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ASURS AND THEIR DANCES

Joseph Marianus Kujur

I. INTRODUCTION

The Asurs are a small community of tribals mainly found in the state of Bihar. They are associated with their ancestors, who were once the iron smelters. Risley, as found in Singh (1994), has described the Asurs as a non-Aryan tribe, who almost entirely lived by iron-smelting. Their main concentration is in the Gumla, Lohardaga, and Palamau districts of the Chotanagpur plateau of Bihar. Their population in Bihar state, according to the 1981 census was 7783. Almost 97% of the total Asur population returned from the rural areas. They speak in the Asuri language, which belongs to the Austro-Asiatic family of languages. But they are also conversant with two other link languages of the region for inter-group communication, namely, Sadri and Hindi. In Netarhat area, where there is an Oraon predominance the Asurs understand the Oraon language as well. They have an oral tradition and use the *Devanagri* script for writing. In Risley's opinion as mentioned by Singh (1994:72), the Asurs were also referred to as *Agoria* and *Lohra* and they used *Majhi* and *Parja* as titles. Risley has identified sub tribes like *Agaria*, *Birja*, *Kolh-Asur*, *Lohra-Asur* and *Paharia-Asur* among the Asurs.

II. SOCIAL LIFE

The Asurs are divided into totemic exogamous clans such as *Aind* (eel), *Baroa* (wild cat), *Basriar* (bamboo), *Beliar* (bel fruit), *Kachchua* (tortoise), etc. The Asurs have three economic and territorial endogamous subgroups, namely, *Soika*, *Birjhias* and *Jait* Asur. There is a practice of adult marriage. The mates are acquired through negotiation, mutual consent, by exchange, elopement and by service. They practise monogamy though polygyny is permitted. There is a practice of *dali paisa* (bride price) also. The post-marital residence is patrilocal. Divorce and remarriage is allowed. Property is divided among the sons, but the eldest son gets the largest share. Birth pollution is observed for nine days and ends with a rite called *chhotti*. The first cereal-feeding ritual is held when the baby is five or six months old. Marriage rituals are solemnised by the village priest (*Pahan*). They have a custom of burying the dead. Pollution after death is observed for ten days.

III. RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

The Asurs believe in *Sing Bonga*, the Supreme Being. Some of them are converted to Christianity, though they still retain some of the traditional practices. Their attitude towards the supernatural powers is one of reverential fear. Diseases or natural calamities are attributed to some evil power. If the disease is diagnosed to be of serious nature, a Magico-religious treatment is sought. The Asur pantheon consists of several deities and spirits like *Pat Deota*, *Sarna Mai* or *devi Mai*, etc. *Darha*, *Nasan*, *Mua*, etc., belong to the category of evil spirits. The ancestral spirits are venerated as they protect them from the evil ones. They also believe in witchcraft and black magic. Thus, in their world view the spirits are of two types, benevolent and malevolent. They observe festivals such as *Sarhul*, *Sohrai*, *Holi*, *Karma* and *Kharwaj*, etc.

IV. ECONOMIC LIFE

Iron smelting has been the traditional occupation of the Asurs. The advent of the iron industries in the region has proved to be a curse for the cottage industry of the Asurs. Their traditional occupation has now died out. Consequently, they have now taken to agriculture. The use of improved methods of cultivation is taken positively by the Asurs. In early days they used to sow their fields by adopting rotation crop in order to give the required rest to the fields once ploughed and cultivated. There was a time when each Asur household possessed 15 to 35 acres of land. Later on, due to the infiltration of the outsiders into their land and the exploitation that followed, the Asurs have to migrate to the tea gardens of Assam. Today, the Asurs live in poverty. While majority of them are still involved in agricultural operations, a sizeable number of the Asurs have taken to other jobs. With the spread of education, some of them are working for the Government and private firms as clerks, peons and even school teachers.

