



Incredible Endeavors in Early Social Science Research: Enhanced Possibilities of the Bhumij Case Study

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Abstract

In this paper, the author appreciates the early researchers from whom all subsequent scientific investigations on social issues are followed up. The present paper is about the initiation of research in the field of social sciences and how the early research fascinated the author to proceed with her research work. The ambitious efforts of the early scholars to investigate the life of the indigenous population became successful one day when the outcome was disseminated among the masses. Their bravery in venturing into inhospitable deep forests, uninhabited beaches and encountering individuals who were unable to comprehend the reasons for their visit is respected. Verrier Elwin has made many such attempts to study the primitive people in the natural environment. He conducted extensive fieldwork on the Juang, a primitive tribe of Odisha, at present a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group, to whom the natives thought that he was either a ghost or an angel from heaven. Credit goes to him for his patience in making possibilities for the study under hopeless situations. Radcliffe-Brown's endeavour in Andaman Island is a sign of magnificent research contribution to this field. However, the field investigators finally could build rapport with the study population and succeeded in their research endeavours. The footsteps they left have become helpful for subsequent attempts. Though the purpose was not simply academic and philanthropic, the earliest trials were not only an inspiration but also a ready-made framework to proceed with one's study, and this study on the livelihood of the Bhumij has become possible. The Bhumij study population of Naranpur have adopted multiple sources of livelihoods to earn a living. They are very practical and hardworking, and never miss a chance to work as wage labourers because wage earning is possible during agricultural operations only.

Keywords: Research, Efforts, Endeavour, Innovative, Successful, Livelihood

Introduction

This paper honours the notable figures of social sciences who played paramount roles and made the research feasible in this field. We are grateful to the distinguished social anthropologists who came up with the conceptualizing scientific methods, carried out their efforts to study indigenous communities for the first time ever in the history of social science research and set the precedent for later attempts. Their innovative ideas, methodology and the trial-and-error basis of progress showed the way forward in the field of social research. The fieldwork was undertaken on the lives of people who were entirely dependent on nature for survival, extracting food using self-developed, simple technology and living a nomadic life as a result of the scarcity of food in one place. Besides the simplest way of living, there also used to exist among them the unique customs and traditions which attracted researchers to get into the details of their living. The early researchers have greatly contributed towards understanding the socio-economic and cultural life of the indigenous people, particularly those aspects of life that make them self-sufficient in getting every requirement of life for survival. However, it is to be noted that it was rather an attraction or philanthropic motivation behind the trial; there was also a colonial

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expedition. The Western social scientists were more interested in studying the social institutions and economic life of the people for better administration.

However, the field investigation tradition, which was initiated, gradually established a framework for the continuation of social science research. Their persistent optimism eventually made them confident in their own abilities as fieldwork was supported by scientific techniques, which elevated the discipline as a distinct branch of knowledge. Research experiments would otherwise have been conducted in natural sciences, and research in social sciences would have been a dream; who would have thought of its possibility? But it has become a reality.

The scientific study of social issues is now being undertaken, which was made possible by the positive school of thought established by August Comte and Émile Durkheim. The findings of the research that was conducted for the first time ever are found to be trustworthy, reliable, scientifically sound and beneficial for society. This can also help solve the problems and concerns in their lives by researching the social issues of early human living. As a result, the marginalised and poorer segment of society can gradually improve their standard of living and integrate themselves into the larger society.

