

# Impact of Ho Women on Tribal Economy and Society: A Historical Study

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## ABSTRACT

The presented article is a critical study of the transformative role in the economic and social life of Ho tribal women of West Singhbhum district of Jharkhand. This article is divided into three parts. The first part is a study of the economic activities of Ho women in the Ho society during the pre-British period. Initially the economy of Ho society was based mainly on the products of wild collection and rudimentary farming. In both these economic activities, tribal women appear to be more active than men. In agriculture, men did plowing and weeding while women did the work of weeding, planting, harvesting and threshing. When there was no work in the fields, women used to make household useful items like Bachhom Bayar, mats, brooms, making leaf plates, extracting oil etc. and went to the markets to sell these items.

The second part begins with the establishment of the British Raj in 1837 AD over the present-day West Singhbhum region as the Kolhan Government Estate. During this period, changes in the economy and livelihood of women as a result of Forest Act and land settlement have been observed. Now women are seen working under forest contractors, in mines, brick kilns, road and railway construction etc., which strengthens their economic condition.

In the third part, in the latter half of the 19th century, education arrived and spread in Kolhan and from 1871-72 AD, education started being given to women in the Kolhan region. Later, after getting education, women started adopting various new professions. In order to observe the changing livelihoods of educated Ho women in the post-independence period, changes in livelihoods and socio-economic changes have been reviewed on the basis of questionnaires received from Ho families.

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**KEYWORDS:** Ho tribal society, market, Kolhan Government Estate, Forest Act law, land settlement, Kursinama

## INTRODUCTION

The country of Ho<sup>1</sup> tribal people is called Ho-Dishum. Historians believe that Ho-Dishum was formed around the 10th century<sup>2</sup>, when a group of Munda tribes migrated from the areas of

Chhotanagpur and settled in West Singhbhum, known as the Ho tribe. Historian Mathew Areeparampil writes that the Kolhan region of Singhbhum is mainly inhabited by the Ho. They were once part of the Munda tribe and lived in present-day Ranchi district. When the Mundas and Oraon elected their first king, to protect themselves from the invasion of outsiders, the Hos who preferred to remain independent, left the original tribe and moved to the south east of Ranchi and formed Ho-Dishum in the Kolhan region.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ho is a major tribal community of India who live in Singhbhum district of Jharkhand state of India and Keonjhar, Mayurbhanj, Jaspur district of neighbouring state of Odisha. Ho people are also called 'Laraka Kol'. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, their number was about 12 lakhs. Presently Ho is the fourth largest tribe. Before this, the people of Santhal, Oraon and Munda tribes come.

<sup>2</sup> S.R. Tickell, *Memoirs on the Hodesum, The Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol IX, Part II July to December, Calcutta, Bishop's College Press, 1840, p. 697.

<sup>3</sup> Mathew Areeparampil, *Migration of the Hos to Singhbhum in A.K. Sen, Singhbhum: Some Historical Gleanings*, Chaibasa, 1986, p.14; A.D. Tuckey, *Final Report of the Survey and Settlement of the Kolhan Government Estate*, District of Singhbhum, Patna, 1820, pp.17-18.

From the point of view of historiography, there is a lack of written sources to reconstruct the history of women. We do not find any written sources in the pre-colonial period. The main reason for this is that the pre-British society was an oral society where there was a complete lack of literate tradition. The "Ho" language, spoken by the Ho people, has also been an oral language for a long time. Because the Ho language was not written, the Ho people could not write their own history. Thus, the pre-literate tradition of the Ho community does not help much in writing historiography related to them.

But this does not at all mean that the Ho community has no history of its own in the pre-colonial period. Famous historian Ashok Kumar Sen writes that the pre-literate tribal society could not record their long pre-colonial past, hence a misconception was spread that they belonged to the pre-historic period. When ethnographic and historical accounts started being written during the British rule, due to this perception their history could not be revived or their role in history could not be properly evaluated.<sup>4</sup> In fact, all the tribes pass on the knowledge received from their ancestors orally from generation to generation. A vivid example of this is the present Ho society which has preserved its rich history in folk tales, folk songs and various dance styles.