V. POLITICAL ORGANISATION

Every Asur village has a traditional *Panchayat* (Council of Elders). The headman of the *Panchayat* is called *Mahto*. The selection of the headman is determined by the personal qualification and popularity of the person. He is responsible for the law and order situation in the village. He is also the spokesperson of the village before outsiders. The *Panchayat* consists of the *Panchas* who must be at least five in number. Women are not allowed to participate in the activities of the *Panchayat*. The *Panchayat* does not meet regularly to settle minor issues of the village but only the serious matters with far reaching impact or the matters pertaining to the tribe itself, are brought to the Council. Every Asur has to comply with the decision of the *Panchayat* or else he can be ex-communicated not only from the village but from the tribe. Ostracism from the tribe has very serious implications because if a person dies in a state of ex-communication he or she cannot attain liberation in the life after death. Such a person can never be in the communion of his/her ancestors.

VI. ASUR DANCES

Dances are one of the main means of entertainment for the Asurs. There are certain dances like *domkatch* in which only women participate. But in most of the dances both, men and women take part. They have an *akhara* (dancing yard) in the centre of the village. The speciality of the Asur dances is that like the dances of the Oraons, Mundas and Kharias, they also make a circle or a semi-circle while dancing. The movement in the dances is anti-clockwise although at regular intervals they move backwards also. There is uniformity in the dance to the melody of the singing and the rhythm of the drum beats. The songs may change, the dancing steps may change, but the drum beats remain the same.

The Asur dances can be classified into three categories according to festivals, jatra and miscellaneous social dances. There is hardly any material available on the Asur dances but on the basis of the resource persons from Netarhat area where Asurs are in majority, the following details can be given regarding their dances:

(A) Festival Dances: Festival dances of the Asurs are those which are performed during special seasonal feasts. It should be noted here that they were basically iron smelters, but now have taken to agriculture and labour work. They are surrounded by other tribes such as Oraons, Korwas, Nagesias, Mundas, etc. The Oraons being the predominant tribe in the region, play an important role in influencing the life style of the Asurs. Consequently, even the feasts and festivals of the Asurs have gone through a sea of change. Here are a few festival dances of the Asurs:

(a) The Phagu Dance: The feast of Phagu is celebrated in the lunar month of *Phagun* (February-March). This is the new year's day of the Asurs as is for other tribals of the region. If anyone is caught ploughing or manuring the field before the *Phagu* ceremony, he may even be ostracised from the community. It is also customary to eat new vegetables and fruits of the year only after performing the necessary ceremony. Traditional hunt is part of the Phagu celebration. The Asurs ask for God's protection on their hunters and beg him to send plenty of game their way. The hunting goes on for nearly two weeks. The animals killed in the hunt are distributed only at the end. The surplus meat is dried up and kept for future use. Some of the meat is mixed with the rice seed at sowing time with the belief that this practice would bring them a successful crop.

(b) The Sarhul Dance: The Sarhul festival is celebrated in *Chait* (March-April) when the *sal* trees are laden with flowers. Sarhul is a spring festival for the Asurs. They propitiate all the spirits on this day at the *Sarna* (sacred grove). The *Pahan* (priest) and his wife undergo a symbolic marriage ritual indicating the mystical marriage of the earth and sky. In their world view this ensures the fertility of the land. The people watching and participating in the ritual the *Pahan* and his wife pour plenty of water on the *Pahan* symbolising plentiful rain. The *Pahan* distributes the *sal* flowers and the sacred water to every house. The ceremony of the *Sarhul* festival is long. A lot of preparations are made. When the ritual ceremony is over the Asurs dance and make merry. They have typical

drum beats and steps in the *Sarhul* season which distinguish these dances from those of other festivals.

In the *Sarhul* dance, boys and girls arrange themselves in two rows. The first party begins the song and the second repeats it. After repeating this, a couple of times there is usually a simultaneous 'Hur-r-r or Hir-r-r'. The same thing is repeated all over again and both the parties begin to dance in unison. After some time the second party begins the song and the first repeats it. After doing this for a couple of times both the parties again dance in unison. Each stanza of the song ends with a simultaneous 'Hur-r-r or Hir-r-r' and a sudden jump.

