



## Acculturation, Adaptation and Change: An Anthropological Study on Inter-Caste Relationship in a Tribe Caste Village of North India

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### KEYWORDS

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De-Tribalisation,  
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### ABSTRACT

*“The soul of India lives in its villages” rightly said by Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nation. This article provides a microcosmic study of a North Indian village and aims to explore the relationship between tribe and caste in a village with a mixed population of tribal and non tribal groups. It focuses on the gradual change of attitude and tradition of the tribals towards the unending competition race with the non tribals, which has led to the partial adaptation to the traditions of non tribals which resulted in acculturation and detribalisation. The present paper is also an attempt to produce a functional analysis of the solidarity and inter dependency between tribals and non tribals and the ways in which they live together harmoniously in a tribe-caste village.*

### Introduction

The Indian village has a special kind of communication system characterized by caste relations. In fact villages in India demonstrate many elements of structural unity, such as a sentiment of territorial ‘political’ kinship and economic solidarity. The sense of village identity on many occasions cuts across caste loyalties, which usually divide a village.

Thus a village as a micro-structure has not only been recognized, but it has gradually become a vital aspect of the National Developmental Planning as well as politico-cultural consciousness in general. Therefore, it becomes an important subject of study.

Social Anthropology, as a discipline focuses on intense emic data gained inductively from a long term association with small communities, has always shown a special interest in village studies. One of the major trends in social Anthropology, during the last two decades or so, has been a substantial shift from the study of more or less isolated tribal peoples. These, however, are confronted by modernity, hence altering their way of life radically, especially in those aspects, which were once anthropologists most prized raw material to the study of peasants. From the view point of structural relationship rather than occupational, peasant cultures can be viewed as part society and part culture. Such a change in the academic trend of social anthropology had been brought about by American anthropologists, among whom the name of Robert Redfield deserves to be mentioned, as he was the first anthropologist, who carried out systematic village study in Tepoztalan, a village in Mexico. Village studies in India historically

goes back to the year 1861 when Sir Henry Maine published his *Ancient Law* (London). Oscar Lewis, usually known for his *Life in a Mexican Village; Tepoztlán restudied* (1951), also wrote *Village Life in Northern India*. (1965). McKim Marriott did field work in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra, edited *Village India*, and authored varied studies on rural social organization and change, and in particular he edited the volume *Village India: studies in the little community* (1955).

The village selected for this study is Dhanaura, a village in the Duddhi block in the Dudhi Tehsil of district Sonbhadra, Uttar Pradesh, where one can find live high castes, lower castes, as well as tribes.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To find out the -caste relationship in their multiple aspects.
2. To assess the process of acculturation and mutual influences over to each other, whether it is one sided or both sided.
3. To examine the retention of tribal identity during the course of the acculturation process.

### **Research Methodology**

In this paper both primary and secondary data have been used for the analysis. The primary data has been collected by means of interviews, participant observation, questionnaires. In the selection of the respondents, the simple stratified random sampling has been applied. As Dhanaura is a tribe-caste village, various tribes and different caste group are living together: therefore each caste and tribes are distributed in different strata. Then from each strata respondents have been selected on the basis of a simple random sampling technique. Besides this, secondary data was collected from research reports, district websites and regional tribal offices. The secondary data was ratified during field data collections.

### **Study Area**

Uttar Pradesh is a state situated in North India. It coordinates 26.850N 80.910E latitude and longitude. It is the most populous state in India as well as the most populous country subdivision in the world. The Sonbhadra District is the 2nd largest district in India which borders four states namely Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Bihar. The Sonbhadra District is also famous for its Industrial Zone and it is also called as Energy Capital of India. A tribe-caste village, which is situated geographically and ethnically on the fringe of district and state, has been my selected field work site.

As per our census the total population of Dhanaura is 4703 out of which there are 2493 males and 2210 females and the total number of households were 673.

### **Findings**

Dhanaura village is the main village in Duddhi block, and exemplifies how tribes and castes live together without deteriorating their identities and cultures. Though both have adopted traits from each other, the tribes have adopted Hinduism, but they still have maintained their ethnic identity.

