

ASUR

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The Asuras: An Ethnographic Profile

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CHAPTER - I

Sub Headings of the Ethnographic Report will be in the following manner

1. Introduction (Present demography, Origin, Migration, History etc).

(A) Present Demography:

(B) Origin: The Asuras were originally from Chotanagpur and eastern portion of surguja. They were civilized mining and house building people. They are now iron smelting tribes living mostly in the tributaries states.

A non Aryan tribe of Chota Napur and the eastern portion of Surgujya, whom Col. Dalton connects with the traditional Asuras destroyed by Sing-Bonga, the Chief God of the Mundas. Risely supposes them to be the remnant of the earlier settlers who were driven out by the Mundas. Herr Jellinghaus rightly suggest, that they were a civilised mining and house- building people who have left behind them in Chota Nagpur trace of their ancient buildings, popularly called "Asura-garhs" they are now an iron smelting tribe, living mostly in the Tributary States and in small number , in Ranchi, Palamau, Manbhum and Hazaribagh. They have thirteen totemistic sections. The non-Aryan Lohars, called by the name of Agoria are often supposed to be a sub-caste of the primitive Asuras. (Page-56)

Asurs have traditionally been iron-smelters. The modern Asur tribe is divided into three sub-tribal divisions, namely Bir (Kol) Asur, Birjia Asur and Agaria Asur. The Birjia are recognized as a separate schedule tribe.

The Asurs are territorially distributed in two contiguous states (4564) namely Bihar (4388) and M.P (175). In Bihar they are only confined to the districts of Ranchi (4156) and Palamau (232). In Ranchi district they are found under the police station Bishnupur (1717), Chainpur (1153), Gaghra (747), Lohardaga (539) and in the district of Palamau (232) under Latehar (199) and Mahuadand (33) police station.

The Asur locality is known as the Netarhat route group of plateaus. This hill ranges run from south to north and their top is locally called as "Pat". The Asurs now inhabit this Pat regions. Their cultivated land is mainly untraced, which becomes unfit for further plough cultivation after a continuous use of 50 to 20 years due to heavy annual soil erosion during the rains. At present there are no irrigational facilities in this region and their agriculture is completely dependent on regular distribution of rainfall throughout the period of agriculture operation. Irregular rainfall and long draughts are usual for this region. Economic distress therefore is a permanent characteristics of the present Asur life.

2. Linguistic affinity

The tribal languages are irresistibly shifting to languages of domineering communities with whom the tribals are coming in contact. For example hindi has a tremendous impact on the tribal languages in the Central and Western part of India. Hindi has taken shape of a dialect of its own kind. About half of the tribal in India have already changed their traditional language and thereby they are neglecting their own age old tribal languages.

Physical features

1. Material culture

As referred to earlier in the study, three villages namely, Korkotpat, Sakhuapani and Tutuapani were selected randomly for intensive and extensive study. The communities residing in these villages were Munda, oraon, kisan, Asur, Birjia and Bania.

The understanding of material culture has been explained in points below—

1. Use of Forest material in the culture of house erection :

They use wooden pillars and bamboos in the erection of walls shed, kotha and roof, door, windows etc. With cutting implements like axe shaw, chisels, adze etc the cut wood and bamboos according to requirements. They do not use all kinds of wood in the house.

2. Use of wood and bamboo in constructing walls :

At the time of erecting walls, first of all wood-pillars or thick bamboo pillars are inserted at all corners of the house and the place of the door or entrance in the house and room. The pillars determine the thickness of the wall. The space between two pillars determines the thickness of the wall to be erected. The space for the window and gate is done with the help of bamboo pieces or wood pieces.

3. Use of Forest Material in Choukhat (door frame):

The tribals of the Pat region use the wood of the forest for Choukhat. Previously, they used to cut wood from the forest and shape them in the form of Choukhat with the help of iron implements.

4. Use of wood in Jungala (Window) :

The tribals of Pat region use wood from the forest for the purpose of the frame and door of the window.

5. Use of Wood in Kewari (Door):

The villagers use wood for making Kewari (door) they close the door with kewari.

6. Use of wood in Constructing Middle floor:

In erecting double storied house, the villagers construct in the middle floor with the help of wood pillars, bamboos, thorny leaves and mud.

7. Use of Wood in Constructing Roof :

The roofs of houses in the villagers were constructed either with bushes and leaves or with tiles. The roof of shed or jhopari is made with wood pillars, bamboos, rope, bushes, leaves, and long grass. Bamboos are spread over the wood pillars. Over bamboos, grasses, straw, leaves and bushes are placed and tied with rope at certain intervals.

