



THE KHARIAS AND THEIR DANCES

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Kharias have derived their name from *kharkharia*, palanquin or litter according to Russell and Hiralal as found in Singh (1994). According to Singh, they are distributed in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal. According to the 1981 census, their population in Bihar is 141,771, in Orissa it is 144,178, and in Madhya Pradesh it is 6892. The Kharias of Bihar are found in the hilly tracts of Chotanagpur. They speak in Kharia language which is an Austro-Asiatic language. They have oral tradition. They use Devanagari script for writing. According to Tete (1990), the Kharias are basically agriculturists and their implements of cultivation are very similar to those of their agriculturist neighbours.

II. THE KHARIA SOCIAL ORGANISATION

(A) Three Sections of the Kharia Tribe : Kharias are divided into three endogamous groups, namely, the Paharia Kharia or Savara, Dudh Kharia and Dhelki Kharia (Singh 1994:506). According to one of the theories, after some years of stay in Ruidas-Patna for some unknown reason, the Kharias marched along the Ganges river. When they reached there, they encountered some tribes of the Kolarian or the Munda group who had come earlier and settled down there. The Kharias got divided into two groups. The smaller group followed the course of the Chambal river valley and crossing the Vindhya ranges came to Mayurbhanj state. They were the ancestors of the Hill Kharias who claim Mayurbhanj as their place of origin.

The larger group retraced the path along the Ganges river and came back to Ruidas-Patna and settled down there for the second time. They remained there as long as they were not driven away by some other powerful tribe or till they became so numerous that their livelihood became impossible at that place. The first group to leave the place were the ancestors of the Delki Kharias. They followed the course of the river North Koel and

came to Chotanagpur. Later the remaining ones (the ancestors of the Dudh Kharias), too, left Ruidas-Patna and followed the same route as the ancestors of the Delki Kharias and reached Chotanagpur. They drove the former (the Delki Kharias) to the regions of Gangpur and Jaspur states and occupied their place permanently.

(a) The Hill Kharias

The Hill Kharias' original habitat is obscure and uncertain. The Kharias have a legend regarding their origin. God created first the sky and the earth and then a pea-hen which laid an egg. The egg burst. From the shell of the egg issued Adi Kharia, the ancestor of the Hill Kharias; from the white of the egg the first Purana (a tribe found in the Mayurbhanj) and from the yellow of the egg the ancestor of the ruling Bhanja family of Mayurbhanj; from the membrane of the egg sprang the first ancestor of the Oraons. This is said to have happened in a place called Adipur which is in the present Panchpir Subdivision of the Mayurbhanj state.

(b) The Dhelki Kharias

The Delki Kharias recount that the home of their ancestors was in Ruidas-Patna (Rohtasgarh). From there they migrated through Kheria-Ghat to Biru Pargana and later, when the Dudh Kharias arrived at Biru Pargana, they were pushed into the Gangpur and Jaspur States and settled there.

(c) The Dudh Kharias

The Dudh Kharias and Delki Kharias formed together one compact tribe. They have the same tradition regarding the place of origin and migrations of their ancestors. Their ancestors lived as one people under their own king in Ruidas-Patna. Their Kharia *Raja* called *Moreng*, was very rich and had large herds of cattle. He and his people were attacked by an Ahir Chief and his people (a tribe whose work is to look after the cattle). The Kharia Raja left Ruidas-Patna with his elder sons and followers, leaving his wife and younger sons and some tribe-fellowmen in Ruidas-Patna because these sons were too young to bear the hardships of the journey. The Kharia Raja and his followers moved on to Chotanagpur and settled in Biru Pargana and its neighbourhood. Later on when the young sons of the Kharia Raja became old enough to make long journeys, they and their followers, too, left Ruidas-Patna and passed through the Chotanagpur plateau along the valley of the south Koel through Palkot, Basia and Kolebira to Biru Pargana. On the way many families settled down, all along the banks of the river Koel.

(B) Social Life of the Kharias

According to Singh (1994), the three endogamous groups of the Kharias are further divided into exogamous clans like Dungdung (eel), Kiro, Kerketta, Soreng, Kullu, etc. Nowadays adult marriage is common among the Kharias. Some of the modes of acquiring mates are by negotiation, service, mutual consent, elopement, intrusion, and exchange. Monogamy is the general form of marriage. They have a custom of paying the 'bride

price'. Residence after marriage is patrilocal. There is an equal share of the property of the father among his sons. Women have roles to perform in the social, economic and ritual spheres. After the birth of a child, pollution is observed for six to nine days. The dead are buried and pollution lasts for ten days.

