

GENDER ROLES AND SOCIAL ORGANIZATION WITHIN THE ASUR TRIBE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

One particularly dramatic example of preserving cultural identity is provided by the Asur people of Jharkhand, India, who are classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) despite the significant socioeconomic challenges they confront. The traditional social structure of the Asur, which is characterized by clan-based systems, marriage rites, and family administration, has a significant amount of impact on gender roles and the cohesion of individuals within the community. As to the 2011 Census of India, the Asur have a population of around 22,459 people. In the tribe, which has a long tradition of expertise in iron smelting, the economic changes that have happened have had an influence on changes in gender roles and social duties. These changes have occurred as a result of many factors. Through the use of an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates sociology and anthropology, this ethnographic study investigates the establishment, maintenance, and changing of gender roles within the social systems of the Asur people. In this study, the social mechanisms that control gender norms are investigated in great depth, with a particular emphasis placed on the involvement of women in rituals, family bonds, and decision-making at home. According to the findings of the study, cultural practices, such as the mourning ceremonies for Dussehra and the use of the Asuri language, reflect gendered features and help to retain social identity. Traditional forms of social structure and gender interactions are confronted with difficulties as a result of socio-economic vulnerabilities such as poverty, illiteracy, and environmental variables. This study contributes to the expanding body of literature on indigenous peoples' rights, social justice, and the preservation of cultural traditions by advocating for solutions that are gender-neutral, culturally sensitive, and value Asur social structures.

Keywords: Asur Tribe, Gender Roles, Social Organization, Ethnography, Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), Clan System, Marriage Customs, Kinship, Rituals and Cultural Practices, Women's Roles

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous peoples, the most of whom live in the forested regions of Jharkhand, India, including the Asur, who are classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG). According to the Indian Census held in 2011, it is estimated that there are around 22,459 people living in this region[1].

According to Chatterjee (2023), the Asur people had a long-standing reputation as experts of iron smelting, which contributed to the formation of their cultural identity and social position[2]. Traditional occupations have been on the decrease as a consequence of environmental degradation, industrialization, and modernization, which has compelled the community to conform to the new economic realities. According to Singh and Kumar (2021), the Asur people have been able to persist in the face of hardship by preserving their own social structures, language (Asuri), and cultural traditions[3].

Social Organization of the Asur Tribe

All aspects of the Asur tribe's social life, including marriage, relationships, and the settlement of conflicts, are overseen by clan-based organizations. When it comes to maintaining peace within the tribe, there are a number of totemic clans, and each of these clans has its own set of norms and responsibilities [4]. The customs of tribal marriage are exogamous at the clan level, but they are strictly endogamous inside the tribe. This is done in order to strike a balance between the genetic diversity and the social cohesiveness of the tribe. According to Chatterjee (2023), the Jati Panchayat, which is a traditional council of elders, is essential for the settlement of conflicts at the family and clan level as well as the administration of events pertaining to communal concerns. The importance of these social institutions lies in the fact that they assist to build the common identity and preserve customary norms, which are both necessary for the maintenance of social harmony in spite of external forces.

Gender Roles Within the Asur Community

The Asur people have gender roles that are deeply engrained in their culture and in their day-to-day life. These roles have been widely established. While men have traditionally been responsible for activities like as iron smelting, hunting, and farming, women have traditionally had a crucial role in the household, particularly in the areas of child care and ceremonial responsibilities. Through the transmission of cultural knowledge, such as songs and rites associated with fertility and grief, women also play a significant role in the preservation of the spiritual life of their traditional community .

Even though there seems to be a strong separation of labor between the sexes, the Asur culture nevertheless has a complicated balance of power and responsibility. Women have a lot of influence in family choices and social customs, despite the fact that there appears to be a clear division of labor between the sexes . The transition from traditional iron-smelting to agricultural and wage employment has resulted in a shift in gender roles, with women's economic engagement and social standing periodically shifting as a consequence of this shift. Despite this, cultural norms that have been established for a very long time continue to define what men and women are supposed to do and how they should conduct themselves [5]. This dynamic is something that has to be understood if we are going to be able to devise development methods that take into consideration both gender and cultural norms.

