

## Transformation of a Bedia Tribal Group of Eastern India: Ecology, Economy and Identity

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### ABSTRACT

Transformation of tribal population has always been an important issue of deliberations among the anthropologists working in India. Ecology and economy can be said to be the most important factors that induce gradual changes that lead to the transformation of a community. The identity remains most fluid in this process of transformation. Rather than being a static formation, the identity becomes a dynamic construct related with the interplay between ecology context and economy a group. The present paper reviews the anthropological approaches to understand the change and transformation of tribal groups in India in the backdrop of the question of tribal identity at present day scenario. It deals with the findings of an ethnographic study among a Bedia tribal group following the profession *bahurupi* performance and tries to substantiate the arguments of the paper. On the bases of these findings the paper argues that the identity of this small tribal group cannot be constructed lineally in the line of essentialist definition of tribe. Rather the identity is to be understood in the inherent dynamics of the contingent situations that befall on the tribe. Here the tribe maintains a multiple identities simultaneously. Thus the most favourable term to describe the tribe is to be sought in the constructivist paradigm. The findings of the paper further our understating about the notion of tribe in India at the contemporary situation.

**Keywords:** Transformation, Tribe, India, Bedia, *Bahurupi*, Essentialist, Constructivist, Identity

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### INTRODUCTION

Change and transformation reflect the inherent dynamics of tribal life. Change is a simple process by which an element of culture is added, dropped or modified. On the other hand transformation entails a paradigmatic shift in the social organization. Cancian (1968) talks about 'change of' and 'change within'. He writes that 'Change *within* the system refers to change that does not alter the system's basic structure' (Cancian 1968:208). He adds that 'Change *of* the system is any change that alters the system's basic structure'(ibid). By transformation the change in fundamental structural features has been meant here.

Transformation is always a multidimensional process. It may be part or full. Change and transformation go on simultaneously. Usually the changes accumulate to bring about transformation. Study of change of the Indian tribes has always been a favourite topic in

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Indian Anthropology. Anthropologists have not deliberated only upon the directions or features of change, but also they have discussed the processes involved in effecting change or transformation of a tribal community. Bose (1953) has mentioned about the 'Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption' in which tribal communities imbibing the Hindu religious elements gradually enter into the Hindu social system. Earlier to that Risley (1891) talked about gradual transformation of tribes into caste. Srinivas (1952, 1962) proposed the processes of Sanskritization and Brahmanization that are going on in tribal society in bringing in changes. Khastriyaization, Rajputanization and state-formation are the models proposed by Sinha (1962), that explain the facets of change and transformation in tribal society. He informed that the movement from the isolated tribal pole to the caste or peasant pole involves a progression towards ethnic heterogeneity in social interaction, role specialization, social stratification and enlargement and diversification in the networks of relationship with civilizational centers (Sinha, 1965). In another article he has tried to see the tribal transformation in broader terms, however the status or fate of small tribes has not been dealt with here (Sinha, 1981). Singh (1982) has discussed the transformation of tribal people under the impact of economic development programmes. He has provided us with a broad historical backdrop of the transformation of tribal society over the periods. He took up two overarching ideological bases of this transformation, namely integration and assimilation. According to him the transformation has led to a greater degree of differentiation. Sarkar's (1992) study on the formation of small populations bears significance in this regard. He has studied the process among the Khampti and Singpho of North-East India and the Bhils of Central and Western India. He mentions that the processes and factors are not uniform everywhere. In Arunachal Pradesh migration and subsequent seclusion of a part population resulting out of some geographical and political barriers serve as crucial factors behind the formation of small population, whereas in Central India the process of social mobility among several sections of the Bhil resulted into the formation of smaller groups. Xaxa (1999) made an elaborate attempt to review the terms of reference by which the tribes in India are studied as well as identified. These terms include three issues – 1. Tribe's transformation into caste 2. Tribe's transformation into peasants and 3. Increasing social differentiation or heterogeneity. He has cited a number of examples to substantiate the above-mentioned conclusions. He added that these approaches have made the identification of tribe a clumsy affair. He came up with an alternative suggestion and wrote:

“It means that the terms of reference in tribal studies are not to be such categories as caste, peasantry and social heterogeneity but groups or communities such as the Bengalis, the Assamese and the Gujaratis. The counter-parts of tribes are not castes or peasants but communities or societies incorporating castes and peasants. The latter are not whole societies but only elements of wholes. Tribes on the other hand are whole societies each with its own language, territory, culture, customs and so on.” (Xaxa 1999:1524)

However this does not stand in the present case as the Bedias cannot be distinguished as a whole society, though his observation that the tribals are not the counterparts of castes or peasants appears to be applicable to the present case. Ideologically, socially and economically they have been very much integrated into the neighbouring Hindu Bengali people. Biswas (2003) has shown the tribalization of the Sountis of Odisha, an erstwhile caste group. Here the Sountis adopted many elements of the neighbouring tribes to achieve the status of

Scheduled Tribe. They are non-peasant part society leaving on the periphery of the caste habitations sharing some of the values and features of the caste society. With regard to their part conformity of the caste norms /features the Bedias under present study may be called proto-caste. It is called proto-caste( and not proto-tribe though its official status is Scheduled Tribe in West Bengal) because of its features of social organization that conforms more with caste ethos than that of the tribe's.