The people of Dhanaura are simple and believe in peace. They are poor, hence everyone is busy in running their livelihood. Males and females work together especially as labourers and cultivators. They speak Hindi and Bhojpuri. Despite being poverty stricken, they are actively involved in educating their children. Dhanaura is divided into tribal and non tribal groups. There are 16 castes in the non tribal group and 5 in the tribal group.

**Tribes** - Gond (*Maajhi*), Chero, Panika, Bhuiya, Kharwar.

**Castes** - *Brahmin, Kshatriya, Srivastava, Agrahari, Kalwar, Teli, Naai, Kewat, Lohar, Kumbar, Biyar, Koiri, Chamar, Paasi*, and Muslim.

Tribals are the original inhabitants and non tribals are the ones who are either migrated from other states or the ones who have forcefully taken the lands of tribals and settled on their lands. The majority of the inhabitants of Dhanaura is Hindu.

The tribal population is one fourth of the total population. In the past, they had their unique culture: their festivals, and the rituals related to magic and religion were not performed by Brahmins, but by a *Baiga* (man of Chero Tribe). However, today the tribes have undergone a process of acculturation, due to which the tribals have abandoned their own custom and traditions, and have fully adopted the rituals and traditions of Hindus.

Thus the gap between tribals and non tribals has been filled in some way. Among the tribals, the *Gonds* are the most numerous. Their population consists of 826 out of 4703, almost 18% of the total population, and among the non tribal population the *chamars* have highest population, i.e. 800 out of 4703, 17% of total population. Dhanaura is situated differently from the other villages are situated on a plain. The houses here are scattered because of the lack of communication between the castes. Dhanaura has been divided into 5 Tola- Dhanaura I, Dhanaura II, Japla, Bagbiyani and Piprahi. In Dhanaura I, there are the smaller hamlets which are named after the castes such as *Brahmin Tola, Thakur Tola, Abir Tola*.

The population of the various castes is almost the same, though the *Brahmins* are a little more numerous, and they are economically stronger than the rest. Moreover, the castes are not so friendly with each other, as they are always vying for headship. Currently also the Gram Pradhan has been a *Brahmin* since 10 years.

Mythologically the *Kshatriyas* consider themselves lower than the Brahmins, because Brahmins are priests, even if few Brahmins are still doing their traditional *Panditai*, and the rests are involved in agriculture, govt. job, business etc.

Table No. 1.1

S. No	Brahmin Occupation	No. of Households	Percentage
1.	Priest	15	23.07%
3.	Govt. Job	11	16.92%
4.	Business	10	15.38%
5.	Maha Brahman	7	10.76%
	Total	65	100%

The Kshatriya are land holders and are economically sound and hold strong position in Dhanaura. They hold important posts in Duddhi Tehsil and also in the Gram Panchayat.

### **Participation of Pandits in Ceremonies and Festivals**

The Brahmins have always been perceived as the connecting link between God and the humans. The *Pandits* (Priests) are the highest officials among the Brahmins, therefore they do not enter the house of a lower caste person, neither they take food nor drink water from the members of that house. They behave differently with different caste people. They show respect for the upper caste people and ignore those of the lower castes. The *Chamar* is a dalit community classified as a Scheduled Caste under

modern India's system of affirmative action. They occupy the lowest rung of the social prestige ladder in the Pandit mentality; although the *Pandits* are present in the marriages of any caste, they do not eat food with everybody. The *Pandits* also perform the *Mundan*, *Chatthi*, *Barahi*, and *Yagyopaveet* ceremonies of the upper castes, as well as the *Katha*. The *Pandits* perform the *pooja* (rituals) for the lower castes in temples or any other place, but not in their houses. As to some intermediate caste people, they do not eat food together with them, therefore they are given *seedha* (remuneration with grains and other edible stuff) so that they can prepare food themselves.

### Acceptance and Denial of Food and Water

There are two types food told by Dhanaura men- the *Kaccha* and the *Pakka*. The *Kaccha Khana* (the acceptance of water and ordinary foods cooked in water from members of lower ranking castes Inferior food) includes *Dal Chawal* (lentil rice), *Roti Sabzi* (whole wheat flat bread with a vegetable dish featuring all sorts of Indian spices) and the *Pakka khana* (*Pakka* food contains *ghee*, clarified butter, a very costly fat) includes *Poori* made of oil and *ghee*. People belonging to two different castes generally do not eat *kaccha khana* together. If a lower caste person accepts food only from a Brahmin and a Thakur, then they can only have *poori* (a traditional whole wheat fried bread) made of oil or *ghee* from any other caste as it is believed that anything cooked with oil and put on fire is pure. This is seen still among the *Gonds* of Dhanaura.

