

Tribal Cultural Change Under Migratory Conditions: A Sociological Analysis

(With Special Reference to Migrant Tribal Workers Engaged in Brick Kilns)

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ABSTRACT

This research paper presents a detailed analysis of the social, economic, cultural and linguistic transformation of migrant tribal workers employed in India's unorganized brick-kiln industry. Seasonal migration caused by displacement from forest land and the crisis of traditional livelihoods uproots tribal communities from their self-reliant, nature-centred way of life and pushes them into a contractual and highly exploitative labour environment. Based on secondary data from NSSO, ILO, the e-Shram Portal and Census 2011, the study examines the erosion of tribal languages, decline of traditional religious beliefs and fragmentation of family relations through the sociological perspectives of M. N. Srinivas's concepts of Sanskritization and acculturation and Karl Marx's theory of alienation. The paper also critically reviews the provisions of the Code on Social Security, 2020 and its administrative limitations. Finally, it underlines the urgent need to protect the cultural identity and basic rights of migrant tribal workers and to develop effective social-security policies for them.

Keywords: Tribal migration, cultural change, brick-kiln workers, acculturation, Sanskritization, alienation, linguistic erosion.

INTRODUCTION

Tribal communities (Adivasis) have a distinctive and unique position in the social, cultural and anthropological structure of India. Historically, these communities have not merely been geographically isolated groups; they have represented environmentally adapted ways of life, coexistence with natural resources, autonomous systems of community governance such as the Padaha Panchayat and Manjhi-Paragana system, and distinctive linguistic and cultural traditions. The basic philosophy of tribal life has traditionally rested on community ownership and nature worship, including Sarna traditions and sacred groves, without an exclusive monopoly of private capital over the means of production.

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The erosion of tribal autonomy began during the British colonial period. The Forest Acts of 1865 and 1878 initiated processes that deprived tribal communities of access to their natural habitats. In independent India, industrialization, construction of large dams, uncontrolled extraction of minerals, infrastructure development and strict implementation of forest-conservation laws intensified displacement. In the name of the 'price of development', tribal communities have repeatedly experienced deprivation of jal, jungle and jameen (water, forest and land). Restrictions on shifting cultivation and the decline of local livelihood opportunities created a serious livelihood crisis for millions of tribal families. This structural deprivation compelled tribal populations to leave traditional arrangements and migrate seasonally towards urban, semi-urban and distant rural informal labour markets.

The brick-kiln industry operating in India's informal and unorganized sector is one of the major, unorganized and exploitative centres of distress-driven seasonal labour migration. Brick kilns generally operate for about eight to nine months, beginning after the monsoon, around October-November, and continuing until May-June. During this work cycle, large numbers of tribal families from central and eastern tribal regions—particularly Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Bihar—migrate towards brick kilns in rapidly developing states such as Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra. A major feature of migration to brick kilns is that it is generally family migration rather than individual migration. Kiln owners and intermediaries, including contractors or jamadars, often provide advance payments to entire families and bind them to work arrangements. This advance-payment system may create conditions resembling debt bondage. Working conditions at kilns are extremely difficult, involving long working hours, temporary and unhygienic housing, inadequate drinking water, uncertain wages and very limited social-security protection.

Seasonal migration among tribal communities is therefore not merely an economic or geographical event. It produces a complex process of socio-cultural displacement and acculturation. When a tribal family leaves its ancestral village, natural environment, dense kinship structure and community festivals and enters the closed, isolated, mechanical and capitalist environment of a brick kiln, substantial disruption may occur in traditional cultural values and behavioural patterns.

From a sociological perspective, two cultural systems encounter one another at the brick kiln. On one side is the tribal 'little tradition', which is nature-centred, relatively egalitarian and predominantly oral; on the other is the 'great tradition' and market-oriented culture of non-tribal or modern society, characterized by hierarchy, consumerism and monetary exchange. Under this unequal contact, changes become visible in language, religion, family relations, education and gender relations. The pressure to use regional dialects or Hindi instead of the mother tongue contributes particularly to linguistic erosion among children. Distance from traditional sacred places encourages participation in festivals and rituals of the surrounding majority society. Long working hours reduce parent-child interaction, interrupt children's education and obstruct intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge. The relatively autonomous social position historically enjoyed by many tribal women may also come under pressure in patriarchal and insecure kiln environments.