## THE BEDIAS

The Bedias is a Scheduled Tribe in West Bengal having a total population of 88,772 which is 1.67 percent of the total tribal population of West Bengal as per 2011 census. This community is mainly found in the districts of South and North 24 Paraganas. It is revealed that the Bedias show little homogeneity in economic activities and social organization. Risley(1892;1981) has mentioned that the Bedia ( Bediya as he spelt ) is the generic name of a number of vagrant gipsy like groups in which he included seven broad types 1. Babajiya, Lava, or Patwa , pedlars 2. Bazigars, Kabutari, Bhanumati, Dorabaz, acrobats and conjurors. 3. Mal or Ponkhwa 4. Mir –shikar or Chirimar who were hunters and fowlers , catch bird with *satnali* or light lance divided into sections like a fishing rod 5. Samperia , snake charmers , hawkers , makers of fish –hooks 6. Shandars , pedlars , divers 7. Rasia Bediyas. The occupations Risley mentioned are still found among the Bedias of present day however the exact following of the above groups with the particular occupation as specified cannot be found today. The religious affiliation of the communities have also been changed. For example we find the Sarpadhar Vaidya as snake charmers in Purulia and they fall within the Bedia. Again the Bede community following the Bahurupee profession as in the present case has found no mention in Risley's work. However the earlier vocation of this people like bird –catching with *satnala* , herbal medicine selling, are mentioned among the Bedia Groups. Risley mentioned these groups as converts to Islam. However in the present case I find the Bediyas to follow Hindu faith. One point that he mentioned is very significant in this regard , he was confused 'whether they can properly be described as castes'(Risley 1981:83 )

Bedia is an interesting group of people inhabiting in India particularly in eastern and partly northern part of India. They are mainly considered a nomadic group of people though there has been a lot of change in their nomadic style of life in recent years and many of them have become semi-nomadic or sedentary. They have several groups among them that have emerged mainly owing to the occupational specializations. Das(2011) has mentioned about forty three divisions or groups( khom) among the Bedias. The divisions include the following groups:

**Table -1:** Occupational groups (*khom*) among the Bedias (After Das,2011)

Sl.	Name of the group	Occupational Specialization
1.	Rārhi Māntā	
1a	Lāghanā	Snake charmer
1b	Jhāpāit	Magician
1c	Phulbagrā	Wrestler and singer
1d	Masuriyā	Snake charmer
2.	Lodhrā	Snake charmer and Tattoer
3.	Junhār	Snake charmer
3a	Lāl Pālam	Wrestler and singer
4.	Turkāṭā <sup>1</sup>	Herbal medicine seller
4a	Bariolā	-
4b	Chaṭiolā	-
4c	Gulālōlā	-
4d	Bhauniyāolā	-
4e	Rānjitolā	-
4f	Mālōlā	-
5.	Kānkāli	Singing with beating drum
6.	Camhā	Spectacle seller
7.	Teliyāolā	Seller of herbal oil
8.	Girhārā	Domestic grinding and pressing stone cutter
8a	Janakpuri	Begger
9.	Bājāniyā Bhātu	Showing acrobatics with children
10.	Sahesia	Cattle doctor
11.	Chātā	Repairing of umbrella
12.	Galeri	Snake charmer
13.	Kaṅgar	Snake charmer
14.	Yogī	Snake charmer playing <i>bin</i> flute
15.	Thutuk	Wrestler
16.	Banbāriyā	Ear cleaner
16a	Bhikhiyā le Omrāha	
17.	Irāniyā	Spectacle and glass bangle seller
18.	Dhabāilā	Amulet seller
19.	Lārpuriyā	Ear cleaner
20.	Gidhriyā	Honey collector and bird catcher
21.	Bhattuk	Bird catcher
22.	Rāydād	Singer
23.	Phakirer Jhār	Folk healer
24.	Chāriye	Divination/ fortune teller by monkey
25.	Lāuyā	Monkey player
26.	Beca	Glass bangle and garland seller
27.	Sāndār	Glass bangle and garland seller
28.	Naluyā	Honey seller
29.	Cāmriyā	Acrobatics
30.	Narasimhā	Beggar with a broom in hand
31.	Jāgā	Stone and ring seller
32.	Garudāgā	Cattle doctor
33.	Jāydi	Flute maker
34.	Masleit	Snake charmer and magician
35.	Ṭhengā	Beggar
36.	Bājigar/ Mādāri	Juggler and magician
37.	Māli	Garland makers with paper and plastic
38.	Āmān	Wrestler and singer
39.	Pāñcbhāiyā	Wrestler and singer
40.	Chaybhāiyā	Wrestler and singer
41.	Kāgmārā	Beggar and crow catcher
42.	Bahurupī	Chameleon
43.	Kālāndar	Monkey and bear playing