III. THE KHARIA BELIEF SYSTEM

(A) Kharia Monotheism

According to Tete (1990:5), the Kharias believe in a Supreme Being, God who is the creator and ruler of everything. They call him *Maha Ishwar* (the great God) or *Sakhi Gosaiya*, the all seeing Deity. These names have been borrowed from Hinduism. They worship the sun (*Bero*), but it is not identical with *Maha Iswar*.

(B) Belief in the Spirit-World

The Kharias believe in the world of spirits. Spirit or '*Dubos*' are created by *Ponomesor* and are subjects to him. They are not gods in Hindu sense. Kharias say that in the 'rain of fire' (the Kharia genesis myth) everything was destroyed including land. Spiritism is the root cause of religion among Kharias. From morning till night, from birth to death, in every moment of their life they are dependent on spirits. They find the presence of *dubos* everywhere. The belief in *dubos* among Kharias is so manifesting that some people call their religion as "animism". The Kharias believe in three types of *dubos* 'namely' ancestral *dubos*, benevolent *dubos* and malevolent *dubos*.

(1) Ancestral Spirits

They believe in the existence of soul. After death the soul remains as a spirit. The Kharias personify and deify the dead ancestors. The ancestral spirits are known as *Burha-Burhi* (old man and old woman). They are benevolent and look after the family. The Kharias say, "When well treated, they follow, as a dog would do, the members of the family to protect them from harm and they help them in their undertakings." It is believed that the ancestor-spirits protect the souls of Kharias while they roam about during deep sleep. Therefore they are regarded with love and reverence after their death. A few days after the death of a member of the family, his spirit is brought back to the house. A place is kept separately in the interior of the house for the ancestor spirits of the family and at every celebration rice-beer is offered to him. It is said that ancestor spirits are offended if any outsiders enter the sacred corner.

(2) Raksa Dubo

The Raksa-Dubo literally means protecting spirit. They believe that *Ponomesor* has created Raksa-Dubo in order to protect village from enemies. It signifies that *Ponomesor* is the protector of the whole humanity. The Raksa-Dubo is believed to have a fierce look so that the evil spirits are afraid to enter into the village. He goes about at night with a big axe in his hand and at times calls people by name. If the or

who is called responds, he is believed to fall sick and die. If the Raksa-Dubo asks for tobacco and obtains it, he does not do any harm.

(3) The Gorea Deity

The gorea deity, the protector of the cattle is a very beloved deity of the farmers. The gorea is believed to be like a young virgin girl. They depend very much on their cattle for their cultivation and manure. Therefore they call their cattle *laxmi*, i.e., the wealth and take care of them. It is necessary that gorea is kept pleased, so that the cattle may be always protected from illness. This deity is believed to reside in the cattle shed and is considered to be as a private deity. They hang a kind of plant called *erndi* in an earthen pot so that it will spoil the evil eye of the enemy. So no outsider is allowed to enter to clean the cow shed, not even the married daughters in their parents' family.

(4) Clan Spirits

The more advanced and better organized Dudh Kharias offer sacrifices also to another Mountain spirit whom the Dudh Kharias call *Barnda Pat* or Barnda Dubo as also *Bar Pahari*. The Dhelki Kharias call it Bar Pahari or the great mountain spirit. The Kharias do not now know the origin of this spirit. They explain it merely as their *Bhayad Bhut* or Clan spirit. It is represented by a sculptured wooden post. But there are reasons to believe that it is the spirit of the hill which was the original or ancient home of each clan.

(5) Jungle Spirit

The Hill Kharias who have no regular totemic clan organization do not recognize the Barnda spirit. They do, however, include in their pantheon a Jungle spirit which the other sections of the Kharias no longer recognize. The Hill Kharias of Mayurbhanj fear and venerate, propitiate and supplicate the spirit of their native jungles to whom they apply the name Baram. They also offer sacrifices to the Earth spirit or Earth Goddess or Mother-Earth under the name of *Basuki* or *Basuki-Mata*. This name has been evidently borrowed from neighbouring tribes and castes, which are found and worshipped by the Bhuiyas and some other Hinduised tribes and Hindu castes in Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar under the same name.