Importance of an Ethnographic Perspective

An anthropological approach is necessary in order to get a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic relationship that exists between gender and social structure among the Asur people. Ethnography, in contrast to quantitative approaches, gives researchers the opportunity to thoroughly immerse themselves in the community they are studying, recording the beliefs, practices, and experiences that they have

personally experienced [6]. Through a focus on particular observations and interactions, the purpose of this study is to provide a deeper understanding of the production, negotiation, and modification of gender roles within the wider social structure of the tribe. The ancient social institutions of the Asur people are facing significant challenges as a result of factors such as poverty, illiteracy, and environmental degradation. This method is even more important because of these challenges. The study contributes to the greater discussion on indigenous rights, cultural preservation, and social equality via the use of anthropological inquiry. It does this by advocating for activities that respect and build the social fabric of the tribe.

OBJECTIVES

1. To investigate the Asur tribe's traditional gender roles and social structure;
 2. To assess how socioeconomic changes affect gender dynamics and cultural practices within the Asur group.
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METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach is used in this study, which makes use of secondary data sources such as government records, ethnographies, and cultural materials. Important sources include the Census of India (2011), [7]the Tribal Welfare Research Institute Jharkhand (TRI Jharkhand, n.d.), and ethnographic accounts that have been published in academic publications and news pieces [8]. Each of the following points of view is included into the multidisciplinary framework that serves as the basis for this investigation:

- **Anthropological Analysis:** To learn more about the cultural traditions that influence gender roles among the Asur people and how the tribe is structured socially.
 - **Sociological Perspective:** The goal is to take a look at the community norms, gender roles, and social structures that control how people live their lives and interact with one another.
 - **Historical Contextualization:** With the goal of learning how the gender roles and traditional vocations of the Asur have changed throughout time.
 - **Economic Evaluation:** The goal is to determine how shifting economic priorities have affected traditional gender roles in the workplace and how that has affected people's political standing.
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An anthropological perspective is used to investigate cultural ceremonies, marriage customs, and clan-based governance systems. Additionally, social structure and gender roles are also subjected to scrutiny. Despite the fact that it is dependent on secondary data, this research recommends doing more primary fieldwork that includes participant observation and interviews in order to corroborate the conclusions that have been presented here and to record in-depth, lived experiences of gender within the Asur community.

RESULT

There were a total of 22,459 Asur people living in the state of Jharkhand, and there were 4,129 additional individuals living in the state of Bihar. According to the Indian Census of 2011, the Asur people are officially classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG). This classification refers to the fact that they are considered to be very vulnerable. Within the state of Jharkhand, the areas of Gumla, Palamu, Latehar, and Lohardaga are the most common places where they may be found living. Although the Mundari dialect of Asur is the official language of the Asur people, the Mundari dialect is spoken by the Asur people. At the beginning of the year 1901, it was estimated that there were around 19,641 people who spoke these languages.

Among the Asur, who were once well-known in the business world for their competence as iron-smelters, there has been a considerable shift in the area of activity that they are engaged in. A rising proportion of the population is working in the mining sector as a consequence of shifting economic priorities; yet, the great majority of the population is still involved in farming, accounting for 91.19 percent of the total population. There are twelve unique clans that make up the social structure of the tribe. Each clan has its own set of standards about marriage and social relationships, and the tribe as a whole has a variety of these norms. The names of these clans are important identifiers, and they are often derived from animals, birds, or grains. To this day, the Asur continue to struggle with health issues, mostly as a result of their reliance on natural treatments and their restricted access to modern medical facilities.

Social Structure and Organization

A totemic system is used by the Asur people, as stated by Jharkhand Culture (n.d.)(9). This system divides the Asur people into twelve clans, each of which is named after a different kind of bird, animal, or crop. The family is the second most significant institution, and it is governed by a jati panchayat, which is responsible for enforcing norms and resolving internal issues. As a result of the fact that members of the Kharwar and Munda tribes are thought to be related to one another, the links of inter tribe loyalty are strengthened. In marriages that follow endogamy, monogamy is the norm; nevertheless, polygamy is permitted in circumstances when there is infertility or widowhood on either side of the relationship. The institution of marriage after the death of a widow is socially acceptable, and the social isolation of those who violate the laws of marriage is repaired by the hosting of a communal feast. The combination of history and flexibility that this structure has helps to maintain the coherence of the community.

