



Historical Evolution And Cultural Identity Of The Mankirdias Tribe: A Socio-Anthropological Study

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ABSTRACT

This present study attempts to explore the history, socio-cultural characteristics and the cultural identity of the Mankirdias tribe from a socio-anthropological perspective. The Mankirdias are a PVTG in Odisha and have a unique cultural heritage characterized by forest culture, occupations, belief systems and social practices. The tribe relies on the environment for survival, making use of the forests and the animals, with particular focus on monkey catching, hunting, gathering, and rope making, which has led to a distinctive social structure and cultural identity. The study explores their history, social structure, kinship system, marriage practices, language, traditional stories, beliefs, music, dance, economy and traditional lifestyle. It also delves into the effects of modernization, migration, deforestation, educational backwardness, health problems, and social isolation on the tribal community. It shows that while modernization has opened up avenues for education, employment, and social mobility, it has also led to a decrease in traditional professions and a decline in indigenous knowledge systems, and loss of cultural identity. However, the Mankirdias have been able to maintain an important part of their traditions, rituals, and community values. The study highlights the importance of sustainable development policies, cultural preservation efforts, educational inclusion, healthcare enhancement, and the protection of tribal rights, all of which contribute to the socio-economic development and cultural sustainability of the Mankirdias tribe.

Keywords: Mankirdias Tribe, Socio-Anthropology, Cultural Identity, Indigenous Culture, Tribal Society, Odisha, PVTG, Modernization, Traditional Livelihood, Cultural Preservation.

1. INTRODUCTION

India is a country with a rich tribal diversity and a high degree of cultural pluralism. Tribal communities are also part of the Indian society and play a significant role in the conservation of traditional knowledge systems, ecological sustainability and cultural heritage. The Mankirdias tribe has a special status in the Indian tribal scenario because of their unique socio-cultural identity and the fragile socio-economic status. The Mankirdias are recognized as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) and are mainly concentrated in different districts of Odisha.



Figure 1: Traditional Lifestyle and Cultural Identity of the Mankirdias Tribe of Odisha

The ancestors of the Mankirdias used to live in forests, and engaged in activities like monkey catching, making ropes, hunting, and collecting forest produce. They developed their culture by interacting with forests and natural ecology. The tribe had its own customs, rituals, social institutions, and belief systems, which were unique, resulting from adaptation to environmental conditions and from their way of life.

The way of life of the Mankirdias, however, has undergone great changes with the process of modernization and industrialization, deforestation, and socio-economic transformation. The tribe finds opportunities and challenges as a result of increased contact with the mainstream society. Although development projects have given access to education, health-care and employment services to the community to some degree, it is still suffering from cultural erosion and economic insecurity.

The purpose of the present study is to analyse the historical evolution and cultural identity of the Mankirdias tribe from a socio-anthropological point of view. The study also examines issues confronting the tribe and proposes strategies for preserving the tribe's culture and its sustainable development.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Dash (2025) studied the socio-cultural heritage of Mankirdias tribe and emphasized the difficulties the tribe is having in conserving its traditional identity in the context of slow erosion. The study highlighted the tremendous impact of modernization, migration, economic difficulties, and closer ties to the mainstream society on the traditional aspects of the tribe's way of life, including their customs, language, occupations, and cultural practices. The researcher noted that forest livelihoods were decreasing, and the socio-economic conditions were shifting, so that there was less transmission of indigenous knowledge and oral traditions to younger generations. The study found



that it was essential to take immediate cultural preservation measures and to implement policies that were inclusive, in order to safeguard the socio-cultural identity of the Mankirdias community. **Patra, Malik, and Patnaik (2026)** conducted an ethnographic study on morbidity patterns and healing practices among the Mankirdia tribes of Odisha. This study investigated traditional health care practices, indigenous information about medicines and attitudes towards sickness and healing among the community. The study also identified that people living in poverty, mal-nutrition, poor sanitation and geographical isolation had a significant effect on vulnerabilities in the community related to health. The researchers found that the implementation of traditional health knowledge along with contemporary healthcare services and their integration could enhance the accessibility of healthcare and health outcomes of the Mankirdias.

Patra, Naik, Sahoo, and Patnaik (2023) studied the socio-structural conditions and health seeking pattern of Mankirdia tribe in an ethnographic manner. The study examined the impact of poverty, illiteracy, social marginalisation, cultural beliefs and absence of health care infrastructure on health-seeking behaviour of the tribal people. The researchers noted that traditional beliefs, lack of finances, and low awareness about the benefits of modern healthcare services greatly influenced treatment choices in the community. The researchers recommended culturally appropriate health policies and awareness campaigns to enhance the health situation of the Mankirdia tribe.