(c) The Karam Dance: The *Karam* feast is celebrated on *Bhado Ekadashi* (eleventh day of the lunar month of August). This feast is meant to ensure the protection of the standing crops, but is primarily the feast of unmarried girls, who have been recently engaged. Prayers are also offered for the blessings of the healthy children in future.

The Asurs boys and girls perform the *Karam* dances in separate rows, singing the same song in unison. One of the characteristics of the *karam* dances is that the dancers have to bend down very low in the course of the dance. The drummers usually stand facing the dancers and move forward or backward. If the dancers move forward the drummers move backward and if the dancers move backward the drummers move forward. The dancers clasp each other's hand. The position of the hands may change depending on the variations in the dance.

(B) Jatra: The Asurs dance the *Jatra* dances on special occasions when people from all over the region come to participate in the *jatra* (fair).

(a) Jhumair: The Jhumair dance has been borrowed by the Asurs from their neighbours Oraons who in turn have borrowed it from the Hindus. It is like a common dance that can be performed all through the year. The *Jatra* dance is not related with any feasts, social ceremonies or agricultural operations. Men and women both dance the *jatra* dance.

(b) Jeth Jatra: The *Jeth Jatra* (summer fair) dance is similar to the *Jatra* dance in the sense that dances are the same with a few variations. The difference lies in the fact that the *Jeth jatra* is performed in the summer season as the name itself suggests. Boys and girls both participate in the *Jeth jatra* dance.

(C) Miscellaneous Social Dances

(a) Matha: The matha dance is performed between *Karam* and *Sarhul* festivals.

(b) Jadura: The Jadura dance, too, like the Matha performed is danced in the season between *Karam* and *Sarhul*.

- (c) Domkatch: The Domkatch dance is also performed between Karam and Sarhul festivals.
- (d) Dhuria: The dhuria dance is performed between Sarhul and the Jeth jatra.
- (e) Angani: The Angani dance, too, like Dhuria is performed between the Sarhul and Jeth jatra.

(D) Musical Instruments : The Asurs do not have much choice as far as musical instruments are concerned. They have *mandar* and *dholak* as their main drums. They play on *jhanjh* (cymbals) also while dancing.

VII. CONCLUSION

Until recently, the Asurs were an isolated tribe living in some parts of Chotanagpur plateau. The processes of modernisation, industrialisation, Sanskritisation has still not touched them. But the situation today is far different from what it used to be a few decades ago. The interference of outsiders such as contractors, money lenders, industrialists, etc., has played havoc in their life by forcing them to be paupers in their own land. The iron-smelters of yesteryears have now to depend on the heavy steel factories even for a tiny nail to build their huts. The Government of India is running many developmental programmes for their upliftment, but most of them have virtually failed. One of the reasons for failure of the Government-run projects is the neglect of the historical and socio-cultural identity of the people. If the same trend continues, the Asurs may one day be a vanishing tribe. The need of the hour, therefore, is to encourage their positive socio-cultural practices and organisations. Their traditional dances need to be encouraged in order to keep their separate identity or else they will soon be diluted with external influence and be extinct in next fifty years.

