

INDIGENOUS HEALTHCARE PRACTICES IN THE BIRHOR COMMUNITY OF SARANDA FOREST

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Abstract

The Birhor are a community classified as a Scheduled Tribe (PVTG) in Jharkhand. The local tribal community calls them "Bir-Ho," where "Bir" means "forest" (Buru) and "Ho" means "people," meaning "people of the forest." They are primarily engaged in rope-making, food gathering, monkey-catching, and the sale of wood, tooth-brushes, and leaves, which are their primary source of livelihood. They also collect medicinal plants, herbs, bark, leaves, fruits, flowers, and seeds from the forest. They are familiar with the medicinal properties of forest-based medicinal plants. Knowledge of these medicinal properties and methods of treatment are passed down through socialization and are passed down from generation to generation as oral indigenous knowledge. This paper will present the indigenous knowledge system of traditional medicine prevalent among the Birhor community living in Tatiba village in the Saranda forest, located in West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand. It will also highlight the current environmental changes that have reduced the availability of these medicines and the impact of the declaration of Saranda forest as a wildlife sanctuary on the medicinal collection of the Birhor community. This paper will highlight common diseases found in Tatiba village, traditional approaches to disease identification, and various treatment methods. In-depth field research will be conducted to collect primary data through individual and group interviews, case studies, observations, and photographs, as well as secondary sources.

Keywords:- Indigenous, Birhor, Health, Medicinal plant, healthcare disease.

Introduction -

The Birhor are a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) community of Jharkhand. According to the 2011 census, their population is 10,724, representing 62.21% of the total Indian Birhor population. The Birhor are known locally as "Bir Ren Hor ko. Which" Bir means "buru" or forest, and "hor" means "human," meaning people of the forest or a forest-dwelling community. In Jharkhand, they are primarily distributed in the Hazaribagh, Ramgarh, Ranchi, and Singhbhum regions. Thus, they are considered a vanishing, sparsely populated, primitive tribe. According to racial classification, they belong to the Proto-Austroloid racial group, and linguistically, they belong to the Austro-Asiatic language family. Therefore, their Birhor language is very similar to the Mundari and Ho languages.

Birhor are mainly divided into two parts. Jhaghi Birhor and Uthlu Birhor. Both of them are differentiated on the basis of their place of residence and economic activity. Out of these, Uthlu Birhor are nomads. They change their place almost throughout the year except during the rainy season. But Jhaghi Birhors live temporarily in their 'Tanda' (settlement). This Tanda has about 10 to 15 khumbas, which are made of straw, in which their single family lives. Their khumbas are small or medium sized thatched huts made of leaves of the local Sal tree and other wood

In the present research study, a study of the Birhor community residing in the Saranda area located in West Singhbhum of Jharkhand has been presented. The Birhors selected for the current study have lived in the Saranda forest for centuries. It is considered Asia's largest sal forest, with 700 hills. It is also a biodiversity hotspot, spanning 850 square kilometers. These Birhors are settled in Tatiba village, Novamundi block, within this region. This area is currently heavily impacted and polluted by mining and iron ore. This Birhor colony, home to 70 families, is each allotted a single room, with no kitchen, bathroom, or proper drinking water. Therefore, the Birhors return to their huts in the forest. Their livelihoods remain dependent on the forest. Therefore, they have not been able to completely abandon either the hut or the government colony. In this Birhor colony, they have not been allotted any land for any kind of employment or for gardening or animal husbandry. The local tribal communities of 'Ho' and 'Munda' consider them to be tribals who are receiving government benefits and discriminate against them. Therefore, they do not allow them to use their land or community land in any way. In this way, on one hand, they are neglected by

the government and on the other hand, by the local tribal community. Therefore, they are forced to earn their livelihood through their traditional occupation only.

livelihood of Birhor :- The Birhor community's primary livelihoods include rope making, collecting minor forest produce, wood selling, livestock, and collecting medicinal herbs from the forest to sell at local markets. They use these herbs for their own healing, as they have lived in or near forests for centuries, living in harmony with the forest's ecology. Therefore, they have a good understanding of various herbs for identifying and treating common diseases.

Research Objectives - 1.To find out the Health status of Birhor Community of Sarnda forest.

2.To Know the Indigenous Health care practices in the Birhor community.