Majumder (2024) conducted a study on the different cultural attitudes of tribal communities in West Bengal and examined the role of traditional beliefs, customs, social values, and cultural practices in shaping tribal identity. The research emphasized that even though the tribes were in the midst of modernization and urbanization, they retained firm links with nature, a way of life, traditional customs, and oral heritage. The study found that safeguarding tribal cultural heritage and fostering culturally-inclusive development policies were crucial for the protection of the identity and social dignity of tribal groups.

Muniraju and Thakur (2018) examined the development challenges of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in India and highlighted the issues of poverty, illiteracy, lack of health care, unemployment, and social exclusion. Geographical isolation, poor infrastructure, weak policy implementation and lack of access to education and healthcare services remained as challenges to socio-economic development of PVTGs in the study. The researchers highlighted that despite a number of welfare schemes and constitutional protection, tribal groups remained marginalised. The study also recommended sustainable livelihood programs, education, empowerment, health care, community involvement and culturally appropriate development strategies for sustaining the overall development and inclusion of PVTGs in India.

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND EVOLUTION OF THE MANKIRDIAS TRIBE

The Mankirdias are believed to be one of the forest tribes of ancient origin in Odisha. Archaeological research indicates that the tribe has traditionally inhabited areas of remote forest and led a semi-nomadic life. Their main livelihood relied on the natural resources of forests.



Monkey catching was the hallmark of the Mankirdias, and had been the occupation of the family for generations.

The tribe's origins is an academic question. Some anthropologists believe that they are from the Austro-Asiatic tribal groups, while others believe that they are remnants of ancient forest-dwelling communities of eastern India. The tribe was geographically isolated and socially marginalised which kept them relatively out of the mainstream society for a long time.

The forest policies and administrative measures in colonial era had a great impact on the tribal livelihoods. Traditional economic activities of the Mankirdias were badly affected by the restriction of forest entry and hunting of wildlife. When they became independent, they were further protected under the law on wildlife, making them less reliant on monkey catching and hunting. Consequently, many families slowly started to engage in wage labour, agricultural activities, rope making and harvesting of non-timber forest products.

Even with all these changes, the Mankirdias had lots of aspects of their traditional culture and social organization that remained. Their collective identity remained being defined by oral traditions, customary practices, kinship and community rituals. In the longer term, the government's welfare measures and tribal development initiatives have made some efforts to improve their socio-economic status and yet poverty, illiteracy and marginalization are still a concern.

The Mankirdias' experiences mirror the broader history and experiences of tribal communities in India who have been at odds with the socio-economic and political transformation.

4. SOCIAL ORGANIZATION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY OF THE MANKIRDIAS TRIBE

The social organisation and cultural identity of the Mankirdias tribe is significant part of their socio-anthropological life and is an expression of their close relationship with nature, traditional practices and communal life. The tribe has created a distinctive cultural system that is grounded in its kinship structure, social co-operation, deep spiritual understanding, and active involvement. The social institutions they have, which include the family, marriage, economic and religious practices, impose order and cultural continuity on family life and establish socially acceptable relationships within the community.



Figure 2: Traditional Rope-Making Practice among the Mankirdias Tribe of Odisha
Mankirdias' cultural identity is maintained through oral traditions, rituals, festivals, songs, dances, language, and traditional living ways that have been handed down from generation to generation over centuries. The tribe still has a number of native customs and social norms that have remained unchanged even in the face of modernization and a changing socio-economic environment. They not only convey their experiences and adaptation to their environment, but they also express a high level of belonging to the community and ecological awareness. The key aspects of Mankirdias tribe's social structure and culture are discussed in detail below.

✚ Kinship System and Family Structure

The kinship system has become the basis of the social organization and governs social relations, inheritance, marriage and community duties of the Mankirdia. The tribesmen and women are mostly of patriarchy type where the eldest male of the family assumes the role of head of the family and takes all the major decisions related to the family affairs, economic activities and social issues. Although women are not in authority, they are involved in household chores as well as childcare, gathering forest produce and performing cultural ceremonies. Family ties are very emotional and economic and mutual cooperation is seen as vital to life and social stability in the community.

✚ Marriage Practices and Social Customs

The Mankirdias follow traditional rules and customs for marriage, and community disapproval is the key to preventing them from getting married. Monogamy is the most usual of marriages, except for widow remarriages and divorces, which are accepted socially only under certain conditions. Typically, traditional music, dance, food and collective participation of the village community accompany marriage ceremonies. Arranging marriage and resolving marital disputes is a role of importance in which elders and traditional leaders are involved. Clan exogamy is usually observed



in order to ensure social harmony and to prevent intra-clan marriages. These marriage practices contribute to the maintenance of tribal identity and unity among tribal members.