This paper integrates major sociological perspectives to analyse migrant tribal workers at brick kilns. Jan Breman's concept of 'footloose labour' helps explain how capitalism can detach labour from stable social roots. M. N. Srinivas's ideas of Sanskritization and dominant caste help explain processes through which economically weaker groups may adopt practices associated with locally dominant groups. The historical debate between Verrier Elwin and G. S. Ghurye concerning isolation and assimilation further helps interpret the condition of migrant tribal workers as a form of cultural in-betweenness, in which maintaining the original identity and attaining equal integration into mainstream society may both become difficult.

The central objective of this paper is therefore to present a detailed, critical and objective analysis of linguistic, religious, social, familial and gender-related cultural changes among migrant tribal workers employed in brick kilns, using secondary data, government and institutional reports, legislative review including the Code on Social Security, 2020, and established sociological theories.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Migration and cultural change among tribal communities have been examined by sociologists, anthropologists and economists as well as by national and international labour institutions. N. C. Saxena (2019), in work on social protection for informal-sector workers in India, critically examines social-security systems for informal workers. The study highlights the difficulties faced by seasonal migrants who remain away from their home villages for eight to nine months and may lose access to local public-distribution and health services. The absence of portable identity and social-security arrangements can increase dependence on contractors' advances and contribute to economic vulnerability, family fragmentation and weakened cultural protection.

K. L. Sharma (2018) examines Indian social structure and change through an Indian and historical-structural perspective, considering caste, class, tribe, family and rural-urban structures. His approach suggests that when tribal populations are displaced from their ecological setting of water, forest and land and migrate to industrial or plain areas for wage labour, including brick kilns and construction sites, processes of acculturation intensity. Integration into the mainstream is not necessarily voluntary; it may reflect pressures from dominant regional cultures and market forces, affecting language and cultural autonomy.

Ravi Srivastava (2012), in his work on internal migration and social protection in India, identifies gaps between internal migration and social-security systems. A large part of Indian migration is seasonal and cyclical rather than permanent. Poor rural and tribal families move during the agricultural off-season to cities, construction sites and brick kilns. Such seasonal migrants may remain invisible in official statistics and social-protection systems. Contractor advances can create debt-like dependency and force workers to accept low wages and difficult working conditions while becoming separated from village institutions and panchayats.

Deepak Kumar Mishra (2016) analyses seasonal migration from eastern Indian states such as Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh using primary and secondary data, with attention to tribal families and especially women and children. The literature indicates that seasonal migration affects family and social structures; children's schooling is interrupted and separation from

traditional community settings can obstruct the transmission of language and oral traditions across generations.

Amrita Datta (2016) analyses socio-cultural transformation associated with inter-state migration from rural and tribal Bihar and Jharkhand. Migration can meet economic needs but may involve deterioration of social and cultural institutions. Returning migrants may bring new consumer goods, mobile and digital technologies, market-produced commodities and new religious practices, thereby introducing new cultural patterns into community life.

Vibhuti Bhushan Malik (2015) examines the socio-economic condition of tribal workers at brick kilns and notes the use of the family as a labour unit, with payment commonly channelled through the male head while the labour of women and children may remain undervalued. Such a work culture can transform family structure and distance children from educational environments and mother tongues.

Professor Virennius Khakha (2008) discusses tribal society, development, displacement and acculturation and argues that displacement increasingly connects tribal communities to mainstream development and labour markets. Entry into these markets can generate a crisis of cultural identity and affect cultural heritage and autonomy. Jan Breman (1996), through his concept of footloose labour, describes the condition of migrant workers in India's informal economy and explains how temporary labour can remain detached both from the social order of the home village and from full integration at the destination.

