

Kharia Sabaras bearing the Stigma of Criminality and Social Exclusion: a Study in South-Eastern Purulia, West Bengal, India.

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Abstract: Among the different tribes in West Bengal Kharias and Lodhas are perhaps most exploited and subjugated. Lodhas are however declared as PVTGs (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups). Kharia Sabaras also suffer from ecological crisis due to large scale denudation of Forest. Kharias are however declared among PVTGs in Orissa. These two tribes are also stigmatized with criminality. Kharia Sabaras or more simply Sabaras of Paruria are one of the most backward tribal communities mainly found in the eastern plateau region of the district. They were declared criminal tribe in the colonial rule and still suffer from stigma of criminality. Their exploitation and exclusion is discernable from all angles. They have no permission to enter in the village temples. Their children are addressed in a derogatory language by the teachers; they have to sit in a considerable distance apart from the other castes children while taking mid day meal. The village people consider them subhuman; keep them aside from all social interaction and assimilation.

Keywords: criminal tribe, stigma, social deprivation, exploitation

Date of Submission: 08-07-2017

Date of acceptance: 23-09-2017

I. INTRODUCTION

Kharia Sabaras or more simply Sabaras of Purulia are one of the most backward Tribal communities mainly found in the eastern plateau region of India. They were declared criminal tribe in the colonial rule and still suffer from stigma of criminality. Their exploitation and exclusion is discernable from all angles. They have no permission to enter in the village temples. Their children are addressed in a derogatory language by the teachers; they have to sit in a considerable distance apart from the other castes children while taking mid day meal. The village people consider them subhuman; keep them aside from all social interaction and assimilation. Virtually their settlement locally called **Kharia dih** or **basti** has been set up a considerable distance apart from the main village settlements. They were not autochthonous in the village, their history of settling in the village periphery dates back not more than 110-120 years ago. The Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) however repealed after Independence in 1949 and Denotified Habitual Offender Act (HOA) was enacted in 1952. They still suffer from social deprivation and alleged stigma of criminality. The villagers gets customary right to torcher on the Kharia Sabaras. If any case of decoity or unsocial activities occur the Kharia Sabaras are prime suspects. Their geographical isolation and impoverished economy too have made them object of exploitation and poverty-stricken.

II. KHARIA NOMENCLATURE

The word **Khaida**/**Kheda** has etimologically derived from rabbit. The people of Manbhum called them kheda ironically. Earlier they were typically sons and daughters of forest and remained in deep jungle. They disguised in the deep jungle, seeing any man (**madas**) they fled in the jungle. Later the word **Kheda** was modified and variously moulded to Kheria or Kharia. Manbhumi Sabdokosh edited by Basuroy and Chattopadhyay (1990) also cites that Kheda is used in both terms as a community called Kharia (noun) and as rabbit (noun).

As in the case of various other proper nouns the name of an aboriginal tribe modifies in course of history. It was first mentioned by E.T. Dalton as Kheriah in 1866 in the Journal of Asiatic Society. Later the tribe was referred to as 'Kheriahs' (Ball, 1868) and 'Pahariya Kharia' (Driver, 1891), Kherria by Birt (1903), Kharias by. Chatterjee (1931). Subsequently, when the Anthropologists took interest in the enquiry about the tribe, they pronounced and spelt it as 'Kharia'. At present the word represents the nomenclature of the tribe. A mention may be made that there also a scheduled caste of the same name in Tripura. Eminent Bengali Novelist Rishi Bankimchandra in his book "Bibidho Prabandho" mentioned about a tribe '**Kheroa**'. It may refer to Kherwals or Kharia though it is questionable.. He however made little reference about them, only referred they are non-Aryan people and worship Goddess Kali. Russel (1916) suggested that the name Kharia is derived from *Kharkhari*, a palanquine or litter, and that the original name Kharkharia been contracted into Kharia. He stated that in the Uriya country Oraons, who carry litters, are also called Kharias. This derivation is in accordance with the tradition of the Kharias. Banerjee (1984) mentioned that the ancestors of the tribe once came from places lying between Rohtas and Patna. It is traditional with them that they at the time of immigration arrived at some spot called Kharia Ghat and hence is the name. Das (1931) also mentioned the Hill Kharias as Savaras as he wrote Hill Kharia or Chabbar. It is apparent that he mispronounced the Sabar as Chabbar. Roy (1937) concludes that the name Sabara ment in earlier time all the different Kolarian groups. As the Kharias of Mayurbhanj recognize themselves as decendents of Basu Savaras. Banerjee (1959) mentioned that Kharias identify themselves with the Sabar who have an important place in different mythological legends of the Hindus. They believe that they were at one time priestly caste and wore sacred thread.