✚ Language, Oral Traditions, and Folk Culture

Mankirdias speak dialects similar to Odia and other neighbouring tribal languages. The tribe's oral history began as the main way to pass on cultural knowledge, history, and values from one generation to the next, because the tribe was not historically known to have a written script. Folk songs are of significance in their cultural life, along with myths, legends and folktales, as well as storytelling. The oral tradition is a living archive of collective memory which embodies the relationship of the tribe with forests, nature, ancestors and spiritual beliefs. The story sessions also serve as a way of social education and cultural continuity during festivals or gatherings.

✚ Religious Beliefs and Nature Worship

Animism, ancestor worship, and nature worship have a close connection to the religious life of the Mankirdias. The tribe treats forests, rivers, hills, trees and animals as sacred and supernatural beings as having an influence on human life and environmental balance. Conventional ceremonies are carried out to protect from bad spirits, to guarantee good crops, health and a good life for the community. The village priests, healers and spiritual leaders are very important in carrying out ceremonies and healing processes. They have a deep sense of ecological awareness and a spiritual relationship with the environment, as reflected in their religious beliefs.

✚ Traditional Food Habits, Dress, and Lifestyle

The Mankirdias' way of life is closely attuned to the forest ecology and environmental conditions. They subsist on roots, tubers, fruits, rice, millets, leafy vegetables, honey and seasonal forest products from their surrounding forests. They used to eat food through hunting and gathering to supplement their needs. Their traditional clothes are comfortable, easy and appropriate for their working life. Men wear plain clothes while women wear simple clothes and wear ornaments of beads, shells, metals and forest products in indigenous style of wearing sarees. These are their cultural elements that are connected with their indigenous identity and their traditional way of life.

✚ Music, Dance, and Community Celebrations

Mankirdia culture is rich in music and dances, which play a fundamental role in the cultural and social life of the community. Folk dances and songs are used in festivals, marriage ceremonies, harvest and religious ceremonies. The traditional instruments used for music performances include bamboo, wood and animal skin. Music and Dance helps promote social cohesion and unity, and is a great way to pass on culture through generations as the community participates. These artforms are also used for emotional expression, entertainment and to pass on tribal history and values.

5. ECONOMIC LIFE AND LIVELIHOOD PATTERNS

Forests and natural resources have been economic life expectancy for the Mankirdias for a long time. Their traditional economy was based on hunting, gathering, catching monkeys, making rope,



and collecting forest products. Their livelihood practices were sustainable use of natural resources and indigenous ecological knowledge.

The loss of traditional jobs was partly because of legal boundaries and partly because of environmental changes and many members of the tribe took up the jobs of agricultural laborers, construction workers, and daily wage earners. Small scale farming and harvesting of non-timber forest products like honey, bamboo, medicinal plants and firewood have now emerged as important sources of livelihood.

However, the economic condition of the tribe remains poor. Their economic stability is still hampered by their limited land ownership, the absence of irrigation facilities, unemployment, indebtedness, and exploitation by middlemen. Many younger people now migrate seasonally for a job opportunity.

The Government has tried to improve livelihoods by providing tribal welfare programmes, education, employment creation and housing aid. However, due to lack of implementation, insufficient awareness and poor infrastructure, such programs are less effective.

They show the struggles for indigenous peoples to adapt to evolving socio-economic conditions while trying to maintain their traditional identity as reflected in the Mankirdias. They highlight the challenges faced by indigenous communities as they attempt to sustain their traditional identity while adjusting to new socio-economic conditions, as in the case of the Mankirdias.

6. IMPACT OF MODERNIZATION AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

The life style and cultural identity of the Mankirdias tribesmen has been changed by the process of modernization and a contemporary socio-economic change as a result. Their social structure, economic activities, cultural practices and traditional belief systems have been affected through increased contact with mainstream society through education, communication, urbanization and industrial development. Modernization has brought opportunities for jobs, education, health care and social mobility, but there are also some challenges which are threatening the traditional practices and unity of the tribes.

Today, the Mankirdias themselves are presented with a very challenging situation where they must be able to adjust to the economic and social changes in the world while also trying to maintain their cultural heritage and traditional identity. They remain subject to social marginalisation, education backwardness, poverty and environmental degradation, which impacts their overall development. The following are the major impacts of modernization and the challenges of the Mankirdias tribe in today's context explained in detail.