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BIRHORS AND THEIR DANCES

Joseph Marianus Kujur and Michael Topno

I. A BRIEF ETHNOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE TRIBE

- (A) The Birhor : The Birhor or the jungle folk are a small group of tribe speaking a dialect of the Kolarian language. They chiefly lead a wild nomadic or semi-nomadic life among the jungles and hills of Jharkhand. They travel about, in small groups of three to ten families, earning a precious living by hunting and by making strings. They are very poor. Their huts are made up of leaves and small branches. They wander about from jungle to jungle as the sources of their subsistence become exhausted.
- (B) Origin : According to Chaudhary (1961:139), the Birhors affirm, that they and the Kherwars are of the same race and have descended from the sun. According to a myth, there came seven brothers from Khairagarh (now it is called Kaimur hills); four went to the east, and three brothers remained in the Ramgarh district. One day when the three brothers were going out to fight against the chiefs of the country, the head gear of one of them got entangled in a tree. He deemed it bad omen, and remained behind in the jungle. His two brothers went without him and gained a victory over the chiefs and returning they found their brother employed in cutting the bark of the chop. They named him as 'Birhor' (in Mundari the wood man). He replied that, he would rather remain a Birhor and reign in the jungles, than associate with such proud brothers. Thus, originated the Birhors, dwellers of jungles. The other two brothers became *Rajahs* of the country called Ramgarh.
- (C) Birhor : The Forest Dweller : As their name 'Birhor' suggests, they are the jungle dwellers. The Mundas call them 'Bir Mundas'. The tribe still lives in the jungle wandering about from one jungle to another. They are known for an extremely low grade of culture according to the standards of the modern society. They are known as monkey catchers, sellers and eaters. Monkey flesh is highly prized by them for food. It is believed that they have developed monkey hunting skill with strong power of scent, sight and hearing, and have acquired intimate knowledge of the haunts and habits of

different birds and animals. They are said to have a magical power to catch monkeys. They are also known as rope makers. They make strong rope and strings, used for various purposes. They also make *sika* (carrying net), *jhalkari* (hunting net), rope, etc. They sell baby monkeys, hares, and monkey skin (used for making drums) to the nearest villages and markets or exchange them for edible things.

According to their mode of living they are classed into two main divisions. One group is called *Bhuliyas* or *Uthlus* meaning the wanderers. According to Roy, during the rainy season the *Uthlus* or the *Bhuliyas* move about jungle to jungle in small groups with their families, belongings, and also with their gods and deities represented by stones or wooden pegs, and carried in baskets by one or two young bachelors who walk at the head of the party. The other boys carry fowls meant for occasional sacrifices. Men follow with their hunting nets, tools and weapons. Women carry on their heads palm leaf mats and wooden mortars and pestles. Both, men and women carry bamboo baskets containing their store of dried *mahua* flower and any food grains. The girls carry earthen pots for cooking and carrying water. Except during rainy season, which they are obliged to spend at one place, they ordinarily stop and hunt at one jungle for about a week or two and then move on to another. They similarly camp and hunt there and again move on to still another jungle, and thus wander about in search of food until they come back to their original starting point in about two years' time. They start once more on a similar tour along the same or slightly different route. The *Jaghi* Birhor, on the other hand, are those families that, tired of toilsome wandering have settled down for a comparatively long period generally on some hill top or the outskirts of some jungle; cleared some land in the jungle for the purpose of cultivation. But the majority are landless and live mainly by hunting and by making and selling ropes (Roy, 1925:44-45). There are many attempts made by the Government of India for their settlement in their respective places. But they are not permanent *Jaghis*. Any slightest ill-treatment from the nearby villagers or landlords send them back to their original nomadic life.

(D) Birhor : The Monkey Hunter : The Birhors are very clever at monkey catching. They use nets made of a very strong fibre, spreading them from tree to tree for some distances. They make a long detour, so as to bring the animals between the nets and themselves. As soon as they succeed in doing this, which requires all their caution as the animals by instinct seem to know a Birhor a long way off, they begin to drive them by beating the trees with their sticks, keeping up at the same time a song of chorus in praise of the monkeys. One little girl is stationed at the foot of one of the trees near the nets, most probably to shed off the suspicion of the animals that they were being trapped. She keeps up a song the whole time resembling, a nursery rhyme, "dilly dilly duckling come and be killed." The beaters advance very gradually, taking care to keep all the animals within a certain space, so as to force them into the nets, and as soon as a sufficient number have become entangled, they rush forward and despatch them with their 'lathies' (sticks).