(6) Evil Spirits

The benevolent spirits help people whereas the evil spirits on the contrary harm them and their possession. Yet, they offer sacrifice to some evil spirits not out of love but out of fear. They think that by offering sacrifices to them they can pacify them and thus aver illness and calamities. Among the many spirits considered to be evil are witches, chordevan, baghia, churil, mua, etc. Some people call these evil spirits as *bhuts*.

(C) Belief in Witchcraft

Witches are believed to be wicked women who have power to harm others. Kharias believe that they can remove the lungs of the sick people and thus bring fatal consequences. *Chordevan* is a spirit who steals wealth from others and gathers in his master's godown. *Chordevan* is believed to appear like black cat carrying a small weighing balance. In order to protect the paddy charcoal or ash is kept on it so that it can not touch the wealth. The idea is that *Chordevan* can not work its power in taking anything if it is sealed with black ash, charcoal or cow dung. *Baghia* is spirit of person killed by a tiger. It attacks cattle and other domestic animals. *Muas* are spirits of people dying an unnatural and violent death. The spirits of hanged person is called '*tangal*', beaten to death is '*pasal*', and drowned is '*dubal*' mua, etc. Evil spirits are harmful, yet some people have special devotion to them for acquiring wealth and to put their enemies into trouble. Evil spirits can be controlled by men and be used as a means to cause evil. Thus human beings are the ultimate cause of evil and suffering.

(D) Belief in the Life after Death

The Kharias believe in the existence of soul (*Jiom*). From the Kharia genesis myth, it is obvious that they believe in the life and death. For them death takes place the moment the "*Jiom*" leaves the body (*Jiom Cholki*). They bring the shade (*longoe*) of their dead back to the family a week after the burial. After taking the body for burial they also keep some food in the place where the dead used to sleep while living. They provide the dead with all the daily requirements, i.e., rice, tooth brush (*Anargi*) oil, comb (*kanasi*), tobacco, some clothes, etc., beside the grave. They also make a small prayer with the help of a reed or unbleached thread so that the shade can not come out of the grave. For Kharias death is the beginning of new life.

The Kharias bury their dead North-South and turn the face of the deceased towards the East. It is to remind the dead of his true home which they suppose is in the North. Their oral tradition says that they had glorious kingdoms in the Gangetic valley which they were forced to leave. About the turning of the face towards the East, it is believed that intensely looking towards God (*Sun*).

IV. KHARIA DANCES

The dances dealt here are of the Kharias, mainly of two states, namely, Bihar and Orissa, where a sizable number of Kharia population resides. The main sources for the present essay on the Kharia Dances are Chattopadhyay (1978), and Vidyarthi and Upadhyay (1980). According to Chattopadhyay (1978: 276-279) who gives a detailed classification and description of the Kharia dances, the Kharias are said to be great dancers. They have varieties of dances. While studying the Kharia dances, the following features can be seen: Kharia youths of both sexes dance together. In some dances, the dancers divide themselves in two groups, each of males and females and sing one after another. It is like conversation going on between the boys and the girls in the form of the song.

Sometimes men and women also dance together. Young people may also join them. The drummers are usually inside the circle or in case of two rows, between the two groups. As far as the starting of the song while dancing is concerned, the leader or the leaders begin a song, and after they have sung the full stanza, others take it up and repeat it while dancing to the tune of the song. Every season has a typical *raga*. The songs of that season cannot be sung outside. Similarly, the dances of a particular season or festival are meant to be danced in that season only. On the basis of the season the Kharia dances can be classified as given below.