Although the Ho people were satisfied with their socio-economic system and cultural life, they had to face new conditions after the formation of Kolhan Government Estate in 1837. The British administrators brought with them science, technology, roads, a new written administrative and judicial system, and a monetary economy. In order to adjust to the changing circumstances, the tribal society of Singhbhum inclined towards written tradition.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, in 1841, when the colonial government started the modern education system by opening a school in Chaibasa, the headquarters of Singhbhum, it did not have to face resistance from the tribal society, but received cooperation.<sup>6</sup> Ho

<sup>4</sup> vk"ksd dqekj- lsu] foLe r vkfnoklh bfrgkl dh [kkst%gks bfrgkl ds dqN vk;ke] vkbZZÆ MhÆ ifCyf'kax] jkaph] 2009] i'B 9-

<sup>5</sup> Asoka Kumar Sen, 'Faltering Steps to Modern Education: The Ho Adivasis of Colonial Singhbhum', Avinash Kumar Singh (ed.), *Education and Empowerment in India: Policies and Practices*, Routledge, London and New York, 2016, p. 108-09.

<sup>6</sup> Sanjay Nath, 'Chaibasa School and Beyond: Educating the Hos of Kolhan Government Estate in Singhbhum', in Maguni charan Behera (ed.), *Tribe, space and Mobilisation, Colonial Dynamics and Post Colonial Dilemma in Tribal Studies*, Springer, Singapore, 2002.

appeared eager to get modern education and take advantage of it. Sensing this opportunity, the government started spreading modern education by establishing new schools. Non-government and private efforts were also made in this direction. Overall, such a social environment was created in which modern western education got a chance to establish itself in Singhbhum.

### **Pre-British 'Ho' socio-economic system and 'Ho' women**

In the early period, the economy of Ho society was based mainly on the products of wild collection and rudimentary farming. In both these economic activities, tribal women appear to be more active than men. Agriculture was the main basis of the economy of the society which is still the case today. Giving information about basic agriculture, Lt. S.R. Tickell<sup>7</sup> writes that the Ho nomadic tribes, who inhabit the hilly areas, are forced to move every three years to make new clearings in the forest. The soil in these places is very rich for the first sowing, but due to lack of fertilizer, the fertility of the soil gets lost in three or four years.<sup>8</sup> Agriculture in its initial stage was temporary agriculture in the form of shifting cultivation, later they started staying at one place and growing crops according to their needs. Thus, agriculture became permanent. Even at present, the tribal people carry out agricultural work using their traditional agricultural methods. In agriculture, men do plowing and weeding, while women do weeding, planting, harvesting and threshing. One of the very few tasks that women cannot do is ploughing. Yes, women are prohibited from touching the plough. This rule is so strict that men do not bring the plow inside the house so that women do not touch the plow by mistake. The women are made to believe that touching their plow will bring misfortune like drought to the entire village. The Panchayat Gram Sabha convenes and punishes those women who dare to break the law.

The argument behind keeping women away from plowing is that plowing is a very difficult task which women are physically incapable of doing. However, this theory appears to be unfounded as even 12-year-

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Richard Tickell's was appointed Assistant to the Political Agent, Captain Wilinon, on 9 May 1837 to be stationed in Chaibasa, headquarters of KGE on a monthly salary of Rs. 500/- per mensem.

<sup>8</sup> S.R. Tickell, 'Memoirs on the Hodesum', *The Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol IX, Part II, July to December, Calcutta; Bishop's College Press, 1840, p-784.

old boys manage to plow with complete ease, whereas adult, capable women, who are apparently much stronger, are not allowed to do so. The plow used in West Singhbhum is of a very light type which does not dig more than two-three inches of soil. Thus, plowing appears to be no more difficult than many other tasks, such as cutting firewood and hauling heavy loads from distant forests.<sup>9</sup>

Generally, the fields of Kolhan are plowed four times. The first plowing is done in March-April. Men plow and women follow the plow, breaking clods of soil and clearing grass. At the time of ploughing, women prepare food for the people working in the fields. Second time in May, men keep plowing and women keep clearing the grass so that the remaining grass also gets killed by the sun. Before sowing begins, women, without the help of men, prepare manure from the cow dung collected throughout the year in a large pit built near each house. Women carry organic fertilizers on their heads and deliver them to the fields and sprinkle them in the fields with their hands. Women carry dozens of rounds of cow dung in baskets on their heads between home and fields. With the first monsoon rains in June, paddy is sown in the fields, in which women carry the paddy to the fields on their heads and sow it, then men plow for the third time so that the paddy is covered with soil. When the paddy plants are two months old, threshing is done in the month of August in which plowing is done again and the women separate the collected paddy plants and plant them in the vacant places of the fields. Besides, women also do the transplanting in the fields where they are to be transplanted. After two months, when flowers start falling from the paddy plants, fish are caught from the fields. This work is also mostly done by children and women.