Some Valuable Contributions

Though research on primitive tribes was carried out, it was based on secondary data. Franz Boas, for the first time, collected primary data using scientific methods and started his anthropological endeavour in Baffin Land and British Columbia, where he studied the Kwakiutl Indians, the Eskimos, etc. (Jha:1995:144).¹

However, Radcliffe-Brown's research on the Andaman Islanders laid the foundation for the fieldwork tradition because early social science research was based on secondary data. Both A. R. Radcliffe- Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski are profound personalities in the history of social research. However, Malinowski is perhaps credited more because of his extensive fieldwork among the Trobriand Islanders, as he learned the language of the natives to collect first-hand information on their traditions of high social order, accompanied by participant observation. The unique culture that Malinowski discovered was the '*Kula Exchange*', a large ceremonial custom in which gifts made of shells are exchanged among them, and something more is given back than received. This demonstrates the native's generosity and their reciprocal relationship. Radcliffe-Brown became successful in studying the life of the Andaman Islanders from 1906 to 1908 for the first time in the history of Anthropology. He investigated the sociological theories among the primitive tribal groups and described the findings in such a way that marked a significant beginning in fieldwork traditions in Social Anthropology, as early records show when the islands were feared and avoided.² (Quoted in People of India Singh: 1994: 72). He was considered the mastermind researcher by the early scholars, as he had started a golden tradition of field investigation.

Radcliffe- Brown carried out the first field investigation on Andaman Islanders; in those days, it was really incredible to study the primitives in a dense tropical rain forest and on the virgin sea coast, where he found the importance of marriage and family life among the study population. He also observed that the bachelors and the spinsters had their own private huts, and their life was uninspiring. The primitive



tribal communities in the two different geographical settings in the Islands were accustomed to arranging food from nature for sustenance. The coast dwellers were in an advantageous position as their canoes used to help them in fishing and in transportation. Therefore, they had access to both the sea and the forest, whereas the forest dwellers were confined to the dense forest only. The hunting expedition was carried out by the community, who used to toast the hunted animals in the evening and share the food among all of them; however, the old people and capable hunters were given a quality share. Now all the tribal communities in the island, with the exception of the Nicobarese, belong to the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups, and they are no longer identified as primitive tribes.

Malinowski did a better investigation whose research created curiosity for which he is not only credited for his long years of stay in the field, but also he learned the language of the natives. He wrote a monograph of high quality, developed his own theory of functionalism and became the champion of the functional school of thought (1914-1918)³ (Jha: 1995:146).

The fieldwork traditions in India started slowly following its progress in the United States and in Britain. In fact, Sociology in India emerged as a distinct discipline due to colonial interest. In the year 1920, the Post-graduate Department was set up in India, and anthropological fieldwork was placed as a part of the course curriculum. Really speaking, T.C. Das, D. N. Mujumdar, M.N. Srinivas and many others carried out intensive fieldwork among the tribes and castes in India. M. N. Srinivas has played a pivotal role in establishing a new theory of *Sanskritisation*. The concept was first used by him in his study in the state of Mysore, now in Karnataka, where he found that the Coorgs, a low Hindu caste, by imitating the lifestyles of the Brahmins and leaving some of the customs and traditions of their own, which are considered impure by the higher castes for generations, could raise their status in the local hierarchy of castes. However, Srinivas had concluded that the change through *Sanskritisation* is a positional change only which does not affect the social structure of a society⁴ (Srinivas 1995:1-29). This extensive fieldwork undertaken by him during that time was indeed a great endeavour to ever show the fieldwork traditions in India. Surjit Sinha and B.D. Sharma have shared their field experiences that some primitive tribes have improved their living conditions; hence it is the duty of the researchers to identify them from the general agricultural groups who still remain alienated from the larger society, lead a primitive mode of livelihood through gathering, hunting and shifting cultivation and whose poverty in a conventional way has no meaning. The literacy level of the tribal groups can also be taken into consideration.⁵ (Surjit Sinha and B.D. Sharma 1977: 1-2). At present, there are seventy-five PVTGs identified in the country on the basis of criteria like low literacy rate, economic backwardness, pre-agricultural level of technology and stagnant population. Research perhaps has contributed towards the notification of seventy-five tribes who are found to be different from others whose lifestyle does not show any sign of development.