(A) Classification of Kharia Dances

- (1) The Hario Dance : The Hario dance is performed in the months of *Magh* or *Magho* (January-February). In general, boys and girls dance the *Hario* dance in the *Jatras* or at dancing meets held in different villages by turns. Men and women from a number of villages join these dances. The dancers arrange themselves in columns, but now and then spread out in a line, each dancer placing his or her hands on the neck of the dancer next to him or her on either side. The steps in this dance are martial. The movements are very quick. Sometimes it appears as if the dancers are running. Sometimes they stand in a row in an erect posture, holding hands and dancing round in circles. Men play on the 'mandar' (traditional drum).
- (2) The Kinbhar Dance : The Kinbhar dances are danced between the period from *Phalgun* to *Baisakh* (February to May). These dances are also known as *angan* or courtyard dances. The dancers while dancing, go round in a circle, but as soon as the stanza is sung, the circle of dancers moves forward singing in chorus : "Ho-re Hre", or "Hir-r-r". As the dancers move forward, the drummers with their faces towards the circle of dancers, recede backwards. The dancers, in turn, retrace their steps with the drummers following them. While going back to their starting point, the dancers again dance in a circle. There is a stooping dance, in which even the drummers dance with a stoop. In this dance the steps are slow, one foot resting on the ground while the other is put forward or backward. In one dance, the dancers stand in two rows, advance towards each other, and when they are within a few feet of each other, they stamp their feet vehemently on the ground and recede, dancing backwards and sometimes stooping while receding.
- (3) The Halka Dance : Like several other dances, in the *Halka* dance also, is performed by both the sexes together in rows in an orderly fashion. They are divided into two parties. Each party sings by turn. Both the parties move backward and forward in parallel lines, one facing the other. Each dancer in a line clasps with his or her right arm the left arm of the dancer next to him or her on the right, and with his or her left arm the right arm of the dancer next to him or her on the left. The hands are joined together, from the palm to the elbow, and are held a little forward. An important aspect of the Halka dance is that, the dance is done to the accompaniment of a song only without any musical instruments. Each party moves round in a circle with a slightly stooping posture. At the termination of a song or a stanza, the dancers of each party with a

half-turn, spread out in a line, come to an abrupt halt. After a long jump and two short jumps, they take a high jump and vigorously stamp their feet down on the ground, and in a deafening chorus, give a shout of "Hur-r-r" or "Hir-r-r-r". Once again they form into lines, and with measured steps, dance or rather march forward, each party singing a song or stanza by turns. This dance is danced by young and elderly people of both sexes. The Halka dance songs are classed as 'Paru'. *Paru* songs are also sung without a dance by young men and boys while sitting on the hills or meadows or while grazing cattle. The voice of the singer alternately rises high and falls low. The songs sung from *Baisakh* and *Jeth* (middle of April to middle of June) are called *Jethuari Paru*, those from *Aswin* to *Pous* (middle of September to middle January) are *Kuari Paru*.

(4) The Kudhing Dance : The *Kudhing* dances are also known as *Jatra* dances. The boys and girls dance together and place their hands on each other's neck. They advance and recede, sometimes in a straight line, one line behind the other, and sometimes in a semicircle or circle. The dancers also swing their legs forward and backward alternately, and then raise their right leg about a foot high. *Mandar* drums and *Jhanjis* played by men for this dance. There are other forms of Kudhing dance also :

(a) The Kasa Kudhing Dances: In this dance, men and women dance together, clasping each other's neck, and advancing and receding in measured steps in a stooping posture, the legs of all the dancers rising and falling together alternately. The men playing on the drum stand facing the dancers, and advance and recede in unison with the dancers.

(b) The Indrail Kudhing Dances : The Indrail dances are another class of Kudhing dance. They are performed in the month of *Kuar* or *Aswin* (September-October). They are, again, of three classes:

(i) *Tharhia* : In the *Tharhia* dance, all the dancers stand in a line and dance in an erect posture without stooping.

(ii) *Lahsua*: In the *Lahsua* form, as the name suggests, the dancers move to the tune of songs with slow measured steps in a stooping posture and sometimes almost sitting down. But when a stanza is finished, the dancers move with quick steps and come to an abrupt halt with a jump.

(iii) *Rata* : In the *rata* form of dance, the dancers stand one behind the other, each holding with both his or her hands the upper arms of the dancer in front of him or her. They move in circles with quick steps, sometimes running or even jumping.

In the month of *Kartik* (October-November), the Indrail dance is performed by young men and women and the Halka dance by old men and women. In the *Doyor* form of *halka* dances, young people of both sexes dance together and form long lines, each dancer taking within his or her right arm the left arm of the dancer next to him or her on the right.

and within his or her left arm the right arm of the dancer on his left, and interlacing the fingers of the hands of the dancer on either side with his or her own fingers. The long rows of dancers move round in circles. In *Tharhia*, *Lahsua*, and *Doyor* dances, dancers sometimes carry sticks in their hands or over shoulders.