When the crop is ripe, harvesting is done by women, while the work of packing the crop is done by men. Then the women carry the crop on their heads to the barn. Sometimes men also carry the paddy crop on their shoulders. The families who have bullock carts transport their crops. Threshing is done by women in the barn and threshing work is also done by oxen. But women prefer threshing by hand, because after this the straw can be used for thatching, whereas after threshing by animals the straw cannot be used for anything except fodder. Men are expected to help build embankments in the fields, take care of irrigation and drainage. But often when no man is available, women do this work themselves.

<sup>9</sup> Madhu Kishwar, 'Toiling without Rights: Ho Women of Singhbhum', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXII, No 3, p. 196.

When there is no work in the fields, women collect forest products like Sal leaves, medicines, herbs, wild fruits, nuts, vegetables. Almost every woman has to collect firewood from the forest for the use of her family. Firewood is the only form of fuel available. Sometimes men also help in cutting wood, but men never carry firewood on their heads. They can carry it on their shoulders or on a bullock cart, but they do not do that. Ho women, on the other hand, do not drive bullock carts.

At home away from the fields, Ho women do everything from cooking and raising children to cleaning the house. Only men do the work of repairing the roofs of the house. Besides, women also do the work of making household items like Bachhom Bayar (Sabai grass rope), mats, brooms, making leaf plates, extracting oil etc. They take these goods to the markets to sell them.

Despite having contributed so much to the upliftment of their society and home throughout their life, in Sasan Diri,<sup>10</sup> women are kept in their graves with stones of the same height as their height, while as per the special duties of men, bigger stones are kept in their graves which are taller than their height. By looking at the 'Ho' graves, one can know which grave is of a man and which is of a woman. Thus, after death, women are not given the same status as men.

### **British era 'Ho' socio-economic system and Ho women**

After the British conquest of the Singhbhum region, the British decided to so-called 'civilize' the tribals of this region. This civilizing process was done through land settlement, market economy, education and the introduction of a Western-style legal system. Soon the moral and material effects of these policies were affecting the fabric of society. Land settlement brought the concept of family/individual property, which challenged the traditional system of communal ownership. This simultaneously converted land into a marketable unit and encouraged greater greed among the Ho people to accumulate additional land. Multiplicity of crops, provision of greater access to markets, gradual contact with the outside world due to the introduction of railways and roads, entry of outsiders and increase in employment opportunities in mines and industries also brought about major changes in material life. Finally, the rise of the

<sup>10</sup> 'Ho' people bury their family dead in the courtyard of their house. And after burial, a large flat stone is kept lying in the grave as a memento. According to the religious philosophy of the Ho people, the dead people's soul protects the family. These graves are called Sasan Diri.



Mankis and Mundas as grassroots functionaries of the British imperial administration accelerated the process of stratification on the basis of wealth, caste and power.<sup>11</sup> The forests of the south-western part of Saranda Pir were first reserved in 1864.<sup>12</sup> Craven writes, from the border of Keonjhar and Bonai states in the south and south-west to Chainpur Pir<sup>13</sup> in the north of Kolhan almost the entire area covered with primeval forests extending up to 500 m is now within the limits of government reserved forest.<sup>14</sup>

The Indian Forest Act 1865 attempted to establish British control over forests through various divisions of the Imperial Forest Department. By the Forest Act 1878 the British administration acquired sovereignty over all barren lands including defined forests. This Act also enabled the administration to demarcate reserved and protected forests. In the case of protected forests, the rights of the local people were withdrawn, while some privileges which were given to the local people by the government could be withdrawn at any time. Thus, from time to time. Forest Acts 1927, 1972 etc. were brought which completely expelled the tribal people from their own forests. Now the tribal people started wandering in search of employment and started adopting various livelihoods.

In Indian society, women generally do not have the freedom to go out of the house and work. But women have privileges and freedom in the society. Which they have earned through hard work and service. Ho women are the breadwinners and hard workers for the family; when there is no work in the fields and money is needed to meet the immediate needs of the household, Ho men often send their wives and sisters to work in the mines. While they themselves stay in the village and rest, they depend on the labour of their women unless it is necessary to work.<sup>15</sup> When money

is needed to run a household, women can work as handloaders or stone breakers on construction sites, brick kilns, stone quarries, mines, railways or dams. Due to which their financial position becomes stronger. These are casual daily wage jobs and some of them are available only during certain seasons. Even in these sectors, women are at the lowest rungs of employment and cannot expect to move into better paying, skilled or physically demanding jobs. No job available to women offers them the slightest security or benefits like provident fund, gratuity, pension, medical care or paid leave. Very few families educate their daughters to the level necessary to obtain such jobs, but, even if they do, employers are likely to discriminate against women.<sup>16</sup>

### **Analytical study of women's livelihood changes and social impact**

Education arrived and spread in Kolhan in the latter half of the 19th century and from 1871-72 AD, women started being given education in the Kolhan region.<sup>17</sup> As they got education, women started adopting various new professions. In order to observe the changing livelihoods of educated Ho women in the post-independence period, changes in livelihoods and socio-economic changes have been reviewed on the basis of Kursinama received from Ho families.

