Soni, Amit. (2016) "Mahali Culture and Social Change in West Bengal." *North Bengal Anthropologist* (2016) Vol.,4: 23-31.