From the table certain facts are apparent. They are mostly familiar as snake charmers, besides this they are fowlers, hawkers and entertainers. More than one Bedia groups are engaged in such types of activities. Again a single occupational specialization is shared by a number of Bedia groups. Now, it can be mentioned that these occupations are not always exclusively practiced by the Bedias only. The Mal caste is also expert snake catchers and snake charmers. In all probability, the Bedias adopted many of the marginal occupations. Later they tended to follow any of the sub-specializations or occupations of the caste groups who were at the margins of the hierarchical caste order of the traditional Hindu society. As a consequence of it, they imbibed the cultural practices of the reference caste. In this regard I can cite example of the Bedia Kurmis as mentioned by K.S. Singh(1994). Singh(1994) has talked about Bedia Kudmi, San Kudmi or Choto Kudmi of West Bengal. He added that a section of the Kurmis who were outcaste and came to be known as Bedias or wandering Kurmis. On the Kurmi connection Risley (1891) informed us that the Bedias were small agricultural tribe of Chhotonagpur and were said to be the maternal cousins of the Kurmis.

In Bihar, the Bedias are a community of agriculturists who are believed to be the original inhabitants of Hazaribag district. On their origin it is said that they were born of the union between a Vedbansi prince and a Munda girl( Singh,1994). Here, among the bahurupi Bedia under present study we come across a number of origin myths.

### **The Bahurupi Bedia**

The Bedia group which live on showing Bahurupi performance has been met with in Bishoypur village in Birbhum district of West Bengal. However, they are also found in another settlement in Ilambazar block in the same district. Outside Birbhum they live in the districts of Burdwan and Murshidabad. I have working with the Bedias of Bishoypur for the last ten years. The cluster of houses in which they live forms the hamlet called Byadhpara or Pakherapara by the others. Their hamlet is at the north-east fringe of the village Bishoypur. Bishoypur is a large multi-ethnic village falling under the jurisdiction of Hatia Gram Panchayat under Labhpur Block. Now the village is well connected with the block and district headquarters and other important towns of Birbhum and adjoining districts of Burdwan and Murshidabad. Ten years back when I went there for the first time number of buses were only two in whole day and their nearest bus stop was at Amritbandh some two kilometers away. However, as the road passing through the village has become metaled the connectivity with the outside world has significantly increased.

In Byadhpara, forty Bedia families live in small houses many of which have been constructed under government scheme of housing for the poor. Usually these are one roomed brick-walled houses with tiled roof. Rests of the houses are thatched with mud walls . Recently the portion of the lane running through their hamlet has been metaled. They live by the side

of a large pond called Mohanapukur. On the northern corner of this pond, there is the shrine of Dharmathakur worshipped annually by the Bedias only.

The *bahurupi* amuses people by taking various forms such as Ram, Laksman, Hanuman, Mahiraban, Harischandra,( mythical characters) mad man, demon etc with appropriate dress and make up. Traditionally they were itinerant performers. They used to go from one place to another and camped there for some time. Here they would show their performances in the market place where many people visit or go from door to door of the houses. They used to contact the local authority union board or village panchayat ( local self-government) in earlier days and stated their purpose of stay. Sometimes they arranged their stay in the lawn of the house of any villager or any other public place like club or atchala. However, they had camping materials with which they could pitch their tent in the open space near a settlement. In such stays, they dressed themselves differently every day. Each day they disguised in a new character. Dialogue appropriate to the character is an important part of their performance. They spontaneously utter the dialogue that is generally composed by them, though sometimes they took external help. The wife and small children used to accompany the bahurupi performer when he went out in such tours. The wife cooked for him and stayed back in the tent. The normal arrangement was that they performed the show in the houses and they would collect the assistance in the form of grains and money on the last day before departing the village.

The bahurupi group informed me that they roamed about in the forest and caught birds with net and satnala. They sold these birds in the local market. Immediately before coming to this place they lived more northwards at the fringe of the forest that abounded the bank along Mayurakshi river. When they forest law became stringent with little sanctions for their traditional practice they gradually shifted to other occupations. This group specialized in the art of bahurupi. However, I have found that all of them did not come from the same place. A section of their community had better contacts with the local landlords and influential persons. In fact, some of the Bedias were employed as guards. After settling in the village more than hundred years back, they were still engaged in their fowling and hunting activities. The word Pakhmara for them still reminds us about their past practice of hunting or catching birds.

Some sixty years back one of them got attracted to the bahurupi performance he had seen in the neighbourhood. He went to Brajeswar Roy of Bhastor village on the northern bank of river Mayurakshi and learnt the art of bahurupi from him. From him his sons and other villagers learnt the basics of this performance. In true sense the vocation is only three generation old among them in this village.

Within a short span of time we notice that they had a transformation from nomadic life based on jungle to a semi-nomadic to a sedentary life based on cultural performance.