(E) The Daily Routine of the Birhors: The settlement of 'Jaghi' groups as well as the temporary dwelling place of 'Uthlus' groups are both called *tanda* where half a dozen huts are erected in a triangular shape. Each hut is meant for one family. Men rise early

in the morning and begin their work of *winding chops?* and preparing them for various purposes. Women also help men in making ropes and then go to attend to household works. After having meals in the morning men go to the jungle either to hunt or to collect chop. Women, too, after their household work either go to the jungle to collect *mahua* in the *mahua* season, edible leaves, yam and tubers, or go to the neighbouring market, or villages to sell ropes, baby monkeys, hares, etc., and buy vegetable, oil and salt, and so on.

(F) Social Organisation of the Birhors: The Birhors have a twofold organisation (1) an organisation for purposes of food quest and (2) for purposes of marriage and kinship. The tribe is divided into scattered community each of which consists of three to four or about nine to ten families.

1. **Tanda Organisation and Inter-Tanda Relations:** It is not only the Tanda organisation that based on necessity for association for purposes of fulfilling the need once a year there is a conference of all the able bodied men belonging to different tandas? They come together for annual hunting expedition known as *Disum sendra* (regional hunt). The *Nayas* and other elders of various group act as umpires in any dispute regarding game between the hunters of different tandas. They consult one another in matters connected with the expedition.
2. **Totemism and Kinship System:** The Birhor tribe is divided into various exogamous clans called *gotras*. These gotras are named after some animal, plant, fruit, flower or other material object such as *Andi* (wild cat), *Chauli* (rice), *Gidh* (vulture), *Induar* (eel), *Nag* (cobra), etc. Totemism, exogamy and father-right are at present the three main factors of Birhor kinship organisation. Descent is reckoned in the main line and marriage or sexual intercourse between person of the same totemic clan is forbidden.
3. **Marriage Customs:** The Birhors recognise ten different ways of acquiring bride. Some of them are *Nam-napam bapla* (marriage by love), *Udra-udri bapla* (love by elopement), *Bolo Bapla* (marriage by intrusion), *Sipundur Bapla* (marriage by force), *Sangha Bapla* (second marriage), *Kiring-jawae Bapla* (Bought son-in-law marriage), *Golhat Bapla* (marriage by exchange of betel nuts), etc. Their marriage ceremony is interesting and peculiar. As soon as a young couple have decided to marry, the elders of both the families join in collecting all their available resources for a feast. Roasted pig, stewed monkey, herbs cooked in fat, roots of all sorts make up the bill of fare. Plenty of *handi* (rice beer) is prepared for the occasion. If that is not obtainable, they prepare the intoxicant liquors made from the two plants called *koolho* and *ikhoossoona* as a substitute. As soon things are ready guests assemble, and the members of the two families sit down in a line opposite one another. After certain inquiries, as to whether the feast is prepared, and receiving satisfactory replies, the father of the boy thus addresses the father of the bride, "my son calls his bride; his looks are eager; his feet are swift", or some

such words as these. The girl's father then turning to the maiden says, "fly my daughter, and show him who would be her husband how nimble is her foot". Upon this the girl gets up and suddenly darts at full speed into the forest. A minute later, and off starts the boy to catch his bride. When the chase is going on, a kind of chant is sung, one side replying to the other, and singing the praises of the bride and bridegroom in some such word as these, "The girl is like the deer, her foot is swift, when flies like the west wind". To which the boy's family would reply, "Boy is like the arrow that strike the deer; he is swift and sure; girl has fear, boy has love".

This song goes on till the shout of the boy, as he succeeds in catching the girl, is heard. Then silence follows. The chase seldom lasts longer than a few minutes; and if they are not already out of sight of the spectators, the youthful couple at once retire into the forest, and the marriage ceremony is continued. They return presently to their friends. The women proceed to adorn her in the bridal dress, presented to the girl by the bridegroom. Flowers are placed in her hair and blushing she is led forth and presented to the company, after which the feast commences in earnest. All get uproariously drunk, and the celebrations high jinks are carried on till morning. Sometimes the feasting and drinking continue for two or three days, but not always.

