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Positionality of the Kora Community of North Bengal

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Abstract

North Bengal and in particular Dooars has been a home to many indigenous tribes since decades. The Kora community is one such tribal group who made their long journey to this land early during the colonial rule of the British. This paper tries to find out the positionality of the Kora community of North Bengal in the perspective of their geographical, diasporic cultural, and diasporic literary tradition. This paper tries to trace the route map of their journey from their origin to their contemporary positionality of North Bengal. At the end it shows how they dislocate them from their diasporic existence and becomes a part of their present positionality.

Key Words: Folk, Diaspora, Dislocation, Tribe.

The transference from one place to another is generally termed as migration. The process of migration can take place both on individual or community level. Migration can further be explained as the shifting of a particular section of people from their original position to another geographical location in search of a better standard of living and is mostly concerned with the socio-economic domains of life. The colonization of these migrants therefore leads to transmission of their own culture on different plains in that particular region. More precisely the concerned ecosystem nurtures the folk song, music, art, myth, lore, legends, culture etc. and develops a diaspora of their own in the new land. The region of North Bengal has witnessed migration on multiple levels, mostly in the district of Jalpaiguri, lying in the foothills of the Bhutan mountain range and widely recognized by the name 'Duars' (Sanskrit 'Dwar') meaning a door. Jalpaiguri and broadly doors thus paved way for the migration of different indigenous community and are presently home to many of them.

Bichhabhanga, a small village adjacent to Lataguri Gram Panchayat, in the district of Jalpaiguri and nestled in the heart of Gorumara National Park is a home to a large number of indigenous tribes, one of them being the 'Kora' community. The Kora community in Bichhabhanga were the large number of tribal immigrants along with other indigenous groups from Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Jharkhand (presently) who came along with their colonial masters as workers for the huge belt of tea gardens in Dooars, owned by The East India Company (Dooars Tea Planters' Association). The other immigrated tribal groups took up the job of working in the tea gardens as their means of livelihood and started to live in the colonies in and around the tea gardens, but the Koras' refrained themselves from doing so and started to live amidst the forest and took up the activities in the forest as their means of livelihood. But with the passage of time many families from the Kora community moved to the tea gardens in order to secure a better life.

It is learned that the Koras' emigrated to Bichhabhanga from the Koraput district in the Indian state of Odisha in the year 1922-23. In Odisha the Koras' mainly worked as labourers in field on daily basis to sustain their livelihood. The state of the Koras' were poor and led a miserable life. The Kora's immigrated from their native land in search of employment and to secure a better life. Bichhabhanga at that time was a dense forest and the Koras' were registered by the forest department as workers in the forest. They settled their habitat in Bichhabhanga thus and is the first concrete instance of their settlement in this region. The tribal community of Kora has been identified and marked as a Schedule Tribe by the Constitution of India. The 2001 Census of India registered an approximate number of around seven hundred Kora people in the district of Jalpaiguri, around two hundreds of which live in the Bichhabhanga, the rest are all scattered in small clusters in Lanka Para, Chalauni , Zuranti, Damdim, Chandra Para tea gardens in Dooars.

The tribal community of Kora located in Bichhabhanga constituted primarily of four ethnic groups – Mudi Kora, Kurmi Kora, Nagbanshi or Murali Kora and Dhangar or Orang Kora. The Kora's in Bichhabhanga regard themselves as the Murali Kora. H.H. Risley in his landmark work *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (1891), had remarked that the Kora community is more or less specified as britti, that is devoted to traditional earth work. The Koras' also practice agrarian work and is a subgroup of the 'Munda' tribal community –

“Kora, Kaora, Khaira, Khayra, a dravidian caste of earthworkers and cultivators in Chotonagpur, Western and Central Bengal probably an offshoot from the Munda tribe. The Koras or Khayras of Manbhumi and Bankura have well-marked totemistic sections of the same type as the Mundas, and the latter admit that some sort of affinity may at one time have been recognized. The Koras of the Santal Parganas on the other hand claim to have come from Nagpur...In Manbhumi no subcastes appear to have been formed, and the caste is still more or less in the tribal stage.” (Risley: 1891; 506-507).

The Kora community in Bichhabhanga practiced child marriage in their society, but with the progress of time the practice has been put to hold. 'Dutum' is the term that is used by Koras' to refer to marriages. The Koras' follow the ritual of inter-caste marriage and practice monogamy. Although they practice inter caste marriage but recent studies shows there are instances of intra caste marriages amongst the Koras', but the figures are very less. The Koras' also follow the law of divorce too, but the divorce has to be under the supervision of the social system or its heads. Widowed, Divorced have the right to remarriage in their society. In the Kora society the tradition of a widow remarrying the brother of her deceased husband was prevalent; similarly the husband can marry the sister of his deceased wife. The eldest son takes up the responsibility after his father and has the authority over his family assets, similar to modern day society this practice is also not in vogue in the Kora society anymore. The Koras' are cremated after death and the funerals rites are performed in by worshipping gods and forefathers.