However, the bahurupi art which their forefathers practiced and handed down them does not remain the same as it was earlier. In those days they wanted to settle in a vocation that would at least provide them with a bare subsistence and was not hindered by their social position in the caste hierarchy. It was a fact that one's occupational choice was largely limited by one's

caste position in traditional Bengali Hindu village society. There were clear divisions among priestly, servicing and agricultural castes under which a group of castes were distributed. This distribution certainly had an ecological basis (Gadgil and Malhotra, 1983). The economically successful or better off castes also had a greater access or deciding influence over the ecological resources in the area. In such arrangement there were certain fringe ecological areas with little direct relevance to the agriculture based economy in the village. These fringe ecological 'niches' were utilized by the lower caste or 'outcaste' groups like the wandering people like the Bedias. The Bedias or Bedes had a very precarious existence.

It is a fact that there was reference in ancient texts to *Nat*, a group of people who were actors and specialized entertainers. However, they were given a very low position in the caste hierarchy. At the close of Pala dynasty, we find the mention of a group called *Chatbhat* who were probably the amuser and entertainer. During Sena Dynasty of Bengal in eleventh century A.D. they are again mentioned. But from both the references, it was apparent that they were shabbily treated and being driven out from the civil habitations (Goswami, 1999). In Mughal period during seventeenth century A.D., *Ain-I-Akbari* mentions the professional named Bahurupi who takes many disguises and thus entertains people. But these buhurupi performers are probably not the predecessor of present day bahurupi Bedia. Bahurupi performers belonging to lower caste Hindu are still met with in different villages in very small numbers. Many of whom have changed their occupation and has become peasants. Only a few still continue to practice this profession. So, as a profession it was not much congested, thus taking up such profession had lesser possibility of competition. The third reason was that they did not possess the skill of agricultural work. It was easier for them to learn the art of bahurupi. Moreover, as they were treated as untouchables, they felt somewhat constrained and uncomfortable in the company of the neighbouring higher castes who were mostly the landholders. Therefore, it was a better option for them to practice bahurupi performance which provided them wide opportunity to roam about and this sort of nomadism was more familiar to them. Thus they settled in bahurupi profession. In doing so, they needed some cultural adjustments which they brought into their social organization. Even through the origin myth their current status and occupation seem to be made justified.

### ***Myth of Origin***

The Bahurupi Bedias offer a very different story of their origin than the one mentioned by Singh (1994) with regard to the Bedias of Bihar. However, from the narratives it becomes clear that they try to link them with the Khsatriya. One of the narratives the Bedias of Bishoypur tells us that King Jarasandha of Magadh was their ancestor. The other two stories indicate that they were related with some so-called 'non-Aryan' (*Anarya*) ancestry. One such story is that they are the descendants of monkey king Bali who was killed surreptitiously by Lord Rama to favour his brother Sugriva to ascend to the throne as the king of the monkeys. At the time of death, however Rama gave him words that he would kill Rama in His next incarnation in the same manner. The death of Krishna by the arrow of the Byadh was thus predestined. Bali was reborn as the Byadh who is believed to be the forefather of the present

day bahurupi Bedia. Another story relates them to Kalketu the hero of medieval Bengali verse narrative ( *mangal kavya*) *Chandimangal*.

Within a single village we find so many versions of their myth of origin. It hints at the diffused nature of their identity which is built up multiple sources of origin. But they are quite aware of their separate identity as a community. They call themselves *Mangta* or *Maganta*; the word *Geli* or *Gamar* is used to denote 'the other'.

Apart from the mythical narrative, there is attempt to historicize their past. Some local intellectuals at Suri, the district headquarters told me that they were brought from Odisha by Bhabadeb Bhatta, a minister of a regional ruler and a social reformer of medieval Bengal in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. But the Bedia themselves did not subscribe to this story. They said that the group who were brought to Bengal by Bhabadeb Bhatta are the Bajikars who live in a village under same police station area. They have no similarity with the Bajikars. Rather they are more inclined to communicate that they were hired by the Nawab to fight against the Mirzafar.

The above narratives do not allow us to conjecture any single possibility of their becoming identified as a single group. However, all the stories indicate their 'otherness' at one hand on the other hand their relatedness with the traditional caste hierarchy. I was told by an old Bedia: 'We don't hit the oxen or bullock with staff which is necessary in doing agricultural work. Since we are Khsatriya we can't do that.' By claiming a status of Khsatriya they take pride and this lends them a justification why they do work other than agriculture. The stories of their past also bolster their claim by describing their efficiency as expert martial race. Again this Khsatriya claim also helps them to find a berth in caste or Varna category. This cherished inclusion might bring them closer to caste and offer a compulsive justification for internalizing caste ethos. This will enhance the quality of their performance and give them better interactions and access to the houses of caste Hindu people.

Another important aspect of these narratives is that somehow they relate them to any of the dominant groups in the locality. In Bihar, it has been the Vedvanshi ruler; in some other part of eastern India they identify themselves with the Kurmis. In West Bengal, they initially identified themselves with the local caste populations. Later they aspired for the status of Scheduled Tribe and also get them notified as such. Therefore the identity also remains a dynamic affair contingent upon the circumstances that prevail upon them.