(G) Magic and Witchcraft: The Birhors believe in the supernatural power that arouse their religious sense. The Birhors seek to attain good luck and avoid bad luck to the community, the family and the individual. In order to do this they utilise or avoid some magical virtue supposed to be inherent in certain material objects or in certain pantomimic or other practices, in certain words or spells, or through the help of certain impersonal powers or energies which the Birhor magician thinks he can set in motion through appropriate actions to further his own ends or those of his clients or community. They have many magical practices to control the elements, for instance, for stopping rain, for stopping lightening, for stopping storms, for rain making, etc.

II. THE BIRHOR AND CRISIS OF THEIR IDENTITY

The Birhor vision of life conceives the basic texture of existence on MAN-NATURE-SPIRIT continuum. Their cultural values are universal human values. These are equality among men and women, dignity of labour, community worship, means of production for the common good, mutual co-operation, honesty, truthfulness, consensus as means of decision making, and facing life with dance and song. The Birhors' bases of identity are cultural, social, economic, historical, geographical, political. The elements of identity are harmony, equality, collectivism, accommodation, etc.

(A) Birhor Identity and the Forest : Their relationship with the forest is central to their very existence. The Birhors are very close to nature. They feel at home in the forest. They live along with the seasons and rhythms of nature in the forest and adopt their pace of life accordingly. They find beauty in plants, trees, flowers, birds, fruits, leaves and animals. Theirs songs are full of imagery of forest and hunts. Even their love songs are compared with forest beauty. In the forest they know how to survive by

hunting, digging for tubers or survive on leaves, flowers, fruits and berries. When there is plenty, they enjoy life to the full with drinks and celebrations. They take life as it is in the present moment though there may not be any security for the future. They are free and adjust themselves according to the cycle of the nature. They are hard working. They have a great instinct for survival.

They never lose their way and can read the trace of animals where others see nothing. In the face of danger from wild animals like bears and tigers, the Birhors are fearless. Birhor men and women work together. Being free they carry dignity of their own and have sense of worth. They are poor but self dependent. They are not beggars at the mercy of others. The Birhors may not be cultured by the standards of modern society but they have an innate sense of dignity, of courtesy and graciousness towards those whom they trust. They are hospitable, loyal and grateful, but these feelings are not expressed in words or outward behaviour. The values of the Birhors are praiseworthy. After a successful hunt they distribute and consume of their good luck together. They are typical of non exploitative culture.

(B) Social and Cultural Identity : In Roy's opinion, Birhors social organization is almost simple as their economic system. Although the Birhors, in common with the other 'Munda' speaking tribes recognize the larger exogamous patrilineal totemic group of the clan as the controlling factor in the regulation of marriage and kinship, the smaller economic group of the 'tanda' or hunting camp is indeed, in present times the more effective social unit, possessing, as it does a greater degree of solidarity born of constant association in the food quest, participation in common joys and sorrows, joint sacrifices to the same local and departmental spirits and intimate association and emotional rapport on ever recurring ceremonial and festive occasions.

As for the clan organization, it has no longer any economic or political function in Birhor society. There is hardly any differentiation of social function between either the different clans or the different *tandas*. The only socio-religious and magical function which are allotted to particular individuals in a *tanda* are those of the *naeke* but they are not privileged. The Birhor society knows no functional or occupational grouping nor any political or other grouping. Here it would not be out of place to mention that the Birhor who were leading an isolated life, are now exposed to several other factors, i.e., constant close contact with the other non-Birhors mainly due to economic interdependence, development programmes, etc. These factors have brought about a change in their attitudes, aspirations, world view, and other material aspects of their culture.

(C) Religious Identity : Forests have provided the Birhor with food, fuel, shelter, etc. They have always used the forest products for their survival down the ages. They have never been destructive in these forest related activities. They know that the destruction of forest means the end of their life. Birhors are the conservators of forest. Forest is a gift of God. Their religious identity stems from the forest. Forest is in their blood. Any imbalance in nature through deforestation makes the Birhors uneasy as it would mean danger to their very survival. The rituals of traditional Birhor religion