The Koras' have gradually accustomed themselves with their new ecological setup and their process of acculturation into Hinduism starts with their interaction and

communication with the local Hindu people. The Koras' have gradually integrated themselves to Hinduism and even worship Lord Shiva, Kali, Saraswati, Manasa. The Koras' of Bichhabhanga also stick to their traditional belief in their native gods and practices the rites and rituals. The Koras' are spiritual beings and believe in the presence of the supernatural beings namely 'bhut' (the spirit who is considered to emerge from the soul of the dead). The Koras' believe in life after death and also worship objects of nature. The spirit residing in the hills is known among them as 'pahardeota'. The ancestral spirit of the land is generally referred as 'oradeota'. Their rituals and ceremonies are performed by Brahmins. In the present day, the Koras' can be seen taking part in Durga Puja and other different Hindu festivities. According to Risley, "In the matters of religion Koras affect to be orthodox Hindus, worshipping the regular gods and calling themselves Saktas or Yaisnavas, according as they incline to the cult of Kali, Durga, and Manesa, or to that of Radha and Krishna" (Risley: 1891; 506-507).

The Koras have their own dialect, which is considered close to the Mundari language. As Grierson puts it, "The honorific title which the Munda Kodas use to denote themselves is Mudi, and their language is, hence, sometimes called Kora-Mudithar...Their old home is, according to their own traditions, Dhalbhum, Manbhum, and the neighbouring localities i.e. the tracts of country now inhabited by the Bhumij and Mundari tribes ... their language is almost pure Mundari (Grierson: 1931 (67); p. 107). The Koras' of Bichhabhanga are gradually getting blended in the social system and takes part in the government ceremonies and events. The tribal dance of the Koras' has acclaimed much praise across society. The Kora dance accompanied by the one stringed instrument 'Ektara' is named as 'Taila'. The dance performance accompanied by drums, flute and other sound instruments is referred as 'Damsa'. Damsa is the dance form practiced and performed in marriages and festivities religious or social. The Kora song and dance work in unison and reflects the day to day joy and struggle of existence.

If we look at the perspective in the basis of Max Webber's theoretical background, we can point out how a 'volk', that is an ethnographical identity, dislocated from its natural geo-cultural position tries desperately to create a locale of identity which is both local and foreign at its initial stage and then tries to place itself in the positionality of the locality of their present position. In Webber's view "The diaspora of the 'volk' fades away as time passes and gradually this diaspora becomes the song of the soil." [Webber, 1978, p.34].

Similar to the other tribal groups, the Koras' real fight for survival is the fight against poverty. Although brought to work as workers in the forest but recent enactments of different laws in accordance with the wildlife act has stripped them off their regular work or primitive practices. The state government though has taken some necessary measures in accordance with the law by handing the members of this tribal community with land deeds. The agrarian tribal community more inclined to the cultivation of paddy is now shifting their mode of cultivation to tea in order to generate more revenue. Another hindrance in the upliftment of the economic-social existence of the Koras' is the affinity of the men towards 'Handia' (a country spirit

made as a result of fermentation of wheat flour, herbs and yeast with boiled rice). Alcohol addiction can be seen in men across all ages and thus resisting their progress in the society. 'Handia' is also offered to their 'deotas' while performing rituals. It is also offered to the performing priests and is very much a part of their culture.

Even today the Koras' are aloof from the larger section of the society. The gulf between the the modern society and Koras' still exists. Remedial measures and different government initiatives have been taken in order to bring the Koras in the mainstream society. One of such is the 'Gitanjali' project of building houses for the tribal community to facilitate proper standard of living. The education of the Koras' of the Bichhabhanga even today hasn't seen proper day light, though measures are taken to spread education among them, but even today the dropout rate is high. The state government has initiated several scholarships under the head of pre and post matriculation and also scholarship for meritorious students for up gradation to higher and professional studies. These schemes might usher in them a new hope and strengthen literacy among them. Malnutrition is yet another curse of the Koras'. Recent studies show the under nutrition that the Kora tribe goes through. The local dialect of the Koras' hasn't been affiliated by the government yet, very less efforts has been given to uplift and preserve the culture and all these is indeed the need of the hour in order to safe guard this indigenou community.

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For the purpose of the study intensive field investigation has been made among the specific group of Koras' of Bichhabhanga mouza of Lataguri Gram Panchyat of Malbazar Block of Jalpaiguri district in the state of West Bengal.

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