### **Scheduled Tribe Status**

The bahurupi Bedias have recently received the Scheduled Tribe certificate which ensures positive discrimination in their favour as enshrined in the constitution of India. They got the motivation to procure the caste certificate when they came to know about its utility from the headmaster of the local school to which their children were sent. They sat together and decided to meet the block and district level officials in this regard. Initially they were told that they would receive Other Backward Classes certificate because they did not fall to the category of tribe. But they were much convinced about their tribal status after the said teacher told them that they had their own language and distinct pre-agricultural economy. So, they met the influential political persons who were also sympathizer to their cause. Some of their

educated non-Bedia neighbours in the village assisted them. They accompanied them and extended all possible helps. They visited the state secretariat at Kolkata and met the official of the Cultural Research Institute. The Member of Parliament of their constituency also helped them. Hearing was held in CRI. They were asked to write letter in their own language, which they could. At last they got the status of ST.<sup>2</sup>

Though ST by constitutional means, their cultural idioms conform much to the caste ethos of the region. They speak Bengali in their home. They have clan(*gotro*) like the caste people. They worship the Hindu gods and goddesses. Their own deity Dharma Thakur is also worshipped as principal deity by the lower castes. They have commensal relations with the lower caste people. Though they prefer endogamous union, marriage between a Bedia and caste Hindu individual is permitted. In fact the composition of the group, marriage practice, political and socio-religious life are well adapted to the nature of their occupation.

### **Composition of Group**

There were three Bedia families that were the first settlers in the village. Since they wanted to maintain group endogamy, they exchanged women among themselves. Initially the cousin marriage was permitted. But soon choice got restricted as they became related as prohibited categories of kin. Again while wandering on the pretext of their profession they came into contact with people outside their community. Some of the men in their community got married to the women of castes like Sadgop, Bagdi, Dhibor/ Kaibartya, Teli, or tribe like Kora. Similarly their girls were married to men outside their community. Some three generations back, one Vaisnab man married their women and settled in their village. Again a Bagdi man has married their daughter and now staying with them in this village. Therefore, it can be said that they do not rigidly maintain their group boundary with regard to marriage. They establish marital relations with other tribes as well as castes. Marital exchange takes place mainly with the lower castes. One Bedia man told me that we would negotiate if we come to know that one is interested in setting up marital relation. In case of love marriage, the scope of such negotiation is less, however the newlyweds are generally accepted following their marriage. They are sometimes seen to marry with the other castes within the village. Adjacent to the Bedias, the fishing caste and agriculturist Sadgop live. The Bedias has marital relation with them. The Bedia man adds ‘We believe that there are two castes in the world – men and women.’

Apart from marriage they show extreme flexibility in the size of the group. The number of the Bedia population varies round the year. All the families do not stay round the year in the village. There is shortage of space in Byadhpara. They have already started settling outside the village in the neighbouring areas. Still there is another mechanism in which some families remain cyclically absent from the village when they camp outside to show their performance or do any other business like selling medicinal herbs. While doing field work in the village I found seven families were staying out. There is little scope for expansion of the village. The only alternative left is to settle elsewhere particularly as a group. In fact such satellite settlement has been set up in Guskara in Burdwan district. Therefore, the increase of population would be stunted. The population has increased by 3.9 percent in the last seven

years, whereas the decadal rate of growth for the Bedias in the state is 58.58 percent. This slow rate of growth is reflected in their demography as well. Compared to the state level data on the growth of Bedia population, the growth of the Bedias is significantly low.

### **Population Profile**

At present there are 133 individuals in their hamlet distributed in forty household. In 2008, their population was composed of 128 souls residing in 37 families. So, there is a marginal increase of population in the last seven years. Logic of taking a seven year gap is to understand the progress of education in a better way since the six year is taken as the age for taking admission in class I.

**Table -2:** Total population of the Bedia in Byadhpara, Bishoypur as distributed age and sex wise

2008				2015			
AGE GROUP	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL	AGE GROUP	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
0-4	11	10	21	0-4	9	7	16
5-9	08	09	17	5-9	6	14	20
10-14	08	05	13	10-14	8	7	15
15-19	06	07	13	15-19	7	7	14
20-24	11	06	17	20-24	9	6	15
25-29	03	07	10	25-29	4	4	08
30-34	04	03	07	30-34	5	6	11
35-39	03	08	11	35-39	2	4	06
40-44	05	02	07	40-44	5	4	09
45-49	04	02	06	45-49	4	0	04
50-54	00	02	02	50-54	1	0	01
55-59	01	00	01	55-59	1	3	04
60+	02	01	03	60+	4	6	10
TOTAL	66	62	128	TOTAL	65	68	133

The occurrence of quite a high percentage of sub-nuclear families is significant. The female headed family without any adult male member or man with or without unmarried children would constitute such type. Therefore, any fragmentation of nuclear family with death or separation or abandonment of any of the spouses till any further addition through marriage will lead to sub-nuclear form of family. The reasons for higher percentage of sub-nuclear family in the present group are the following: i. Abandonment of the wife by her husband who sets up another family and move elsewhere, ii. Death of husband or wife, iii. Aged parent(s) staying alone. The greater flexibility allows them to find a marriageable man without adequate information on the antecedent of the individual. It might so happen that the man had another family and he has suppressed it or the man is alcoholic or addicted to substance use. These factors often lead to dissolution of marriage. Again sometimes heavy drinking habit of man lessens their span of life. Poverty is no doubt a factor.