B .K. Roy Burman has also made it clear that the primitive communities at large are not at the same stage of development. Therefore, small groups are to be identified among the backward tribes and can be studied at the micro level.⁶ (Surjit Sinha and B. D. Sharma; 1977:44) K.N. Sahay has mentioned that as no study is conducted on Self Image and Identity of the tribals so, he has done it to know how the tribals perceive



themselves about them, the image they have got for themselves and the concept that what do they mean about their name.⁷ K.N. Sahay in S.C. Dubey (ed.), *Tribal Heritage of India*, Vol.1, Ethnicity, Identity and Interaction ("Tribal Self-Image and Identity:") 1977: 8-54). It is depicted from the appearance of the Malers in Santhal Pargana that there is something special with them which differentiates these hill dwellers from the plain dwellers.

A Case Study of the Bhumij, a Tribe in Odisha

The present study is conducted on the livelihood of the Bhumij, a tribal community who live at Naranpur in Nilagiri Sub-Division in the district of Balasore, Odisha, to observe the various occupational patterns and the cultural practices of the tribal group compared to their Bhumij counterparts who inhabit other parts of the country. The study conducted in the year 2000 on the Bhumij in Keonjhar, Odisha shows they are the beef eaters and they also take the carcass of the cattle whereas another study conducted in Balasore district by the same researcher found that the Bhumij claims a higher ritual status whose forefathers used to be the *Sevayats* in Shrimandir of Puri who do not even consume rice bear which is generally consumed by all tribal groups is the worst of all customs that spoils the socio-economic life of the tribals. Therefore, the present study intends to find out anything new if it exists among the Bhumij of Naranpur. As the tribes are fond of the forest, the same is also true among the present study population who live in the periphery of Kuldiha Wildlife Sanctuary in the Sub-Division of Nilagiri in Balasore district. In this area, many tribal communities inhabit, such as the Kolha, the Santhal, the Bhumij, the Bathudi, the Munda, etc., along with other caste groups. However, the Bhumij were selected in Naranpur, which is a multi-caste, multi-tribal village, using a purposive sample in which all fifty Bhumij households were included. An interview schedule was used as the method of data collection, for which an adult member was interviewed irrespective of one's sex from each Bhumij household in the village. Some key members were approached who were present at home for a focus group discussion on various important matters of their life. The field situation, the ongoing activities of the Bhumij study population and their interaction with others were also observed.

The Prime Objectives of the Study

1. To observe the physical environment of the study area.
2. To know the livelihood pattern of the Bhumij study population.
3. To study their socio-economic life from all sources of income, expenditure, contingencies of life and the means through which they overcome.
4. To observe the continuity and change of culture if any among the study population.

NARANPUR

The universe of the study is well connected with the roadways as it is situated twelve Kilometers from the Sub-Divisional Headquarters, Nilagiri and three kilometres from the main road that connects Nilagiri with Udala. The People avail the advantages of good communication facilities, for which young school dropout boys migrate to other places of the state and outside the state to earn a better living. The researcher also took advantage of the all-weather roads of the villages and found it



easy to reach the study population; however, this was a reminder of Radcliffe-Brown's and Verrier Elwin's attempts to reach Andaman Island and Gonasika in Keonjhar district of Odisha, respectively, which was incredible but inspiring. The Bhumij work as wage labourers in the Hindu caste neighbour's paddy field depending upon the availability of wage work in the village. They go to the nearby forest to pluck *sal* leaves when wage work is not available. They are found to be calculative, and they do not miss the opportunity to work in the paddy field as it is seasonal in nature. They do not have a sizable agricultural land to cultivate, but they cultivate land as sharecroppers that they get from the higher castes, mostly from the Teli caste, who traditionally deal in oil. As sharecroppers, they in return give one-third of the crops to the landholders. The study population says they themselves work in the paddy field and, when required, borrow money from the higher castes to invest in the agricultural field for improved harvest.