Roles of Gender in Social Organization

The gender roles that are associated with the Asur culture are unique from one another, yet they are closely connected to the greater social structure of the tribe. A clan-based structure, marriage traditions, and family governance systems are all factors that contribute to the formation and reinforcement of gender roles within a tribe. Males have always been expected to bear the majority of the work in iron-smelting, hunting, and hard agricultural labor. This is because they are the primary breadwinners and protectors of the society. There are symbolic implications linked with masculinity and social status that are associated with these positions within the tribe, in addition to the monetary worth that they have.

The other side of the coin is that women have a significant role in the life of the community by taking care of the house, raising children, and taking part in rituals, particularly those that emphasize fertility and wealth. There are many instances of ancient rituals in which women take part, such as singing during the process of iron smelting or performing mourning rites on holidays like as Dussehra. These examples show the significant role that women play in maintaining the social and spiritual fabric of the tribe. Women continue to have a significant amount of influence in the decision-making process for matters pertaining to the family and clan, as well as in the home and in the social circles of the community, despite the conventional gender roles. Marriage rituals are another example of how gendered social expectations manifest themselves. Through the practice of endogamy at the tribal level and exogamy among clans, the Asur are able to preserve patrilocal residence patterns. Following their marriage, it is customary for women to relocate into the clan of their spouse. The fact that widows are permitted to remarry because of certain cultural norms demonstrates that there is some wiggle room within the traditionally rigid gender roles.

On the other hand, these roles are beginning to shift as the old iron-smelting industries are being replaced by farming and wage employment. As a consequence of changes in the economy, an increasing number of women are working as wage earners and in farming, which calls into question the long-held beliefs on the traditional gender roles that are expected in the workplace. As an illustration of how cultural standards about gender roles have remained over the millennia, one example is the Jati Panchayat, which is an institution that resolves problems between families and clans with the goal of sustaining gendered social order. It is possible that a better understanding of the preservation of cultural identity and social cohesion in the face of ongoing socio-economic changes may be achieved by situating these gender roles within the framework of the social structure of the Asur.

Traditions and Cultural Practices

It is through the use of material and ceremonial manifestations that the Asurs are able to communicate their cultural identity in a clear way. The height of their dwellings is around 15 feet, the width is approximately 20 feet, and the length of their homes is approximately 30 feet. The walls of their homes are built of mud, and there are no windows. Jharkhand Culture (n.d.) said that the outside walls of their houses are embellished with murals that show the creative traditions that they have traditionally practiced. These murals are displayed on the walls of their dwellings. Rice, maize, millets, vegetables, meat, and rice beer made with Ram/Charpandu (*Ruellia suffruticosa*) are the pillars of their cuisine, which serves as a basis for both their social and religious practices. As a consequence of the belief in divine anger, tattooing is also forbidden, and the only kind of milk that is considered to be unsuitable is buffalo curd or buffalo milk. Mahishasur Dasain, which is a time of sorrow for the Asurs that takes place during Navaratri, is one of the customs that distinguishes it from other celebrations.

There is a stark contrast between this and the joyous celebration of Dussehra that is observed by other Hindus. Their assertion that they are descended from Mahishasur is evident in the way that they live their lives, which lends credibility to their alternative story to the cultural narratives that are prevalent. Despite the fact that its usage has diminished due to a lack of documentation, the Mundari dialect known as Asuri, which had around 19,641 speakers in 1901 [10], continues to be a crucial marker of identity. This is the case although the number of speakers has fallen.

Religion and Mythology

In order to show respect for their ancestors and the natural environment, the Asurs observe festivals such as Mahishasur Dasain, Sarhul, Karma, and Dhanbuni, as stated by PW Only IAS (2023)[11]. Because of its relation to the Mahishasur story, their mourning during Dussehra is an intersection of their religious identity and the historical narrative that they have been told. Priests cherish and celebrate the century-old craft of iron-smelting via the rituals that are linked with it. These rituals blend the spiritual and economic components of many facets of life. As a result of their syncretism, they stand out among the main faiths and tribes that are located nearby.