Moreover, even if a caste person eats with another caste person, then they generally do not eat *bhaat* (Rice), especially with a higher caste person. The rule of not eating *bhaat* is so strict that when the *Gonds* were asked about this tradition, they told that do not eat rice even in some of their own sub castes. The Hindu castes accept rice only from the *chamar* in lower castes and no scheduled tribes. Similarly the *Gond* and the *Kharwar* do not accept rice as food from any tribal group and from any caste, not even from the Brahmins.

The Brahmins do not accept the *kaccha* (inferior) food from any caste not even from the Kshatriya. The Kshatriya do not accept *Kaccha Khana* from the Brahmins in a Brahmin's home, but if it is served somewhere else, they can have the food. Brahmins can accept sweets or dairy products from the Kshatriya. The food pattern or the food intake relation between the Brahmins and the other castes is the same as the relation between the Kshatriya and the other castes. All the other upper castes follow the food pattern of the Kshatriya. The Kalwars, Agrahari, Srivastava, Lohars, Ahir, and Kewat do not have any taboo for the *Pakka Khana*, but generally they do not accept *Pakka Khana* from the Kumhar, Teli, Chero, Panika, Paasi, Chamar and Bhuiya, with few exceptions. The Kshatriya do not have *Pakka Khana* with the *Chero* but few castes such as the Lohar, Ahir, Kewat, Kumhar, and Teli have *Pakka Khana* with the *Chero*. The *Gond*, *Chero*, and *Kharwar* tribal groups enjoy some hierarchical status but the *Gonds* are more respectable because firstly they more numerous, secondly they are the original inhabitants, though they do not have any taboo as to the exchange of food. The *Panika* and the *Bhuiya*, on the other hand, are the lowest tribal group that can eat *kaccha* and *pakka Khana* with the other tribal groups, but the tribe did not accept food in their houses. The lower castes can accept water from upper castes, but the upper castes only accept it from the touchables. It is a general notion that those castes from whom water can be taken are suitable for the *Pakka Khana* (Fig.1).

### Discrimination in the Seating Arrangement

Lower caste people cannot sit together with upper caste people. It is mandatory for the upper castes to sit above the lower caste people; however, while attending the Panchayat an exception was seen. At the Panchayat Bhawan, Dhanaura it was seen that among the *panches* of the members of the Gram Panchayat, certain low caste people were sitting next to the Pradhan and other upper caste people. But

it was also seen that whenever a low caste person sees an upper class person, he stands in due respect. We can also say that the discrimination is practiced not only through the castes, but also through education, post, business etc. In the Panchayat Bhawan, there was no such discrimination. In the primary school of Dhanaura there were teachers and attendants belonging to the lower castes, yet they sat together with other upper caste teachers and enjoyed equal status.

### **Intermingling during Festivals**

There is no discrimination among the castes in any festival except the *Holi*. The lower castes cannot put coloured powders (*abir gulal*) to the high caste people although they can wear them. The main reason behind it is that water untouchability.

### **Interrelations between Castes**

In spite of strong racism or the casteism seen in the village, the villagers are bonded through strong social relations which fill the gap between the higher castes and lower castes. In this the *Jajmani* system and traditional occupation of the castes plays an important role. Every caste plays an important part in maintaining the integrity of the village. As seen earlier, the Brahmins (Pandits) are in contact with every caste. The Lohar and the Gonds also do the work of carpentry (*Badhaigiri*). Thus they do useful services to the villagers, for example, by repairing ploughs and making the wooden blocks to be used in the weddings. The *Kumbar*, on the other hand, are potters, making *dona* (cups) and *pattal* (plates) made from clay as well as from *Palash* (*Butea monosperma*). Irrespective of higher and lower castes, the *chamar* provide their services whenever a child is born, similarly the *Naai* (barbers) are also called during birth, mundane, marriage, and death events. Since the *Dhobi* (washermen) do not live in Dhanaura, when needed, they are called from other villages. The *Cheros* are also an indispensable part of the village because they are the *Baiga* of the village, an ancient job handed down by paternal line. The *Baiga* are the traditional healers and practitioners to whom everyone goes either for treatment of a disease, as well as ghost and witchcraft problems, etc. The *Chero* call themselves the 'owners of the land' therefore their presence is mandatory in all the festivals related to land such as sowing, reaping, harvesting in agriculture, and digging out clay for the *matkodhwa* (a wedding ritual). In the marriage ceremonies a *baiga* has vital role irrespective of any caste. In every house, when the seeds are sown and the harvesting of crops done, a *baiga* is called to thank the deities for the successful agricultural endeavour. He also performs certain worship for the welfare of village called as *Gaaon Banana* and *Gaaon Gothna*.