Research Methodology: This research paper focuses primarily on the Birhor community of Tatiba village, located in the Saranda forest area of West Singhbhum district in Jharkhand state. They were resettled from the forest to the edge of this village under the Indira Gandhi Housing Scheme. Out of 70 families and a total population of 200, the Birhor community has been allocated a single house or room in a colony. This research area was selected using a purposive sampling method, and key information was selected using a random sampling method, which included 70 families. A case study was conducted by conducting personal interviews with selected informants. Primary data were collected through group interviews, photography, and scheduling techniques. Data was also collected from secondary sources, including articles and books on the Birhor community.

Findings and Discussion –

• Concepts of Illness and Methods of Diagnosis Among the Birhor Community –

a) They have their own socio-cultural beliefs for identifying illness or disease. They consider an overweight or thin individual to be sick, and they identify seasonal illnesses based on cold and heat.

b) When feeling physically weak or unwell, they identify the illness by touching the veins of the hands and forehead. They also perform magical rituals to diagnose certain illnesses—such as rubbing rice grains or soup and chanting mantras.

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- **Causes of Diseases Prevalent Among the Birhor Community –**

The Birhor community has shared joys and sorrows with the forest and nature. Based on their experience living in nature, they have identified diseases and their causes well. According to them, the following are the factors that contribute to illness:

a) **The wrath of supernatural powers** - They believe that illness can occur when their Buru Bonga (forest deity) or the water deity (Daah Bonga) in the forest becomes displeased, such as through wounds.

b) **Weather changes** - They believe that illness can also occur when the weather changes, such as drinking or bathing in fresh water (Namahdaah) after rain.

c) **Lifestyle and dietary changes** - They believe that illness can also occur due to poor lifestyles and a lack of or alteration in proper diet.

- **Traditional health care practices among the Bihors** - The Birhor community has developed traditional indigenous health care knowledge based on the experience of their ancestors over centuries, and it has been passed down orally from generation to generation. Thus, the following are the health care practices among them –

a) **Through worship (Bongaburu)** - They consider divine displeasure as the cause of many common diseases like stomach ache, headache, diarrhoea, physical weakness, lethargy etc. and try to cure the diseases by offering prayers and performing rituals, sacrifices and chanting mantras.

b) Treatment by Totka :- 1) They wrap Belva leaves and bury them in their kumba or house to protect them from evil eye and ghosts.

2) At the time of delivery, arrow is kept in the room and at the head of the newborn to protect them from evil spirits.

3) After delivery, sawdust or paste is applied to clean the navel quickly.

- 4) In case of bee sting, paste of bee's umbrella made of clay is applied.
- 5) A type of grass is tied to the hands and feet of malnourished children.
- 6) Kendu wood (Tireel) - SK wood is bury to protect from evil eye. In this way they take care of their health by Totka also.

c) Treatment by exorcism - Exorcism is also popular among them for health protection. It is done in the morning or evening. They sprinkle water with mango leaves to please their six deities (Goy Boga), forest deities (Buru Bonga), Singhbonga, etc. and also offer sacrifices. For this they also chant mantras. They also offer Hadiya, Mahua, Kendu, Mango Belwa, etc. in the puja. Presently some families of Birhor colony have adopted Christianity, hence they also pray for health protection.

d) Treatment through herbs or medicines - Due to living in the forest, they are well aware of the medicinal properties present in the bark, roots, stem, leaves, fruits, flowers, seeds etc. of trees and plants. These medicines are used to treat a variety of ailments. Therefore, the Birhor community here is well-versed in herbs. They must strictly follow several rules for collecting, uprooting, breaking, cutting, grinding, drying, and preparing the herbs. To do this, they wake up in the morning, worship their "Buru Bonga" and "Singh Bonga," fast, bring the herbs home, and prepare the medicines only after reciting certain mantras and purifying their body and mind. These medicines are prepared and used in the form of raw, powdered, tablets, hard pastes, ointments, and oils,

• **Common Diseases and their treatments:-**

A description of common diseases and medicines among them is as follows:-

1) Name of the Herb or medicine: Aakwan , **Local Name** - Plati

Botanical name: Calotropis gigantea

Name of the disease: Elephantiasis, muscle pain, problems related to lactation, and swelling.

Method of treatment: A paste of its root provides relief from elephantiasis and body aches. Its stem is used as a toothbrush and its milk is helpful in the production of milk in pregnant women. In case of swelling, the oil is applied on the stomach and hot fomentation is done.