III. KHARIA SABARAS AS SECONDARY PRIMITIVE TRIBAL GROUP

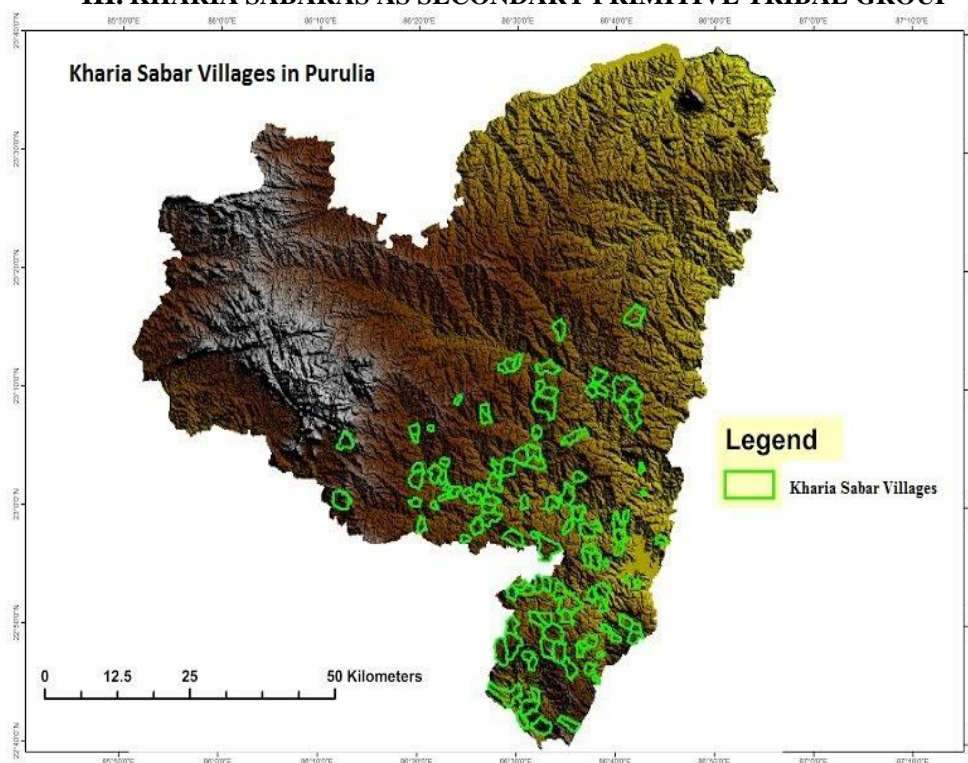


Fig.1. Location of Hill Kharias of Purulia

The Kharia Sabaras are mainly concentrated in the hilly and forested areas of Bankura and Purulia in West Bengal. Dixit Sinha (1984) mentioned that the Hill Kharia of Purulia (Fig. 1) and Singbhum district are *secondary Primitive Tribal Group (S-PGT)*.