All the land owners who belong to upper castes are heavily dependent upon the lower castes for their help in harvesting, sowing, irrigation, etc.. Similarly the lower caste and the tribals are dependent on the higher caste for their jobs or part time occupations. Thus, due to this interdependency of castes and tribes on each other in everyday life leads to closeness and solidarity in spite of the strict caste rules. The tribes and castes live together in Dhanaura building a strong bond due to such interdependency. The following diagram shows the interdependency of the various castes and tribes.

### **Transition Phase**

The interaction with other villagers and migrated population people coming from different cities or even countries to work which has turned the strict caste rules into a flexible ones for reasons similar to these found in Dhanaura. People have become liberal now. The factors included are social interaction, communication sources- Media, television, phones, abolition of the *zamindari* system introduced by the British rule concerning the ownership of the land, various development schemes launched by the government, a new awareness among the lower castes and tribes. All those privileges and power owned by higher caste people today are demanded by the lower castes and tribes. They state their opinions strongly, they are no more slaves now. We see that even if the rules of acceptance and denial of food are

still prevalent, but we also encounter people as Brahmin *Mahabir Pandit* who eats at every wedding feast, even a *chamar* one. When he was asked why, in spite of the rules of purity, he ate with Chamar and Bhuiya families, he smartly said, “hotel me Jo Khate hain vo kaun sa Brahmin Thakur banate hain” (‘even we do not know the castes of the people who cook food in hotels’). The upper castes now have become more tolerant towards the lower caste. Thus these old practices are no doubt getting followed, but gradually they are losing grip, and the jimmy being used to force open this door is made of awareness, education, job security.

## Conclusion

The castes and the tribes were interdependent; an effect of acculturation was that the tribes adapted Hinduism and followed all the rituals and festivals of Hindu. The village of Dhanaura witnessed acculturation i.e. the tribes were adopting the cultures and rituals of the castes, but presently transculturalion is also evident. An example is the fact that all the castes worship *Nanku Baba*, who was a *Gond*, is worshipped by the tribes, and even the Muslims have profound faith in him. The castes here do not have many statues of Gods and Goddesses, and in Dhanaura there was only two temples dedicated to Lord Shiva, who is also worshipped by the tribals. The tribes follow Hindu wedding rituals, and the castes also follow tribal rituals in every Hindu wedding, the *Baiga (Chero)* is called for the *Matkodwa, Mandap chana* rituals, and for the *Mehadbar Pooja*, which is a tribal ritual and on many occasions the tribes and castes complement each other. A characteristic tribal feature, that is the fields close to the houses in the villages is imitated by the castes.

The diner relationships are evident from the acceptance of food. Earlier the rules were strict and people followed them. The upper castes and intermediate castes did not accepted food and water from lower castes. The *Pandits* did not perform the ceremonies in the houses of lower castes and tribal families, but now the *Pandits* go to the weddings of the lower castes, even if they do not eat food and generally they do not go to their houses. The *pooja* or any ceremony is kept in temple or anywhere, except the house. In the *Gond* marriage the priest (*Dharmacharya*) performs the wedding rituals. The *Gonds* also now take food and water from other castes, unlike their ancestors, but they do not eat rice *bhaat* in anyone’s house especially in those belonging to upper and lower castes. The practice of untouchability is diminishing, while it is gradually strengthening the commensality between castes and tribes. Besides, the tribe-caste interaction can be seen in events such as weddings, births, rituals done for the welfare of the village. The Kshatriya wedding is a classic example of intercaste relation in present Dhanaura: a Brahmin (*Pandit*) performs ceremonial rituals, a *Baiga* is present for the *Matkodwa & Mandap Chana*, a *Lohar* brings a wooden table and flags for the pillars of *Mandap*, a *Naai* invites the villagers, the *Chamars* are there for cleaning purposes, they bring *dona*, a *Dhobin* makes the *sindoor daan* (the mark of a married woman in Hinduism, by applying sindoor, red color, in her parting of the hairline), *Gonds* are among the invitees, a *Kumhar* brings the earthen pots, and the various castes help each other in this way. Thus they have strong intercaste interaction, due to which these heterogeneous population are able to live in harmony with each other.