**Table-3:** Family size and Family Type among the Bedias

FAMILY SIZE	FREQUENCY				FAMILY TYPE	FREQUENCY			
	2008	2015	%	%		2008	2015	PERCENTAGE	
			2008	2015				2008	2015
SMALL(1-4)	18	33	60	82.5	NUCLEAR	18	24	60	60
					SUB-NUCLEAR	07	16	23.33	40
MEDIUM (5-7)	10	7	33.33	17.5	JOINT	04	-	13.33	-
LARGE (8+)	02	-	06.66	-	EXTENDED	01	-	03.33	-
TOTAL	30	40	100.00	100.00		30	40	100.00	100.00

The nuclear family is also found to a better adjustment to their semi-nomadic life or wandering life.

**Table-4:** Literacy status among the Bedias of Byadhpara, Bishoypur in 2008

AGE GROUP	PRIMARY		SECONDARY		HIGHER SECONDARY		GRADUATE		POST GRADUATE		NON-LITERATE		CANSIGN	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
5-9	6	7									2	1		1
10-14	3	1		3							5	1		
15-19	1	1	4	1							2	5		
20-24	2		3	2			1				4	4	1	
25-29				1						1	3	5		
30-34			1								1	3	2	
34-39											2	7		1
40-44	1										3	1	1	1
45-49			2								3	2		
50-54												2		
55-59														1
60+	1										1	1		
Total	14	9	10	7			1			1	26	32	4	4

The rate of literacy among the Bedias (Table -5) under present study is only 55.56 per cent compared to 44.44 per cent of non-literate. The literacy among the Bedias living in this place is below the average literacy of the Bedias in the state (63.5 per cent). The rate of female literacy is very low among them. Only the meager 45.9 per cent of the females has received formal education. However the growth in the percentage of literacy is quite remarkable in the

group. In last seven years the number of non-literate persons has decreased from 54.21 per cent to 44.44 per cent. Most interesting change happened in the female literacy sector. In 2008, only 15.89 per cent of the women were literate, after a gap of seven years now 45.9 per cent of them are literate. Moreover percentage of school going children has also increased.

**Table-5:** Literacy status among the Bedias of Byadhpara, Bishoypur in 2015

AGE GROUP	PRIMARY		SECONDARY		HIGHER SECONDARY		GRADUATE		POST GRADUATE		NON-LITERATE		CANSIGN	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
5-9	6	11										1		2
10-14	4	3	2	3							1	1		
15-19		1	2	4		1					6	1		1
20-24			1	1	1						5	2	2	3
25-29											2	3	2	1
30-34	1			2							2	4	2	
35-39			1	2							1	2		
40-44	1		1								3	4		
45-49											4			
50-54	1													
55-59												3	1	
60+											2	5	3	
Total	13	15	7	12	1	1					26	26	10	7

**Table -5a:** Literacy status among the Bedias of Byadhpara, Bishoypur in 2015

Yr.	PRIMARY		SECONDARY		HIGHER SECONDARY		GRADUATE		POST GRADUATE		NON-LITERATE		CANSIGN	
	No	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No	%	No	%
2015	30	25.64	19	16.24	2	1.71	-	-	-	-	52	44.44	15	12.82

The reason for low literacy among the Bedias is rooted in the extreme poverty. The little Bedias boys and girls used to accompany their parents in the stay outside the village. Sometimes they themselves wear the dress of bahurupi and seek help from the passengers in the trains. Their parents also dress them Rama or Krishna or Kali and take them to the villages for showing bahurupi. So, the children become a means of earning. When the parents remain outside in the pretext of their profession, the underage boys or girls are to look after their little siblings. However, the things have changed a lot in the recent years. They have become sedentary to a great extent. Now the father goes in the morning to work and return by

evening. They have also understood the value of education and been trying their best to send their wards to schools.

### **Social Organization**

The kinship, family, marriage, and other life cycle rituals have some features which seem to have relations with the ecology and economic life of these people. Their kinship system is same as that of the neighbouring Bengali Hindu community. The nature of family has already been discussed in the previous section. In marriage customs certain interesting features are noticed.

#### *Marriage and 'gift of forest'*

It has already been mentioned that the Bedias prefer group endogamy. As their community is small in size they had to allow marriage between cousins. Here the clan endogamy is allowed. The marriage is now officiated by a Brahmin priest. The rituals like *gaye halud* (anointing body with turmeric) paste, drawing *alpana* (design on floor) on ground etc. are customs similar to the local caste people. In addition to this they have a custom to gift the groom a net (*jal*) and lance (*satnala*) used in the catching of birds. The father-in-law symbolically gifts a 'forest' to the son-in-law in marriage. At the time of marriage rituals he points his index finger to a patch of forest (may not be in sight) or to the direction of a forest and says 'I am giving this forest to you in marriage'. In fact one cannot gift forest since it is the property of the state, but it indicates an age-old custom of the bygone days when there was probably no such manifest right of state over the forest. The people like the Bedias would have enjoyed unmitigated access to the forest. This practice of gifting forest might be a strategy to amicably distribute forest territory amongst themselves and with affinal kin to avoid any clash and ensuring availability of resources.