2) **Name of the Herb or medicine :** Castor oil, **Local Name** – Jara Bindi

Botanical name: (*Ricinus communis*)

Name of the disease: Toothache/disease, injury, sprain, wound, itching, swelling, contraceptive

Method of treatment: Its seed oil is beneficial in reducing wounds, swelling, injury, sprain, and heat stroke. Its leaves are used as hot fomentation in case of swelling and pain. It is used as a toothbrush for toothache.

3) **Name of the Herb or medicine :** Mango, Tamarind, Sour Fruit **Local Name** – Uli, Jojo, Epil

Botanical Name: *Mangifera Indica* & *Tamarindus Indica*

Name of the disease: Heat Fever, Insomnia, Dysentery, Diabetes

Method of treatment- : It is applied as a paste for heatstroke. It is beneficial for cooling the stomach and insomnia. Powdering the seeds is beneficial for dysentery, diarrhea, and diabetes.

4) **Name of the Herb or medicine -** Chirayta , **Local name -** Chirayta

Botanical name :- *swertia chirayia*

Name of the disease :- Irregular menstruation, stomach pain, malaria, fever, digestive problems.

Method of treatment :- The root and stem are soaked in water overnight. This water is used to regulate menstruation, purify blood after childbirth, malaria, fever, digestion, weakness, and diarrhea.

5) **Name of the Herb or medicine :-** Tub grass, **Local name -** (Dubi tasad)

Botanical name :- *Cynodon dactylon*

Name of the disease :- Headache, itching, helps in milk production, Dhatu disease

Method of treatment: Grind this grass and eat it with sugar candy or honey to cure Dhatu Rog.

6) Name of the Herb or medicine:- Neem, **Local name -** Lim

Botanical name:- Azdirachta Indica

Name of the disease: Ringworm, itching, wounds, boils, stomach worms, diabetes

Method of treatment: - The bark and leaf decoction or boiled water is beneficial for ringworm, itching, wounds, boils, stomach worms, and diabetes. The seed oil is used to treat hair-related problems, ringworm, and scabies. Its tender leaves cure stomach ailments and stomach worms. It is also considered a contraceptive. A person suffering from smallpox is made to sleep on neem leaves, fumigated, and bathed with boiled water.

7) Name of the Herb or medicine :- Palash, **Local Name:-** Murr Ba

Botanical Name:- Butea monosperma

Name of the disease: Sunstroke, fever, stomachache, headache, broken bones, cough, and dysentery

Method of treatment :- Its flowers are soaked overnight, and the soaked water provides relief from sunstroke, fever, stomachache, and headache. A decoction of its bark provides relief from dysentery and cough, and a paste of the bark is used for bone joints.

8) Name of the Herb or medicine:- Bhelwa, **Local Name:-** Soso

Botanical Name:- Semecarpus anacardium

Name of the disease:- Cancer, arthritis, and paralysis

Method of treatment: : Its oil is beneficial for cancer, arthritis, and paralysis. It is also used to ward off the evil eye and protect against evil spirits.

9) Name of the Herb or medicine:- Sindwar, **Local Name:-** Begana

Botanical Name :- vitex negundolinn

Name of the disease: Cold and fever, skin diseases, stomach worms.

Method of treatment :- It is applied warm with oil for cold and fever. This cures cold and fever. Mixing it with Karanj oil and applying it cures skin diseases and stomach worms.

10) Name of the Herb or medicine:- Banyan (Bargad), **Local Name :-** Bai Daru

Botanical Name :- Ficus benghalensis

Name of the disease:- Diabetes, Diarrhea, Bone Joining

Method of treatment :- Its juice cures diabetes, and its fruit cures diarrhea. Also, its root paste is used for bone joining.

11) Name of the Herb or medicine :- Sal/Sakhuwa, **Local Name :-** Sarjom

Botanical Name :- Shorea Robusta

Name of the disease:- Stomach ache, diarrhea, stomach worms, dizziness, toothache, mouth related diseases

Method of treatment :- Its seed powder cures stomach ache, diarrhea, stomach worms, dizziness, etc. Its tooth brush relieves toothache and mouth related diseases. They eat food by making a plate from it

12) Name of the Herb or medicine :- Karanj, **Local name :-** Koronjo

Botanical name :- Millettia pinnata

Name of the disease:- Skin diseases, scabies, wounds, white spots, bloody piles, pyorrhea, dental problems.