The ILO report, Decent Work for Brick Kiln Workers in South Asia (2017), examines the social, economic and human-rights conditions of workers in brick kilns in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The report highlights deficits in health and safety, drinking water, housing and other basic facilities and describes the demanding labour conditions associated with brick production. Such conditions restrict social interaction, religious observance, leisure and the cultural life of migrant workers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper is based entirely on secondary data, international labour reports, government records and published sociological research, analysed through content analysis. In view of the limitations on collecting primary data, the study uses triangulation of available credible sources so that the conclusions remain factually grounded, objective and academically robust.

Major secondary sources used in the study include:

1. Census of India 2011 database, particularly migration tables, Scheduled Tribe population tables and labour-force participation data.
2. National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) reports, including the 64th Round (2007-08), Employment, Unemployment and Migration in India, and the 72nd Round (2014-15) relating to the unorganized sector.
3. Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India, including demographic information available through the e-Shram Portal and the official Gazette of the Code on Social Security, 2020.

4. Publications of international and non-governmental organizations, including ILO reports on informal labour in India and UNICEF reports on education of migrant children.
5. Relevant research published in academic journals and books, including Sociological Bulletin, Economic and Political Weekly and Contributions to Indian Sociology.

TABLE 1: BROAD DEMOGRAPHIC FRAMEWORK OF THE BRICK-KILN INDUSTRY AND TRIBAL MIGRATION IN INDIA

Demographic/Economic Indicator	Secondary Data/Estimated Value	Major Source Regions	Major Destination Regions
Estimated total brick-kiln workforce	1.20–1.50 crore	Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh	Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujarat
Share of tribal workers	35%–45% (approximately 50–60 lakh)	Chotanagpur Plateau, Santhal Pargana	Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and other destination states
Duration and nature of migration	6–8 months; seasonal and distress-driven	Rural tribal agricultural areas	Semi-urban brick-kiln settlements
Wage-payment system	Advance/piece-rate, generally per 1,000 bricks	Sardar/Matedar/contractor intermediary	Direct control of kiln owner
Children/dependants	20%–25% migrant children (as stated in source paper)	Tribal primary-school areas	Non-formal or disrupted education at kilns

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

1. Robert Redfield's Little and Great Tradition Robert Redfield developed the concepts of the 'little tradition' and the 'great tradition' to understand cultural forms in rural and wider societies. Little traditions are oral, local, nature-oriented, largely unwritten and community-based, whereas great traditions are more philosophical, written and widely disseminated. Tribal culture has many characteristics of a little tradition. When tribal workers migrate to brick kilns outside their ancestral areas, their little tradition encounters the great tradition and market-oriented culture of the destination. Local deities, nature worship and oral narratives may gradually weaken under wider religious and cultural influences.

2. **Acculturation: Redfield-Linton-Herskovits Perspective** Acculturation refers to processes of cultural change that occur when distinct cultural groups maintain continuous and direct contact. Following the Redfield-Linton-Herskovits perspective, tribal workers belonging to communities such as the Santhal, Munda and Oraon, when living for several months with non-tribal workers, contractors and local populations, experience changes in language, dress and lifestyle.

3. **M. N. Srinivas's Theory of Sanskritization** M. N. Srinivas conceptualized Sanskritization as a process through which a lower caste or tribal group may adopt the lifestyle, customs and rituals associated with a higher or locally dominant group. In the multi-caste environment of brick kilns, tribal workers may adopt elements of the food habits, rituals, religious festivals and lifestyles of dominant local communities. The paper interprets participation in festivals such as Dussehra, Diwali and Chhath in this framework.

4. **Karl Marx's Theory of Alienation** Karl Marx described four forms of alienation under capitalist production: alienation from the product of labour, from the process of production, from one's human essence and from other human beings. The mechanical and demanding environment of brick kilns can generate alienation among tribal workers who previously experienced a relatively autonomous and nature-centred way of life. At the kiln, the worker may be reduced to a unit of production and become distanced from nature, folk culture and community consciousness.