They are essentially conservative tribal and have not made many changes to adopt in modernity. Watching common people (*madas*) they would flee in deep forest. Among the three sections of the tribe the Hill Kharia are most backward. Roy (1937) writes 'Forced into complete isolation by their geographical environment for long centuries had very little communication with more civilized tribes or casts or even with other sections of their own tribe, and with all their energies absorbed in solving the food problem, the Hill Kharias have successfully remained for untold centuries almost stagnant at the same primitive level of economic, social and intellectual culture'

Mukhopadhyay writes

'Historically the roots of Kharia being stigmatized as deviant lay in the colonial period when forests, the only source of Kharia economy were declared as protected areas. The incoming of money lenders, Zaminders and Izzaraders from the Hindu peasant community brought a wide transformation of the region materially & culturally. The forests were to be fast denuded by the merchants, land lords and colonial government... Many forests became private property and various restrictions started to be imposed to control entry into them. After imposition of these regulations, a Kharia found to collect food & other product from the Jungle has to be convicted..... it was basically a question of clash of order; the old Vs the new one. In other words the same ethnic group with the same cultural attributes would be devaluated due to vested interest of the wider society. Such devaluation and categorization was a mode of exercising power by the British Govt. Perhaps it was thus that the local administrative machinery brought Kharias under the preview of Criminal Tribes Act, 1924'. Some elder Kharia Sabaras still memories the pseudo romantic image of their past life.

hām takhaḍ vaḍe ruhinu vaḍ pākā yur pākā khātu |vaḍe kāt kurātu vadar phaḍ khāi ruhātu | takhaḍ vaḍa sov dhāre ruhi nāk| takhaḍ māḍ bhāt khātu nāi kad māḍā khāi hām ruhātu| takhaḍ vaḍa sov dhāre ruhi hām ruhātu| gāor māḍas ṣange miṣitu nāi | vaḍe hām vāghut pūjā kuritu | hām māḍsaka ḍarātu | takhar hām saha yāḡ ālu sonā emnā khātu |takhaḍ kiso kaṣṭa ruhi nāk nāi| phaḍ ruhināk anek kichu| āj kāiltā vaḍe phaḍ pāo nāi|

(Then we lived in forest, subsisted on forest fruits like *bor* or *jor*. We cutted wood in the forest. Then everywhere was forest. Then we didn't eat mar rice. We subsited on jungle fruits like kad, mara etc. We scared to mix with the villagers. We disguised in the forest. We adored tiger deity, Baghut in the forest. We feared men. Then we got leaves, potato etc. from the forest. Then we had no sense of starvation. We got different fruits . Now we don't get enough fruits from forest.)

After regulation of Forest Act (1892) and strict restriction to enter into the forest , Kharia Sabaras confronted a situation where they can neither move to their traditional forest life nor possess adequate capacity to assimilate into the main current. Subsequently they faced multi – dimensional exploitation. Their exploitation is discernable from almost every angle-economic, social, political and religious performances. With reducing forest resource they have suffered a crisis not only in the economic spheres but it has also created a vacuum in socio religious & cultural life. The plethora of issues ranging from social distance, land grabbing, land alienation and robbing of their traditional life support system sometimes pushed them in

the dark world of criminality. Lack of adaptability to encounter the new economic system and alleged stigma left the Kharia Sabaras to the marginal segment of society. Two other tribal communities of West Bengal were declared criminal tribes along with Kharias namely Lodhas of Medinipur and Dhekaros of Birbhum. They run a condition of absolute misery and poverty. Debashis Debnath (2003) documented about the grim history about the Lodhas "Zamindars converted many forested land into aerable lands resulting into making the forest dwellers landless such as the case of Lodhas....after losing the stakes of their survival and livelihood, the Lodhas did not find any other than decoity, pilferage & buglery to get food". He further added "the criminality made stigma on them and they became oppressed, exploited and neglected by others even after the attainment of India's Independence".