- **Decline of Traditional Occupations and Indigenous Knowledge:** The loss of traditional livelihood activities like monkey catching, hunting, rope making and forest-based livelihood due to modernization is one of the significant effects. However, these traditional livelihoods are no longer as significant as with the past due to government bans on hunting, environmental legislation, and economic trends. Younger generations are more willing to go for wage work,



construction work and urban jobs rather than follow the old tradition. Consequently, local knowledge of forests, wildlife behaviour, traditional ecological knowledge and medicinal plants are being lost. This loss is a risk to the continuity of the cultural heritage and traditional tribal identity.

- **Migration and Weakening of Community Cohesion:** The economic hardship and low income in the tribal areas have driven many Mankirdias to urban and semi-urban areas for jobs. Tribal youth and families have increasingly begun to migrate seasonally for construction work, industrial labour and daily wage work. The traditional social ties have been weakened due to continuous migration, fewer opportunities to participate in community rituals and festivals, and the loss of intergenerational transmission of cultural practices. The breakdown of community cohesiveness has also had an impact on collective decision making, social solidarity and traditional systems of mutual support in the tribe.
- **Deforestation and Environmental Degradation:** The Mankirdias are traditionally reliant on forests for their food, shelter, medicine and livelihood. Deforestation, industrial development and degradation of the environment have however significantly curtailed access to forest resources, while mining operations have also affected the forests. Deforestation has had adverse impacts on hunting, the collection of non-timber forest products and food security. The destruction of the environment has also impacted the spiritual and cultural ties between the tribe and nature, with forests being a central part of their religious and cultural life. The development projects have further marginalized and made the tribal community more vulnerable because of displacement.
- **Educational Backwardness and Literacy Challenges:** While education has developed in the last few years, there is still educational backwardness in the Mankirdias community. Low literacy rates and high drop out rates are attributed to poverty, language barriers, lack of infrastructure, poor schools in rural areas and socio-cultural differences. Due to the need to engage in family livelihood activities, many children are not able to complete their schooling. There are instances where the formal education system does not enable inclusion of tribal culture, language and indigenous knowledge. The tribe's social mobility and employment prospects are limited because of educational deprivation.
- **Health Problems and Poor Living Conditions:** The health-related problems remain a concern for the Mankirdias tribe. Various health issues in the community are caused by malnutrition, low sanitation, unsafe drinking water, low level of health care facilities and low awareness regarding the hygiene problem. Maternal and child health is generally poor, as a result of limited health care and nutritional deficiencies. Additionally, access to hospitals and healthcare centers is restricted due to poor transportation facilities and remote geographical locations. While traditional healing is still significant, the lack of modern healthcare infrastructure also poses severe health issues to tribal communities.



- **Social Discrimination and Cultural Marginalization:** There is social discrimination, exclusion and marginalisation of the Mankirdias from mainstream society, often. They are still held back by negative stereotypes, economic exploitation and unequal resource access, in regard to their development and social integration. Programs of development are less effective due to gaps in implementation, corruption, and bureaucratic inefficiencies despite constitutional provisions and policies in tribal welfare. The impact of dominant social/cultural systems has also led to the loss of tribe identity, language, customs and traditional values. Maintaining the cultural dignity and social rights of the tribe, then, is a significant issue in the present-day world.

7. CONCLUSION

The current study aims to raise awareness about the significance of the cultural heritage and socio-cultural diversity of Mankirdias tribe, which has a rich history and identity in India. Forests, natural resources, and indigenous cultural practices have been integral parts of the Mankirdias' traditional way of life, as they are considered a PVTG. They have a rich cultural heritage, which is evident in their social organization, kinship structure, marriage customs and their oral traditions, their beliefs in the spiritual world, their music, their dance and their traditional livelihood systems, all developed through adaptation to their environment and through communal living. The study shows that while modernization, deforestation, migration, poverty, educational backwardness and social marginalization have had a great impact on their traditional way of life and cultural continuity. The traditional occupations and indigenous knowledge systems have been declining and are facing challenges in the preservation of tribal identity and socio-economic stability. Through collective involvement and traditional practices, the Mankirdias have been able to maintain much of their culture, values and ecological awareness despite the challenges. Hence, the centrality of inclusive and sustainable development strategies to create educational empowerment, access to health care services, livelihood security, forest rights, cultural preservation and respect indigenous identity and dignity. For the socio-economic development and cultural continuity of the tribe of Mankirdias in the modern era, implementation of tribal welfare policies and a participatory approach from the tribe is necessary.

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