5. **Milton Singer and McKim Marriott: Localization and Universalization** McKim Marriott's work on Indian traditions discusses processes of localization and universalization. In the context of migrant tribal workers, local deities and festivals may not become universally institutionalized; instead, local traditions can become influenced by broader great traditions and may gradually be incorporated into them. The paper associates this process with changing forms of cultural self-identification.

PHYSICAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF BRICK KILNS AND THEIR IMPACT ON TRIBAL LIFE

Advance-Wage System and Conditions of Bondage Tribal workers often leave their villages in search of employment because of seasonal unemployment and livelihood insecurity. During periods of economic distress, kiln contractors or intermediaries, commonly called sardars or matedars, provide advance payments. Families may then work for six to eight months to repay the advance. Dependence on advances can restrict workers' freedom and compel them to live and work according to the conditions imposed by kiln owners.

Rigid Division of Labour and the Family as a Labour Unit Wages at brick kilns are often calculated not simply per person but on the basis of the number of bricks produced. Under pressure to produce more bricks, men, women and children participate in labour-intensive tasks. Work may begin as early as 4 a.m. and continue until late evening. After such physically exhausting labour, workers have little time or energy for cultural activities, community meetings or folk music.

Housing and Lack of Basic Facilities Workers may live in extremely poor temporary shelters made from raw bricks, locally called kholis. These small structures may lack windows, toilets and piped water, with the entire family cooking and sleeping in the same space. Such conditions create serious deficits of sanitation and privacy and can affect family life and cultural practices.

MAJOR DIMENSIONS OF CULTURAL CHANGE

1. Linguistic Change, Decline of the Mother Tongue and Linguistic Contraction Language is a principal carrier of culture and enables communication within a community. Indian tribal communities possess rich languages and dialects, including Santhali, Mundari, Ho, Kharia, Nicobarese and Khasi among Austroasiatic languages; Gondi, Kurukh, Kui, Koya and Malto among Dravidian languages; Bodo, Garo, Mizo and Manipuri among Tibeto-Burman languages; and Bhili, Halbi, Chhattisgarhi and Baigani among Indo-Aryan varieties. At brick kilns, people from different linguistic communities work together. Owners, supervisors, contractors and local shopkeepers commonly use contact languages such as Hindi, Bhojpuri, Punjabi, Gujarati and Haryanvi. Tribal workers therefore learn these languages for everyday communication, often at the expense of regular use of the mother tongue. The effect is particularly visible among children. During six to eight months at the kiln, children may be unable to attend school regularly either in the home village or at the destination. Reduced use of the mother tongue may lead to mixed or hybrid forms of speech. The paper interprets this as pressure towards bilingualism and gradual erosion of the mother tongue.

2. Changes in Food Culture, Dress and Consumption Patterns Traditional tribal food culture is closely connected with nature and forest produce, including millets such as kodo and kutki, mahua, tubers, local greens and medicinal plants. During migration, workers may increasingly depend on inexpensive market foods such as rice, potatoes, packaged spices and low-quality cooking oils. This can alter traditional food practices and customary understandings of health and nutrition. Traditional beverages such as handia and rice beer or tadi have social and ritual significance in many tribal communities. At brick-kiln sites, limited access to traditional beverages may be accompanied, according to the paper, by consumption of locally available country liquor. The paper associates this pattern with household economic difficulties, family conflict and deterioration of health. In dress, traditional clothing and ornaments may be replaced by inexpensive ready-made garments such as jeans, T-shirts and synthetic saris, contributing to more market-oriented consumption patterns.