Dr.L.P.Vidyarthi (1988) in the forwarding section of a book named 'A Study in Cultural Ecology and Tribal Dynamics' written by Dr. Ramakant Prasad writes

'The Hill Kharias are facing considerable difficulties and feel helpless because of the devastation of their forest wealth. A large number of them were brought out of forest in 1962 – 63 and were resettled in 8 villages. According to our latest case studies out of 36 families rehabilitated at Kesharpur near Ghatshilla, only 19 families survived, while at Darishali out of 44 families only 6 families were located. It is reported that most of them died in small pox and some left the resettlement and went back to lead a jungle life. These Hill Kharia, living in the forest are exploited by both the forest officers and the advanced tribe, the Bhumij, living in the cleared patches. Our survey of their food habit also indicate that the rehabilitated families in order to win over the revenges of hunger, they even eat snakes to satisfy their hunger, they even eat snakes to satisfy their hunger. Some Hill Kharia however, under the desperate situation have turned to be criminals and several of them are in jails for decoity cases'.

They virtually had no idea of hunger of mar rice as they now feel are. Their life and economy had a strong semblance with nature and natural world. Everything was abundant in the forest. Being an ecological people they enjoyed boundless freedom. They had no idea of exploitation. They had no idea of stigma. They had no idea of profit. They had no idea of personal ownership. They are found in absolute juxtaposition between traditional values and popular culture. With dislodgement from forest resources they started to move towards a ruined community. Labeled with stigma of Criminality they lost their dignity.

Dhekaros were labeled 'Criminal Tribe' under the preview of Criminal Tribal Act of 1876. The community was skilled in extracting iron from the ore. They learned the art from the *Sasha* community of Jhalda, Purulia. They supplied arms to the Indian freedom fighters. During Santal Rebellion they supplied arms to the Santals. The British Government then labeled them Rajdrohi and destroyed their cottage industries. The community then started migration and some even changed their title for the sake of disguise and prevention of extortion. Stigma of Criminality leaves a strong imprint upon the social fabric of a community, disgrace the well-being and self-esteem of a society.

Joshi noted 'Oppression, terror and isolation result in the alienation of man from the external sphere of life. As a result he develops an indifferent attitude towards the system and its effects on his life. He loses, in course of time, the power of perception The process of animalization ultimately converts the entire society into the same state. In other words the process starts from the micro level to the macro level and vice versa.....A culture of silence engulfs them'(1984: 171).

IV. LIVELIHOOD AND ECONOMY

The Kharia Sabaras mainly dwelled in the rugged foothill surrounded by forest. Their oral tradition and folklore indicates that they subsisted entirely on forest resources. With the diminishing forest, progressive restriction on utilization of forest resources Kharia Sabaras were badly pressed with regard to their traditional activities. The nature of their traditional economy was very simple. Economic activities were very limited primarily to collection of forest products and hunting and also minor cultivation. It was a self-sufficient economy. Risley (1892) writes 'the wild Kharias who frequent the Dalma range in Manbhum and the forest – clad hills of Gangpur and other tributary states know no other mode of agriculture than the barbarous *jhum* or *daha* system which consists in burning down a patch of jungle and sowing *bajra*, *biri* or *kodo* in the ashes between the stumps of the trees'.

The uprooted Kharia Sabaras confronted a situation where they can neither move to their traditional forest life nor possess adequate capacity to assimilate into the main current. Subsequently they faced multi – dimensional exploitation. Their exploitation is discernable from almost every angle- economic, social, political and religious performances. With receding forest resource they have suffered a crisis not only in the economic spheres but it has also created a vacuum in socio religious & cultural life. The plethora of issues ranging from social distance, land grabbing, land alienation and robbing of their traditional life support system sometimes pushed them in the dark world of criminality. Lack of adaptability to encounter the new economic system and alleged stigma left the Kharia Sabaras to the marginal segment of society. Two other tribal communities of West Bengal were declared criminal tribes along with Kharias namely Lodhas of Medinipur and Dhekaros of Birbhum. The Lodhas later however declared Primitive Tribal Group (PTG) in West Bengal the Kharias were not recognized PTG though they run a condition of absolute misery and poverty;