All the capable members in each household, including women and children, work and contribute their earnings to the family economy. Among the two available sources of livelihoods, they prefer to work as wage earners, as single cropping is the practice there and wage earning is scarce. Radcliffe-Brown has described the livelihood of Andaman Islanders in those days that the division of labour was based on sex; the women used to gather forest produce, whereas the men used to hunt animals for food. The production of the day used to be shared equally among the community members; however, the delicious part of the hunted animals was given to the capable hunters and the old people in the community. Some members of the community, despite not taking part in the hunting expedition due to their incapacity, were also given a share. However, among the present study population, all capable members in the family involve themselves in almost the same type of work and contribute their earnings to the family economy. They go to the forest for leaf collection in agricultural off-seasons or else when their labour is not required by any of the land owners. In the forest, they pluck *sal* leaves from the small trees using a stick or with their hands. At the end of the day, they join seven to eight leaves together and manually make leaf plates. Since people enjoy eating from this kind of natural leaf plate, there is a greater demand for this cottage industry. There are some businessmen who regularly come to Naranpur to collect these plates with payment. In the spring season, the leaves fall down themselves as it is the sign of the presence of new leaves in the *Sal* tree. The season is enjoyable for the study population as they find it easier to collect plenty of leaves and earn comparatively more. The businessmen make good profit out of the better kind of leaf plates that they could make using machinery.

The study population manages their household expenditure within their income, and only twenty per cent of them have borrowed money from the oilman caste to meet the contingencies of life. The same practice of the Bhumij population is found in other studies that they have control over their family expenditure. In most cases, they have invested the borrowed money in the Paddy field for a better harvest. A few households have borrowed to meet the medical expenses of their family members. The remaining eighty per cent, or forty households, have not borrowed money. The interest rate in the study area is Rs 5/- for Rs 1000/- per month. Only one household out of fifty households has taken a loan from the Government sources, of which fifty per cent is paid back, yet out of 10,000.



Education

The literacy level of the study population is very poor. However, the remarkable feature of the education of the Bhumij children is that two girls are a step ahead of everyone in the village. One Bhumij girl is pursuing her MBBS degree, whereas the other girl is in +3 Science stream. All girls and boys are admitted to school, but all of them eventually stop attending school in spite of the midday meal and study materials, whereas the other caste children continue their schooling and pursue higher education by attending college.

The study of population admits that their children are not attending classes in the school as they cannot afford much time towards their children's education. As the parents remain busy earning a living, the children, in order to escape from studies, hide themselves somewhere in the village so that the parents would not find them out easily. They also say that if they had given more attention to sending their children to school, it would have been better, and the children would have benefited by accessing all essential facilities provided by the Government. Contrary to this, the school dropouts either join with their parents or else migrate to other places for a better living.

Institutions in the Village

There is an Anganwadi Centre in the village where the Anganwadi Worker imparts pre- school education and performs all other activities assigned to her. She is assisted by the Anganwadi Helper who cooks and provides supplementary nutrition to the beneficiaries. The AWW visits all households to ensure the good health of the villagers and discusses with them all required messages. There is a High School in the village, but for college education the students go to Berhampur, three kilometres from the village. The villagers also go to Berhampur to avail themselves of the healthcare facilities from the Primary Health Centre. An Accredited Social Health Activist is there in the village to help them in meeting their health needs.

Social Life

They maintain nuclear families, but there are more members found in the family since they are yet to accept the small family norm. Both the Anganwadi Worker and the Accredited Social Health Activist are worried that they are not ready to listen to them. The old parents, though, live in the same house, cook themselves, and live a life of their own. Rice meant for the Below Poverty Line families as part of the Public Distribution System and old age pensions are very helpful for the older adults. Though they do not have agricultural land, each household in the village has built up a house on their homestead land having a record of right.