- (5) The Jadhura Dance : The *Jadura* dances can be performed by women alone or by both the sexes together clasping one another's arms. They advance and recede in measured steps in a low stooping posture. The legs of all the dancers alternately lift up and down in unison. The legs of the drummers also move the same way, in the opposite row. During the dance, while one row recedes, the other row also does the same. But when there is only one row of dancers, then as the dancers advance the drummers recede, and vice versa.
- (B) The Kharia Belief Associated with Dances: The Kharias believe that their seasonal dances, by some mystic alchemy, stimulate the benevolent forces of nature to be able to gain plenty in crops and game. Their words, expressions, movements, postures and exclamations while dancing, are intended to exert a beneficent magical influence on different agricultural operations and other seasonal activities of the tribe.
- (C) Musical Instruments : The musical instruments played by the Kharias are flute, traditional drum 'mandar', etc. The drum is the most important percussion instrument. The drummers have a special status in the Kharia community.
- (D) The Occasions of Dances: According to Vidyarthi and Upadhyay (1980), after the day's work the dancers may perform a group dance. There are no fixed occasions for such a dance. In the evening the boys and girls come together and dance in front of their elders. They form a circle or a straight line, and hook their hands with each other and sway forward and backward with a waving, rolling and accordion motion. The tempo of the dance depends on the sound of the drum and the singing. Rhythmic motions of Kharia women in their colourful traditional dresses, exotic hair styles to the accompaniment of reverberating music creates an intense magic which warms up the coldest hearts.
- (E) The Marriage Dances: The marriage dances of the Kharias are the most interesting of all. While dancing there is an interesting oral debate competition between the two bridal parties. Very often the songs are spontaneously composed by both the parties. While the joking debate is on, both the bridal parties sing and dance.
- (F) Dance on a Hunting Expedition: When they start the hunting expedition they start it with a dance. Everyone in the Kharia community participates in this dance.
- (G) Origin and Significance of the Dances : It is believed that dances originated as ritual forms to worship the divine power.

V. CONCLUSION

Of the various agencies of social change in the Kharias society, Christian mission are one of the most important agencies that brought about an immense modification of the social, cultural, economic and religious life of the Kharias. The Christian missions with the help of the abundant funds at their disposal could organize welfare schemes, economic help and other philanthropic measures. There has also been a lot of interaction of the Kharias with the Hindus. Consequently, the process of Hinduisation has also affected their socio-cultural life. The opening of the industries and influx of the outsiders have deeply influenced the Kharia social institutions and the very belief system. Kharias of all sections frequently came in contact with the urbanized people from the adjacent cities and towns. Many Kharias work in industrial towns, like Tatanagar, Rourkela, Bokaro, Ranchi, Gumla, and far off towns of Assam and even the Andaman Islands. These Kharias, naturally accept the overbearing influence of modernity around them, and in turn pass it on to their own backward folk when they return home. This process of change goes on continuously.

Big mining operations and industries have been established in many Kharia localities which get a chance to be involved in or to witness a large modern organization in action. This puts a tremendous influence on their total social thinking and brings a lot of change in their life. Abolition of shifting agriculture has also affected the socio-cultural pattern of the Kharias through the change in economic mode and environment. A number of Kharias are working in different government offices and come in frequent contact with outsiders. In course of time, they are influenced by them and their life style is gradually transformed.

In general, factors like Christianity, urbanization, modernization, industrialization, education, communication, administration, community development and tribal welfare agencies are responsible for bringing an immense cultural change in the Kharia society. Their food and dress habits, their social conduct and behaviour, their religious beliefs and practices, their mental attitudes and outlook all have undergone tremendous change. Again the implement and tools of modern civilization are becoming prized acquisitions in their society and becoming new status symbols while at the same time creating a new status consciousness.

But the dynamics of cultural change vary in the three Kharia sections, due to their diverse situations and frequency of contact with the new environment. Kharia arts, myths, folk-songs, and legends are preserved in original form, but a few new ones have been acquired from outside. A number of traditional village organizations are still prevalent but most of them are disorganized and getting less and less in use. Community considerations are losing importance. This sort of change is especially recorded in the Dudh Kharia section. The traditional hospitality of the tribals in course of time, has been replaced by a new-formed hostility. The Dudh Kharias are more keen than the other two sections to come in touch with people from modern society which seems superior to them.

On the whole, in the democratic life of the Indian state the freedom and liberty of Kharia tract have been amalgamated. Any future developmental programmes should take into consideration the cultural dimension of the tribe. Without paying attention to the ethos, belief system, social organisation and rich cultural heritage of the Kharias there can never be true development of the Kharias.

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