V. SUBJUGATION AND EXPLOITATION

The village people keep them aside from all social interactions and assimilation. They cannot move through the village at night through the main road. If any case of decoity or robbery occurs in the village the Kharia Sabaras are the prime suspects. Earlier a village judiciary system called '*Sholoana*' committee was powerful in the villages. Sometimes some village people exploited their condition, engaged them in some criminal activities. If a Kharia Sabara is caught he is penalized but who employed him are released from charges after paying a fine amount. The poor Kharia Sabaras being unable to pay the fine are beaten severely even to death. Police rarely intervene in these cases. The murder of Bhadra Sabara (1993) is the prominent example in this regard. There are many undocumented murder of Kharia Sabaras courted guilty in Sholoana. Even today, they face discrimination in employment sector. Thus they constitute a distinct neglected unit of population having hydra headed problems of life including a great deal of psycho somtional stress. Major, O' Brien (2005)

discussed elaborately about the psychological effect of social stigma. Social stigma leads to identity threat and stress in social life. They pointed out that that being the target of negative stereotype & prejudice is one of the mechanisms of stigmatization; suffer deleterious consequences of psychological stress. The feeling of antipathy and negligence prevailed against the Sabaras have resulted into antagonism. As a result they have withdrawing themselves into a narrower shell and isolated from the societies around.

VI. STIGMA SUFFERED BY KHARIA SABARA

The Kharia Sabaras have suffered stigma since they were settled outside the village. From generation after generation, Kharia Sabaras have had wandering traditions and they have hardly been integrated in the peasantry society. In fact, the peasantry society has always looked at them with mistrust and suspicion due to the stigma of criminality attached to them. Some of these tribes still prefer to stay near jungle; away from the villages. There was a long gap between the food habits and customs of the wild people with the villagers. The village people since then have little tried to assimilate with them. To them Kharias are no more than instruments to fulfill their own pursuit. One Non-Kharia person identify them Dharmahin i.e they have no religion. Explaining further he commented they eat meat of Kara even they bury their dead bodies like Muslims. How can you classify them as Hindu? The Kharias however themselves try to prove they are no less than the Brahmins. One Kharia remarked “we are disgraced by the Brahmins by clever tricks. Earlier we had sacred thread like the Brahmins.” This sort of folktales clearly indicates that within such hostile environment. K.M.Kapadia (2005) writes ‘the social system of the Hindus namely the casts, stresses exclusiveness. These people who belong to the lowest rung of caste hierarchy have been tolerated as the dregs of society. While, on the other hand, the social system does not permit free social intercourse with them, on the other, they have been kept at a distance out of fear. In the popular mind, murders committed by some of these people and tales of their bloody dacoities are vividly flesh and form the staple of the history of contacts between the two. The youngsters who know these people from the accounts narrated to them by their elders shape their subsequent attitudes as adults on these emotional reactions. Peoples attitude to or sentiment for these criminal tribes is therefore a blend of hostility, contempt and fear. The reaction is one of stunning and segregating (P.221).The stigma of criminality is still impregnated in their mind. One Kharia of Nirbhoypur at first appearance told us that ‘we don’t commit crime. We work in different fields and make our living’. Dilip Sabar (aged 22) of Kuda Village of Manbazar I Block son of Suphal Sabar filled up the form for the job of Police but later denied to go for training. In his words if he joins the job of Police he has to arrest his father, his mother or brothers which he cannot suffer. So he decided not to join the job. He now makes his living by working in brick field and agricultural labour. A crude news of discrimination was reported in local daily Manbhum Sambad on 20th September 2004 titled “Sabar cook so mead day meal was not taken by the higher caste children”. The incident was reported in Sikara Primary School under Bandwan Police Station.

Dixit Sinha (1984) pointed out that “Among the peasants there are various kinds of stories current about the amazing quality of the Hill Kharia which enable them to perform crimes. Thus they are believed to be capable of moving to far off places to commit decoity and come back the same night else than their two legs. Another story holds out the belief that they have elaborate network of underground tunnels which enable them to move from one place to another with impunity. But the most significant aspect of the social relevance of stigma is that it is often coerces people into social performance which creates a vicious circle. Often the stigmatized person has no other recourse but to play social game with cards stacked against him. The Hill Kharia of Purulia too frequently find that they have no other alternative but to act the way other people want to act”.