The changes in livelihood and economy in Ho tribal society have been explained through Kursinama. Kursinama is a type of genealogy or family tree through which tribal people reveal the details of their family lineage. Kursinama is used in Indian government offices for tribal lineage identification. Through which tribal people are provided tribe identity card. To obtain the Kursinama, field study and interviews were used.

The presented Kursinama has been obtained by Mrs. Suparwati Sinku ji, resident of Kolaisai village of Jagannathpur block of West Singhbhum. In this Kursinama, the livelihood of all the family members along with their livelihood is also shown.

<sup>11</sup> Asoka Kumar sen, *Representing Tribe: The Ho of Singhbhum Under Colonial Rule*, Concept Publishing Company Pvt. Ltd., 2011, p.108.

<sup>12</sup> Gupta, Sanjukta Das, *Adivasis and the Raj: Socio-Economic Transition of the Hos, 1820-1932*, Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd., 2011, p.178.

<sup>13</sup> An old system of village communities still survives among both the Ho and Munda tribes. Villages are divided into an organization called Pir, usually seven to twelve in number, under the jurisdiction of a single leader called Manki. Manki is probably a descendant of a pioneer settler family in the main village of the group.

<sup>14</sup> Craven, *Final Report of the Kolhan Government Estate, 1897-98*, p.32.

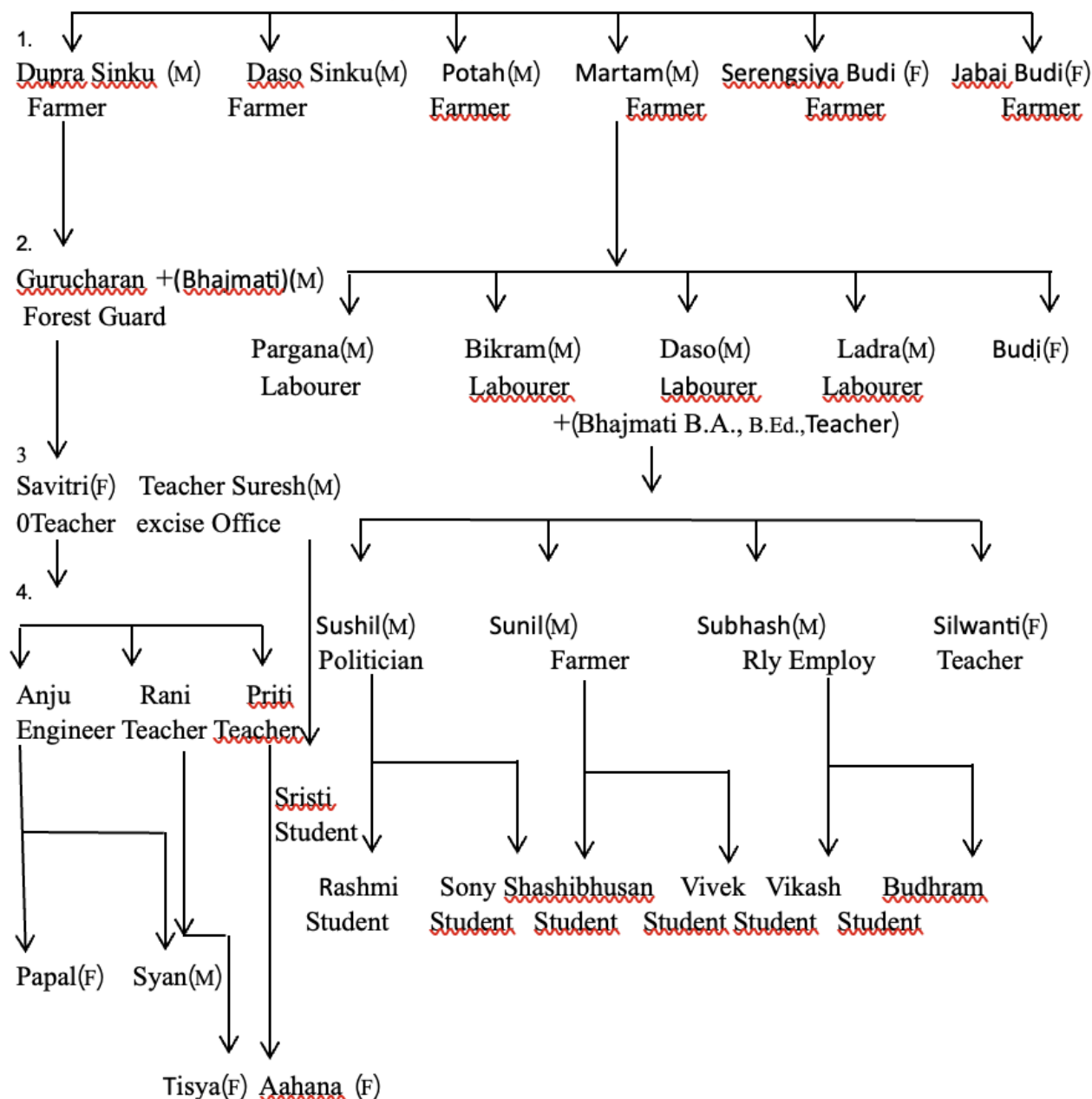
<sup>15</sup> Dharendra Nath Majumdar, *The Affairs of a Tribe : A Study in Tribal Dynamics*, Universal Publishers, Lucknow, 1950, pp-67-68.