This tribe-caste village was different in a way that regardless of the culture contact with the Hindus, and going through a process of acculturation and partial detribalization, the tribal groups have maintained their identity. Thus transculturation was more evident than acculturation. However in the world of globalisation and in the society of competition, the tribals compete with the upper castes and in the process of continuously comparing themselves to the Hindu, they have undergone a partial detribalization. Their continuous exposure to the castes has lead to this, but this fact is beneficial to them in many ways. This adoption of Hindu culture has brought them in the stream of progressive development, which is good for their multifaceted development. Tribals of other states are lagging

behind as they are living in a homogenous population, so they do not have to face competition with the outer world.

The socio economic status of the Dhanaura people has been upgraded due to the castes residing in the village. However every time when two cultures comes in contact there are some pros and cons. Earlier they were exploited by the castes but now the tribals have passed that transition phase, when they were struggling for their identity. The tribals here are the indispensable part of the village. Poverty exists, which is the important reason behind their backwardness, but they are no more the deprived class of the village. Also they are no more exploited by the migrant castes. The immigrated castes have adapted themselves according to the atmosphere of the village.

This tribe-caste culture of Dhanaura is a partial example of the theory of assimilation postulated by anthropologist and sociologist G.S. Ghurye. According to him the tribals are the backward Hindus, therefore they should be completely merged with or assimilated into the Hindu. This way and their own ethnicity and cultural identity will be destroyed by the complete assimilation. In response to this, Majumdar advocated that it is impossible to completely ignore the entire tribal population, complete assimilation will lead to a chaos. Therefore a gradual transformation is the best policy for any tribal population. The tribals should be helped in assimilating in their own way. This fact is evident in Dhanaura, the tribes and castes are living in their own way and have their own choices of what to select and reject from the other culture which is the prime factor in maintaining a peaceful relationship between the tribal and non-tribal group of this village.

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**Figures**

Fig.1 - The exchange of food between the Thakur (an upper caste) and other castes.

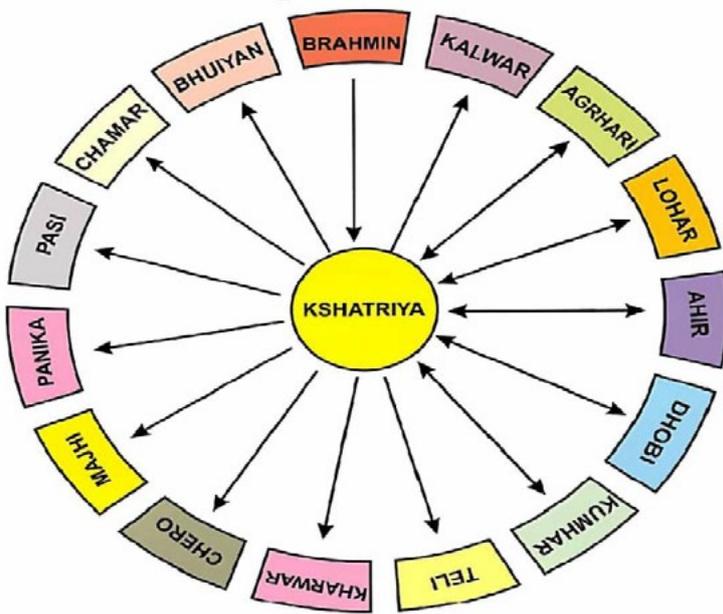


Fig. 2 - Marriage of an upper caste Hindu