The murder of Budhan Sabar on 10th February 1998 and Bhadra Sabar in 1993 aroused a consolidated movement from the civil Society working for the repeal of DNT rag. The movement and call for the justice revealed the ruinous condition of the Sabaras and severe extortion on Sabaras in Purulia. Eminent Social activist Mahasweta Devi writes

“.....these denotified communities are still under a death sentence. A Budhan Sabar is killed because he was born to a Sabar community. In the old India, only the upper casts had right to literacy. The Lowry born ones lived outside the city. The denotified ones live outside the society. They have no right to anything.....At the end of the century they are denied all human rights because of their birth. The world should know that it is time, from Denotified Communities name, the words ‘Year of Birth: 1871’ were removed once & forever”. (<http://indiatgether.org/bhasha/budhan/birth1871.htm>).

Bhowmik (1990) observed among the Lodhas that chronic poverty, constant police torture and oppression from neighbouring people made them social isolates and recoil into the shell of their old traditions. Also the aforesaid factors developed them with coyness, timidity and left them full of fear and distrust. At School the experience of Kharia Sabar children range from discrimination to asense of complete alienation. They often experience hostile condition, abuse & discrimination from teachers & non Tribal students. Teachers are not at all sympathetic to them. In Damodarpur Sabar tolla we found that several Kharia Sabar children are playing at school time. A case of discrimination was noted in January, 2011 where Kharia Sabar children of Suala Village of Puncha P.S were discriminated. They have their Primary School & I.C.D.S about ½ Km away in Dhabaradi village. The teachers instructed the cook that during distribution of mid day meal Kharia Sabar children and other caste children mainly hails from Mahato caste have to sit in distant place. Jaideb Mahato teacher of Paschimbanga Kharia Sabar Kalyan Samiti run School of Nirbhoypue, Puncha P.S first brought the event of discrimination under notice of Sub Inspector of School & PBKSKSK. Paschimbanga Kharia Sabar Kalyan Samiti resisted against the discrimination. The matter has now resolved.



Fig. A Kharia Sabar of Damodarapur (tolla Khuditanr), P.S. Puncha showing his injury over head and back. He was attacked by villagers in case of alleged involvement in decoity.

VII. DEVIATION FROM THEIR TRADITIONAL ACTIVITIES AND CRIME RELATED ACTIONS

The Kharia Sabaras, the ancient forest dwellers of midland plateau of India were thrown out of the forest by the forest act of the British rule and transformed into **ecological refugee**. The changes in their livelihood and economy may be considered as a part of forced adaptation, an exogenous pressure which halted the main current of their life. Their social life and economy revolved around forest resources. They had the capacity to face adverse environmental condition like severe drought due to their unique adaptive mechanism based on traditional ecological Knowledge (TEK). They never starved for mar rice as they now are. Bell mentioned their unique adaptation to severe drought condition. They felt absolute helpless when they were dislodged from their forest abode. They were found ill adapted to the new economy. Losing the right to collect the resources from the forest sometimes they were forced to collect resource from households unauthorizely. At the same time, British rulers mistakenly suspected them as criminal. As a result stigma of criminality was attached to the Kharia Sabaras. Thus they were thrown out of the forest and civil society. The passing of Indian forest Act of 1892 made the Kharia partially crippled as they had no other alternative source of economy. The passing of CTA of 1924 became a mode of oppression of the wider community. Their utter frustration regarding discrimination and isolation is reflected in different folk songs. One such song is highlighted

*āmrā śavar jāti
ār āndhāre pindāre thākī |
mare gele se ke kari ve pīthā
khukḍā janam liyā mor michā |*

Translation: We are Sabar community
And we live in darkness
If I die who would make sweets
Our cursed life is meaningless.