3. Changes in Religious Rituals, Folk Beliefs and Festivals Many tribal religious traditions are based on Sarna or nature worship, involving sacred trees, rivers, hills and ancestral spirits such as bongas. Festivals such as Sarhul, Karma, Sohrai and Maghe are closely associated with agricultural cycles and seasonal change. The period of brick-kiln migration, generally from October to May, overlaps with important festivals. Because of demanding work schedules, migrant workers may be unable to participate in festivals in their home villages, while sacred places such as Jaher Than are generally unavailable at kiln sites. As a result, some workers participate in widely observed festivals around the kilns, including Chhath, Diwali, Holi and Dussehra, and may keep images of Hindu deities such as Hanuman, Durga and Shiva in their living spaces. The paper describes this as religious Sanskritization, in which aspects of an

animistic or nature-oriented religious identity may weaken under the influence of wider religious traditions.

4. **Disruption of Kinship, Family Relations and Marriage Practices** Tribal society traditionally relies on clan organization and extensive kinship networks. In villages, community and kinship networks provide support during crises. During brick-kiln migration, this support system becomes spatially separated and weakened. Extended family relations may increasingly take the form of smaller nuclear-family arrangements, reducing the everyday interaction of migrants with their wider kin and home-village institutions. Marriage practices may also change. Traditional tribal marriage is commonly organized as a community event involving relatives, songs and dances. At brick kilns, young people may begin cohabiting or marry without the full range of customary rituals and community approval. Such practices can generate tension with village elders and traditional leaders and may contribute to forms of community exclusion.

5. **Decline of Autonomous Community Institutions and Changes in Power Structures** Tribal communities have traditional systems of self-government, such as the Padaha system among Mundas, the Manjhi Hadam system among Santhals and the Paraha Panchayat among Oraons. These institutions settle disputes and enforce community norms. At brick kilns, traditional leadership has little institutional authority; practical control is concentrated in owners, supervisors and contractors. Extended residence under this external authority may weaken migrants' attachment to traditional institutions and reduce compliance with village-level customary rules after return.

CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE CODE ON SOCIAL SECURITY, 2020 AND THE POLICY PERSPECTIVE

The Government of India consolidated 29 labour laws into four major labour codes, among which the Code on Social Security, 2020 is an important legislative framework for social protection. Relevant provisions include a broader understanding of inter-state migrant workers, registration through the e-Shram system and portability of benefits such as public-distribution support under the One Nation One Ration Card framework.

From the sociological perspective adopted in this paper, however, important limitations remain. First, the framework primarily addresses workers as economic and social-security beneficiaries and does not provide a comprehensive framework for preservation of tribal cultural rights, language and religious identity. Second, although facilities for children, including crèche-related provisions, are contemplated, the paper notes the absence of a specific mechanism for mother-tongue education and culturally appropriate learning for migrant tribal children. Third, the extensive use of contractors and incomplete employment records can make identification and registration difficult, leaving some workers outside effective access to social-security schemes.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that seasonal migration to brick kilns may help tribal families meet immediate economic needs, but it can also carry significant social and cultural costs. The mechanical, market-oriented and isolated environment of brick kilns contributes to changes in

traditional culture, language, kinship relations, nature worship and autonomous community institutions. If these processes of cultural erosion remain unaddressed, an important part of India's tribal cultural heritage may face gradual weakening.

On the basis of the analysis, the paper proposes the following policy and practical measures:

Establish mother-tongue-based mobile education centres: Labour and education authorities should establish mobile schools at brick-kiln clusters to provide primary education to migrant tribal children in languages such as Santhali, Mundari and Gondi.

Culture-sensitive working environments and leave: Kiln operators should provide paid leave during important tribal festivals such as Sarhul and Karma, or provide space and facilities within kiln premises for cultural observances.

Local permanent employment and livelihood protection: Employment days under MGNREGA and other livelihood programmes should be strengthened in tribal areas; timely wage payment should be ensured; forest rights should be protected; and schemes supporting minor forest produce and its minimum support prices should be effectively implemented to reduce distress migration.

Inclusion of cultural dimensions in social-security policy: Labour policy should incorporate cultural-protection measures for migrant tribal workers, including support for preservation of tribal language, art, dance and music.

Tripartite monitoring committees: District-level committees comprising labour officials, tribal representatives and civil-society organizations should regularly inspect the rights, health, education and housing conditions of migrant tribal workers at brick kilns.

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