The study population is a homogeneous group, as the occupational pattern, attitude, behaviour, outlook, perception, food habits, dress pattern, socio-economic background, way of life, dreams, and worldview are all the same; after all, the culture is the same. Therefore, it is not felt essential to present the data on each head like occupation, or relate those with the independent variables like education, land holdings, economic position, etc. A qualitative analysis is made to show the life and activities of the Bhumij in the village vis-a-vis other castes and tribes. However, a few percentages are presented to show the real situation in detail. As the study population lives permanently in the village, they are well acquainted with each other, have a deep



sense of belongingness and 'we-feeling', and share the sorrows and sufferings of life. The kind of life they lead seems to be the product of the natural and social environment to which they belong, and they are observed to be happy. They are not in a very good position simply as they do not have land holdings and are yet to be educated, but whatever they earn, they manage their expenditure within the limits of income. Their life is somewhat made easier by the Public Distributive System, the Government ration meant for each Below Poverty Line family.

HANDIA

They prepare and drink *handia*, rice beer, an indigenously made intoxicating drink brewed at home using wild herbs which are readily available with fermented rice. Although it is a nutritious beverage, the study group drinks too much of it and becomes sedentary as a result. Sometimes they are unable to act properly and become so verbose when experiencing hallucinations that they are unable even to make out. Rice beer is also prepared to sell in the weekly markets for earning. During the 'lockdown', when there was no permission to sell rice beer, customers used to come to households to have it. They are so dependent on the drink that they cannot survive without it. One thing to be mentioned here is that rice beer is thought to be auspicious; hence, it is taken on every occasion, including death observations. The study group has retained nothing as part of its original culture but has not left rice beer, which is the sole cause of backwardness.

New Findings and Conclusion

The study population is found to be a unique group in many ways compared to the other Bhumij groups studied by the author so far. Unlike the Bhumij of Keonjhar, they are identified as a Hindu tribe and have assimilated themselves purely with the local people. However, their worldview, outlook and outside participation are not accepted as similar to that of the non-tribal population in the locality. The Bhumij community identifies itself among others. On the other hand, the Bhumij of Keonjhar, though they interact with their Hindu caste neighbours, maintain a distance from them as they take beef. They are also found to be different in many ways, as the Bhumij of Keonjhar do not follow a definite pattern of living. The womenfolk do not do the early morning household chores like sweeping, mopping, and cleaning utensils and do not keep things organised. Still, the study discovered that the Bhumij of Naranpur have established and upheld a shared group culture. However, the Bhumij of Keonjhar celebrate many festivals as part of their community traditions, which they very much enjoy with dances, feasts and *handia*. These festivals bind the community people into a single thread. The Bhumij of Naranpur speak Odia and cannot say the name of their mother tongue, which is common among all Bhumij groups studied by the author except the Bhumij of Lulung, Mayurbhanj, Odisha. They do not celebrate any Bhumij festival at family or community level. Nothing is retained with them as part of their original culture. No sort of continuity of culture is found among them. They celebrate some Hindu festivals at the family level and participate in Hindu festivals like Durga Puja and Kali Puja celebrated in the study area. The Bhumij have become a Hinduized tribe who have already adopted the Hindu way of life and culture to a great extent, says Surjit Sinha, which is also supported by H.H. Risley and Colonel Dalton, who have said that the entire tribe has become Hindu castes, which could have been possible through the process of acculturation. The present study



population is of the same type which the eminent scholars have observed in their studies. Their community festivals could have tied them into a single thread and could have given them a distinct identity, but they have not left rice, which spoils their life. Last but not least, the study population are found to be hard-working and maximises their efforts to engage themselves in either of the occupations available for them. Their guiding idea is to live debt-free. Therefore, they are better off financially than the Bhumij of Keonjhar. The livelihood pattern of the study population is not only different from the other Bhumij study population researched by the author but also different from the literature available about the Bhumij that they are a land-holding tribe and the principal source of their livelihood is agriculture, which is nowhere found in any of the studies done yet.

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