Srivasta (2011) writes ‘Violence against DNTs has its distinctiveness of being embedded in the social structure of domination by upper caste. In many cases they also manipulate the local authorities to nab the DNTs. It is the caste based hierarchical structure that lays down the norm of conduct for human relationship between its more privileged groups and the subdued and subordinate ones. The ground has thus been made more fertile for tension and unrest to grow. The situation has also turned ripe for communal and caste forces to sow the seeds of division and discord and indulge in violence.....the violence takes brutal forms and turns into acts of atrocities against the whole group of people, such as massacre, rape, burning of houses and through more subtle methods like social boycott, which intended to block their access to basic necessities and services’

Sometimes some village people exploited their condition, engaged them in some criminal activities. If a Kharia Sabara is caught, he is the penalized but who employed him are released from charges after paying a fine amount. The poor Kharia Sabaras being unable to pay the fine are beaten severely even to death. Police rarely intervene in these cases. The murder of Bhadra Sabara (1993) is the prominent example in this regard. There are many undocumented murder of Kharia Sabaras courted guilty in Sholoana. Even today, they face discrimination in employment sector due to alleged stigma of criminality.

Raghaviah (1969) write about Yerukulas, A Criminal tribe of Andhra ‘They lack the rhythm of life, the balm of troubled minds’. Virtually Kharias Sabaras are tribes with demeaning traditional culture and strangulated existence. Patnaik et al. (2007) observed that among the Juang psych somatic stress after detachment from traditional forest based economy. The Juang had no idea of poverty when they lived as food gatherers. With the change in their livelihood and increased contact with outside world, they have started feeling that they are poor as compared to their neighbouring non – tribal communities.

Kharia Sabaras are found to take discrimination and exploitation as granted fortune. As a result they also have withdrawn themselves into a narrower shell and secluded from the societies around. They constituted a divergent isolated unit of population having hydra headed problems of life including a great deal of psycho somtional stress.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The Kharia Sabaras have passed from very critical situation. Dislodgement of forest and subsequent imposition of CT act has made them victim of social exploitation and exclusion. They were treated as subhuman and touchered on the pretext of stigma of criminality. The village people as well as police got customary right to punish the Kharia Sabaras. There was virtually no human rights for the Kharia Sabaras. In a traditional society more or less before 1980s or '90s in Purulia immense darkness of social life was the reality due to social stigma and lack of awareness of the Sabaras also. But, perceptible social change is going to be established from the first decade of 21st century in most of the Villages due to the **blessings of modernity** (Mass Media contact), access to urban culture through occupation and also multiple opportunity of present day discourse of civilization. The continuous efforts of mainstreaming of Sabaras life under the leadership of G.B. Sing Deo, G. C. Speevak, Mahasweta Devi and others also helped to change the condition. But, recent strategic change about enlightenment of Sabaras is a multi-directional progress, basically an outcome of new market economy where Sabaras are diffused in the Urban areas and earning a lot as an informal non-primary workers. A sustainable income and urban life exposure thus gradually fading out the darkness and austerities of Sabaras life

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors are highly recognizing the contribution of Late Gopiballav Sing Deo (Former Joint President Paschimbanga Kharia Sabar Kalyan Samiti), Prosanto Raxit (Secretary Paschimbanga Kharia Sabar Kalyan Samiti) Late Mahasweta Devi (Former President, Paschimbanga Kharia Sabar Kalyan Samiti), Provakar Nath Sahadeb, (Member, Paschimbanga Kharia Sabar Kalyan Samiti), Jaladhar Sabar (Joint Secretary Paschimbanga Kharia Sabar Kalyan Samiti), Hemanta Sabar (Kuda, Manbazar I Block) Krishnnapada Sabar (Damodarpur, Punched Block), Bhagirath Sabar (Kuda), Sarathi Sabar (Nirbhoypur, Punched Block), Kiriti Sabar Rangalal Sabar (Kuda, Manbazar I), , Baisakhi Sabar, Budhu Sabar, Bari Sabar, Chunaram Sabar (Kultanr, Punched Block).

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