<sup>16</sup> Madhu Kishwar, 'Toiling without Rights : Ho Women of Singhbhum', *Economic and Political weekly*, Vol XXII, No 3, January 17, 1987. P. 195.

<sup>17</sup> *General Report, Public instruction in Bengal, 1872-73*, Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, 1874, p. 526.

## Kolaisai Kursinama

### Nonga Sinku + Brother 5 (Farmer + Business)



## Research Methodology

The historical method of research has been used for this article. The research is basically based on data collected through questionnaires, videos and interviews under empirical study. Apart from this, data collection work has been done from Chaibasa Archives, Kolkata Archives and Bihar State Archives located in Patna. Primary and secondary sources obtained from various research institutions and libraries have also been used.

## Overview

This Kursinama was carefully observed and it was found that along with the changes in livelihood, there have also been changes in the sectors of the economy from generation to generation. Women of the first and second generations were fully engaged in the

primary economy. And their livelihood was based on wild food collection, fishing, hunting, animal husbandry and agriculture. And from time to time, she used to take her agricultural produce, wild produce, fish, animals and birds to Jaintgarh, Hatgamaria and Keonjhar Haat for exchange, and through the exchange, she bought oil, salt, turmeric, clothes, tools, fish nets, she used to bring utensils etc. The first and second generations were illiterate but an educated woman married into this family and earned a living as a head teacher, she taught all the children. In the third generation, a mixture of educated and uneducated family members is seen. Also, there was a change in the livelihood of the third generation and family members took up working professions. Two women of the third generation gained careers as

teachers. Three women of the fourth generation entered the working profession, one became an engineer and two became teachers.

The family members of this generation adopted primary and secondary sector economy and were engaged in professions like jobs, farming, labour, animal husbandry, etc. The fourth generation became fully educated and adopted the third sector economy and all the family members entered into working profession. At present, the fifth generation is adopting the fourth sector economy and getting higher education. In the third, fourth and fifth generations, along with jobs, family agricultural work is also being done, but professions like forest collection, fish farming, hunting, animal husbandry are not being done. The reason for the change from the primary sector to the secondary sector of the economy was found to be the establishment of Kolhan Government Estate and the reason for the change from the secondary sector to the tertiary sector of the economy was found to be education. As people got educated, they changed their livelihood. Started doing.

### Conclusion

Ho society is a liberal society. In this, women were never stopped from doing any kind of work, but being male dominated, their privilege was definitely established on some tasks. To maintain their supremacy, men never allowed women to establish authority over land. Whereas in reality crops are produced in that land only on the labour of women. Nevertheless, due to their hardworking nature, women rose above this landless status, got education and started adopting various high level job professions and started strengthening their economic position. At present, empowered tribal women are purchasing land in their own names and are also claiming their rights on traditional land. On perusal of the presented Kursinama, it was found that all the men of the fourth generation have died and the women, being financially strong, have made solid cement mausoleums in their Sasan Diri. The marriage of two women of the fifth generation has been solemnized according to Diku Andi,<sup>19</sup> which reflects the cultural change. The transformation of livelihood and economy has led Ho women on the path of progress and made them monetarily empowered. As a result, there has been a change in the outlook of the society. And women are now getting a status of respect and after their death, their graves are being built according to their contribution.

At present, due to external influences, society is changing its specific culture.

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<sup>19</sup> Diku Andi marriage arrangements are organized by the regional Brahmins.