Apart from marriage, the *jal* and *satnala* are touched to the new-born babies at the *ekusha* ritual held on the twenty-first day after the birth of the child. It can be said that these material objects still possess symbolic value though the actual use of these has become almost defunct among them with the giving up of the practice of fowling.

#### *No formal traditional leader*

Among them we do not come across any formal headman or leader at present. However, they say that once they had a leader like *morol*<sup>3</sup> (headman of village) of the local Bengali people. This leader used to guide them in the forest. In lieu of that the elders of the village sit together to discuss any problem or issue that needs intervention by the community. Sometimes they regard any one of the elders who has adequate forbearance and judicious disposition in their eyes. Lack of formal leadership is a feature of band or nomadic groups. This particular feature of their social organization may be attributed to their characteristic economic activities.

*Single grand ritual event*

The Bedias worship Dharma Thakur in their village shrine. It is the only ritual event that is held at the community level. There is a small brick-built temple in the middle of the village at the side of the pond. The calendar date for the ritual occasion is the day of Buddhapurnima falling in the month of Baisakh ( sometimes Jaistha in Bengali calendar corresponding to the English months of May – June). There is no image or idol of the deity. A raised earth on the floor of the shrine is treated as deity. On this occasion all the Bahurupi Bedias of the village who went outside come and stay for at least on the two three days during the worship which is actually held on one day. This worship has three significances with regard to their identity and adjustment. They know it very well that they cannot organize a number of community festival in their village because of their economic condition and time constraint as the cost of remaining absent from the potential places of their works would be tremendous. The grand festive events of the neighbouring people would offer them opportunity to earn better than usual months. If they remain busy with their own rituals, they would be economically loser. Living on such a marginal occupation, they can not tolerate that luxury. So, organizing their festival at a time when no major festive occasion is observed by their patron communities. The worship of Dharma thakur is also done by some lower caste people in the region. But by observing this worship they communicate that they follow the caste ethos. At the same time they consolidate their identity as distinct group since the event is solely organized by them at the community level. Again constraint of space is also avoided by keeping such event at minimum because this would then necessitate the presence of all the villagers for longer period in the hamlet. Therefore the worship of Dharma Thakur has got adaptive significance for the bahurupi Bedias.

*Ecology and economy*

The Bedia identify themselves as a distinct group of people following Hinduism and practicing the craft of bahurupee. They are quite clear about their identity as Byadh. They even use 'Byadh' with Chowdhury as their surname. They have also received Scheduled Tribe certificate recently. But they are not fully aware of the ramification of this status and complacent in having a berth in the Varna system of the Hindu social system. One old bahurupee of the village informs 'We are Khsatriya. For this reason we do not hit the oxen / bullock with staff.' It means that they do not do the agricultural work because of their Khsatriya status. However their status as caste is also ambiguous. They mention that they used to roam about in the forest and their contact with the caste people in the village was marginal. In contrast to the settled village people they were the wanderers in the forest. In the traditional caste hierarchy no particular occupation was specified for them. While visiting the village they used to camp at the fringe of the settlement and keep a minimum social interaction. They were not part of the jajmani relationship network. They subsisted on the marginal ecological resources remained unspoiled by other communities. The ecological basis of caste system has been studied by anthropologists. But the particular ecological specialization the Bedias excelled, was not encroached by any caste communities. In this regard the adoption of caste ethos through Hinduization and Khsatriyazation helped them

coming into a better relationship at the interactional level with the local Hindu caste populations. However they were mainly nomadic or seminomadic forest dwellers in contrast to caste who were basically permanent settlers of the village and town. At this stage two dominant references of tribalhood is present among them – one is forest dwelling and another is the non-sedentary life. When they came to settle in the village by adopting the bahurupée profession, their caste status was unspecified though they adopted some of the features and ethos of the caste system. This is the proto-caste stage.

At this stage they were conferred Scheduled Tribe (ST) status. This status helped them in subsistence as STs are entitled to enjoy some special benefits given by government. Now they may again change their occupation if the present one fails them to survive. They would then go for the vocations which are not traditionally prescribed by caste idioms and result of developmental initiatives to nation building. It is well surmised by the trends of literacy among the lower age groups. The rate of literacy is 76.47 per cent in the 5-9 age group, it is 53.85 per cent among 10-14 age group; whereas in the age group of 25-29 the literacy rate is 20 per cent only and among 50-54 it is zero per cent (2008). A considerable number of members of the below fifteen age are not interested in bahurupée performance. Therefore a small community of the Bedia is at the threshold of another transformation. The interplay of ecology and economy has been crucial here. The features of the interactions are manifest in their social organization. In nutshell these features are:

- i. The Bedia were habituated to a life that was not specified for any caste. From that they shifted to another occupation i.e. bahurupée which was also not marked for any particular caste group.
- ii. They used to live in the forest as ‘ecological community’, from there when they came to settle in the village they were located at the margin of the village.
- iii. The composition of their group is not very rigid. They allow intermarriage with other communities. At least seven families out of thirty families in the village accepted intermarriage.
- iv. The clan has been probably transformed from totemic to tutelary. Initially they adopted the Hindu sages as their clan head. But, now the importance is more on lineage particularly with regard to marriage.
- v. Their symbolic association with the forest and hunting –gathering practices is reflected in their customs of marriage and identity claim.
- vi. They have made an effective use of the space in the village. The shortage of dwelling place is managed by the periodic absence of some of the families alternatively round the year. They only meet for a brief period at the time of annual festival of Dharmaraj worship. The communal or large festival is few in number, that keep their expenses and engagement at minimum, though reflecting their collective identity adequately. The occurrence of small size nuclear families in highest frequency is an indication of an effective adjustment in this regard.

We have noticed that this people make effective utilization of the marginal environmental resources and habitation zone as they were pushed to subsist on the forest produce and games. It becomes apparent why Redfield called the tribes as 'ecological communities'. When this community was forced to leave the earlier subsistence pattern of sole dependence on forest, they came to live on the new profession of baturupi because that was one viable option left to them unconstrained by caste barrier and still unspecialized by any community. They were not adept in agriculture or any other menial labour due to interactional lacunae destined upon them by their earlier nomadic life. Again these menial field of labour is already encroached by other lower caste groups under prevalent caste system. Then they had to manage with the little cultural space left. This cultural niche specialization left them no option but being a nomadic group. From the nature of subsistence by utilization of ecological space or resources the Bedias under present study are transformed into a community that subsist on the utilization of cultural space and resources. This is a case of transformation from natural nomad to cultural nomad. Misra (1967) has reserved a term symbiotic nomads for them. Killing or catching of birds and hunting may be done for pleasure or pastime by any group in a region, but it is a specialization of the Bedias as ecologically defined group. From there they moved on to a professional specialization by expertise in baturupi –an economically defined group like caste. Therefore taking up caste ethos is a necessary adjustment for their survival. And accordingly they have also adopted strategies at the behavioral/ practical as well as symbolic levels to ensure an effective adjustment in the given situation.

The next transformation in the offing is concomitant with the conferment of ST status. Here the baturupe is not more important than the earlier subsistence strategy which was brought to the fore in symbolic manifestation. Now the identity of 'Byadh' or 'Pakhmara' or Bedia identity is more valuable cultural capital on the basis of which they can claim a 'prized status' of ST that can bring further changes unconnected to traditional practice.

Thus in reality transformation of small communities like Bedias is heading towards umpteen number of possibilities divorced from caste or tribal obligations to base it on some more secular ground brought forth by new politico-legal and economic opportunities.

The colonial British government included a section of Indian population in the category of tribe. They possess a distinct culture of their own and are traditionally distinguished by language, social structure, economy, geographical distribution. Characteristic cultural attributes distinguish them from the rest of the people. This static categorization of tribal people constitutes the essentialist paradigm of looking at the tribe. However, a lot of changes have taken place in their culture and social organization in the recent years. As a result of such changes, it is difficult to ideally depict a tribe. In fact, the concept of tribe has undergone sea changes over the years. The scholars are not unanimous on the definition of tribe. The anthropological understanding of tribe very often does not agree with the administrative understanding of tribe. The word, though etymologically pristine has been a colonial contribution to India. After independence, the Indian government continued to adhere to the classification and extended distributive justice to them after scheduling them through presidential order. However the issue of tribal identity has remained a moot point in the discourses on tribe. It brings about a shift in the paradigm from essentialist to a constructivist

one that is built upon the process how a tribal community is constituted. It brings to the fore the dynamics the tribal society is passing through at present. However, the colonial legacy still holds a strong sway as its adherents speak of the socio-economic and demographic features of this section of people that distinguish them from the non-tribal people. This is an essentialist approach in which an attempt is made to categorize tribes as ST with regard to their socio-economic features, geographic distributions, and linguistic affiliation. But this understanding of tribe is incomplete till we adopt a constructivist approach. The Bedias have been categorized as ST following an essentialist paradigm, but we have seen that the Bedias have been always searching new elements or reference community to construct their identity which is never a linear process. Here, the Bedias multiple identities simultaneously beyond caste and tribe linearity. According to contingency of the situation, they project the appropriate identity.

The issue of transformation here appears to be legal- political one. The study also brings to the fore how the peripatetic or semi-nomadic, proto-caste group transforms in a non-tribal milieu and adopts the identity of tribe. It discusses how ecology and economy play crucial role in the transformation of tribe. The study is important in comprehending the mechanism of how small groups are adjusting and maintaining their boundaries in a particular social milieu.

#### Footnotes:

1. The sub-types under sl.no.4 are probably sellers or repairers of various goods and objects.
2. As per record, the first ST certificate issued to them in 1999. One such certificate bears the Ref. No. C6729/71 BS99 dated 13-9-99.
3. Nowadays the *morol* is not even seen in the village. However, they exist informally particularly as a part of informal caste panchayat or *soloana* i.e. the corporate leadership embodying the group or particular caste or a village faction.

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