Method of treatment :- Its oil cures skin diseases, scabies, and wounds. Applying its root powder mixed with oil removes white spots. Its bark powder is beneficial for bloody piles. Its toothbrush is beneficial for pyorrhea and dental problems.

- **Socio-cultural health related Taboos –**

1) **Hot and Cold Concept** - When a patient is sick, cold water is not given to drink but hot water is given.

2) **Food prohibited after delivery** - After delivery, the lactating mother is given only rice, salt and kurti dal. Vegetables, oil, spices are prohibited along with it.

3) Bringing water from water source like river, waterfall etc is prohibited for a few days after delivery.

4) In case of chicken pox, the patient is prohibited from going out. He is kept covered with neem leaves inside the house or in a pot.

5) The patient is prohibited from eating dry fish, urad, kohara etc.

- **Current Health Situation of the Birhor Community in Tatiba :-**

The Birhor community has been allocated 70 single-room homes, each made of wattled sheet metal, in a small family home. They also have a pet dog, monkey, goat, chicken, and duck. They are forced to live in a slum-like environment in such a small space. Therefore, they are refusing to leave their homes. They would like to cultivate vegetables or small crops, but they are landless. Therefore, they remain engaged in their traditional occupations of rope-making, leaf plates, toothbrushes, forest produce collection, wood sales, and herbal collection. To sell these, they must travel 10 kilometers on foot or by bicycle to the market, which provides a mere income of 2,000 to 3,000 rupees.

Therefore, their economic condition is also quite poor, which directly affects their health and nutritional status. Thus, they face several health problems:-

(1) Lack of cleanliness and hygiene - While the huts are clean, they have to sleep, wash, and live in a small room. Locals forbid them from throwing garbage outside. Therefore, they throw their garbage there, wash their utensils, and eat their food there. Consequently, they are forced to live in a completely unsanitary environment.

(2) Lack of clean drinking water - While the government provides clean drinking water in Birhor Colony, the tanker is often empty, and Birhor families wait in line with their pots. Therefore, they are forced to fetch water from the river or Chuwan.

(3) Lack of nutrition - Due to their poverty, their daily diet consists of rice, ant chutney, sour curry, and vegetables. Therefore, they are far from proper nutrition; they eat only to their fill.

(4) lack of awareness about Allopathic medicine -Due to illiteracy and poverty , they do not have awareness about health. Till now they have been protecting their health and life through their indigenous knowledge system. This indigenous knowledge is only saving their life, but they do not get proper income from it.

(5) Lack of availability of medicine - Primary health center is located in 10 kilometers. They have to struggle a lot to reach there. They go by bicycle or on foot. Sometimes even after reaching there they are not able to get medicine, hence they give priority to traditional treatment

(6)Lack of institutional deliveries - The PHC is 10 kilometers away, and there are no transportation facilities. Due to the lack of institutional deliveries, the Birhors are typically delivered by elderly female midwives, but gradually they are becoming more aware of institutional deliveries.

(7)Decreased availability of herbs - Continuous mining in this area is destroying many medicinal plants. Pollution has significantly affected the air, water, soil, and vegetation, making it difficult to find rare herbs. Furthermore, the Forest Act currently limits their rights and use of the forest.

(8) Impact of industrialization - Continuous mining of iron ore in the Saranda forest is destroying trees and plants. This mining has also significantly increased pollution, leading to illnesses such as vomiting, diarrhea, asthma, and typhoid among the Birhor community. This means that mining has significantly disrupted the health system here.

(9) Health Department Apathy - While numerous government health schemes have been implemented for this community, they remain largely on paper. The reality is that even the doctors appointed to the CHC rarely visit them. Furthermore, there is considerable negligence in the distribution of medicines. Thus, this community remains far from access to modern medical

facilities. Consequently, due to the indifference of the Health Department, government health services and institutional offerings are not reaching them properly.

Conclusion: Thus, the Tatiba community of approximately 200 people is facing serious health problems due to environmental degradation and continued iron ore mining in the Saranda forest. They previously lived a nomadic life within the Uthlu Birhor community, but they aspire to a more settled lifestyle. Currently, they are grappling with displacement, chronic health problems, environmental pollution, contaminated water, poor road connectivity, and extreme poverty. Furthermore, they believe that the designation of Saranda as a sanctuary will strip them of their forest rights and could lead to their eviction from the forest, which will inevitably impact their traditional lifestyle. Therefore, today, they struggle for survival, preserving their rich heritage of indigenous medicinal knowledge.

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