Economic Activity and Subsistence

Iron smelting, which was carried out in rudimentary furnaces that were powered by natural ores, was the primary economic activity of the Asurs in the past. According to IAS Gyan (2024), the tradition, which has connections to fertility cults, included women singing to the furnace, which represented a pregnant mother, in order to ensure that the iron they produced was of a good grade[12]. Since this method became obsolete as a result of colonial industrialization and current rivalry, 91.19 percent of the population had changed to farming by the year 2011. The practice of using day labour in the mining sector of Jharkhand has grown widespread, which is beneficial for the state's income but detrimental to the state's ecology and agricultural basis [13]. This development is a perfect example of how conventional knowledge and economic autonomy are gradually disappearing inside the world.

The effects of modernization

The process of modernization has brought about significant changes to the Asur way of life. By encroaching on their land, interfering with farming, and contaminating water sources, mining in Jharkhand is a serious concern, according to The Indian Express (2015). This is because mining causes contamination of water supplies. Despite the fact that there is a strong desire to learn, it is difficult to get an education, and the literacy rate is low due to the fact that the schools are located in such a remote location. Relying on conventional therapies, with the exception of in times of emergency, and having restricted access to medical care are both indicators of resiliency and difficulty. In spite of the progress that was encouraged by the government's designation of the PVTG as a Scheduled Tribe in 2014 and measures that are special to the PVTG, land rights and cultural loss have not been addressed.

Present Difficulties and Preservation Initiatives

Numerous interrelated problems endanger the social and economic security and cultural continuity of the Asur people.

1. Poverty and Health: Poor health outcomes and restricted prospects for growth are worsened by the tribe's vulnerability, which is already high due to persistently high poverty levels and lack access to modern healthcare services.

2. Education: Youth empowerment and future economic possibilities are hindered by the significant shortage of accessible educational institutions inside Asur settlements, which severely affects literacy rates and skill development[14].

3. Cultural Erosion: Few concerted attempts to preserve Asuri culture have put the language and many ancient customs in danger of dying out. This crucial facet of Asur identity risks being permanently lost unless immediate action is taken.

4. Environmental Threats: Traditional subsistence methods and ecological balance are threatened by the substantial deterioration of land and forest resources brought about by the region's intensive mining and industrial activity.

Singh's Asuri Vartalap Nirdeshika (n.d.), which strives to record and resuscitate the Asuri language, is one example of the linguistic documentation efforts that have been made in an effort to preserve the Asur culture and improve the quality of life of the Asur people. According to TRI Jharkhand (n.d.), land rights activists in Gumla and other places with comparable characteristics have also been trying to conserve traditional homelands. Despite the fact that several social and infrastructural initiatives have been initiated by government programs and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), these projects often run into obstacles due to inefficient bureaucracy and a lack of commitment from the community[15]. To ensure that these treatments are both culturally appropriate and long-lasting, it is imperative that the Asur people have a significant input in the design and implementation of these initiatives.

CONCLUSION

The social structure of the Asur tribe, which is built on clan structures, traditional marriage standards, and governing practices, is responsible for the formation of gender roles that are distinct and intrinsically linked to one another. When seen from an anthropological perspective, it is evident that women have always played significant roles in the administration of households, the performance of rituals, and the preservation of cultural traditions. On the other hand, men have traditionally been connected with activities such as iron-smelting, hunting, and physical labor. All of these obligations operate in concert with one another to ensure that the social structure and cultural identity of the tribe are preserved. Nevertheless, gender dynamics are beginning to alter as a consequence of ongoing socioeconomic transformations, such as the move away from traditional iron-smelting and toward agricultural and wage employment. This transition is one example of how gender dynamics are beginning to change. The tenacity of the Asur social structure is shown by the fact that a number of these old practices and conventions have continued to exist despite the changes that have taken place. Concurrently, the community is confronted with substantial challenges, including but not limited to poverty, limited educational opportunities, environmental degradation, and cultural loss. These challenges, which all threaten their social structures and gender relations, are all interconnected. In order to maintain the particular social structure and gender roles of the Asur people, it is vital to implement development projects that are culturally sensitive, value the indigenous knowledge systems of the Asur people, and incorporate those systems. Future projects need to put an emphasis on community involvement in order to ensure that modernization does not destroy traditional social cohesion and gender equality but rather strengthens both of these aspects of society. The anthropological findings that are presented in this study need to be incorporated into the formulation of policies that will assist the Asur people in attaining social justice, preserving their culture, and establishing environmentally sustainable lifestyles.

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