2. Occupation (Economy, Livelihood, and pattern): Main occupations of this tribe were building houses and blacksmith. (An Historical Outline of Pre-British Chotanagpur- By Mangobind Banarjee.)

The economic system of tribals such as ASURAS can be discussed in the following heads:

1. Hunting and fishing: Earlier the tribals residing in Pat regions of Chotanagpur considered themselves as the King of forest and were free to do hunting gathering grazing etc. After the ban on hunting the tribals of Pat region do this practice illegally. They hunt animals like deer at night when the latter visit their villages. No villager discloses this fact. Sambhar, jackal, fox, wild goat etc are also hunted for the purpose of eating. They trap hares for eating and earning money by selling them in local haat.

They hunt birds like Titir, Bater, Haril, Bagula, Panduk, Janghil, Chakawa, Bageri etc.

Tribals do fishing in small ponds and Nala available in and around the forest. They do fishing in group. They also catch turtle and crabs for eating.

2. Instrument of hunting: The instruments related to hunting are Bhala, Baracha, Garasa, Chaku, Gulel, bow and arrow.
3. Instrument of fishing : the instruments of fishing are net, harpoons, and basket,
4. Food Gathering: The Tribals of Pat region do the collection edible roots, shoots, and leaves, flowers and fruits. They have been explained as under :
 - Collection of root : Haser, kulu Bawala, kundari pathal Kohara etc
 - Collection of shoot: edible shoots like stalk of Kanda, karami, sag, Gandhari sag, bathua sag etc.
 - Collection of leaves: saoura, maltha, birlak, chuchi, pirlak, pinder, muchara dhai, jaaru, hisa, pathan, chhata, hite.
 - Collection of flowers: dhawai, murup, koinar, kehara, yarm, nayor, sidha.
 - Collection of fruits: jamun, mahua, bair, kathal, kekhasa, kahua, sarai, udra, titil, piyar, pithor, amla, Imali, marleth, janu, karundh, sajom, hunda, khekkhasa.
 - Collection of mushroom: morang, simdali, kanar, badho, talros, sarjam, lawa, moth, mocha, paltera, phulkel.
5. Craft making: other minor economic activities of tribals of pat region are rope making, mat making, broom making, basket making.

3. Food habit

4. Village life (type of village)

5. Dress & Ornaments:

- Dress: New born babies are kept in old cloths till the period of **Chattis**. On the day of **chhatis** child is given to wear **ganjis**, **pants** and **bushshirts** and that of girls is **frock** and **pants**. Young males wear **pants**, **shirts**, **ganji** and **Lungi**. Young girls wear **saris**, **saya** and **blouse**. Adult and aged females are found wearing **luga**. From the same **luga** they cover the upper portion of the body. Aged males were **dhoti** and **ganji**.
- Ornaments: Female are very fond of ornaments. They wear Bali, Kanbali, Kangan, Mala, Kamarbala etc. Made of steel, Rold Gold, Brass, and various kinds of threads. Married women wear Gold and Silver ornaments. (Forest and Tribals in India: Ajit K. Singh, Gaya Pandey and Prabhat K. Singh)
- S.C Roy mentions a list oof pre historic finds in Chotanagpur. " besides this objects , the finds from the ASURA sites of Chotanagpur include terracotta pottery of different shapes and sizes, some handmade some wheel made some having incised designs on them either symbolic or ornamental, fragments of enamelled pottery, small terracotta models of birds and animal heads, stone bulls, a tiny copper bronze and copper belts, stone maces, stone corn crushes, ring stones stone anvils, neolithic and mesolithic axe heads, chisels, hammer stones, small low stools and miniature copper stools, presumably used

ceremonial purposes, rock crystal beads, faience heads, beads of coloured stones some of which are semi precious such as carnelian and lapis lazuli, and small terracotta cones which have the appearance of phalli symbols."

6. Art and Craft:

A comparison of the kiln burnt bricks and stone slabs in the Asura sites in Chotanagpur with those in the Indus valley sites, would seem to indicate that the sizes of bricks in the Indus valley varied from 9.5x 4.35 x 2 to 20.25x10.50 x 3.50 and that the common size was 11 by 5.5 by 2.5 inches; whereas each brick of the "Asura" building measures on an average 17 inches in length, 10 inches in breadth and 3 inches in thickness. The other features, described by Mackay, namely bathroom, erection of artificial platform for foundation, presence of wells, drains, the "L" shaped bricks etc, must be considered minor and peculiar to the artistic taste of the people of the Indus valley.

What really the prehistoric sites of Chotanagpur have not yet been able to show are the artefacts of the golden and silvers, figures in yogic postures and the picture signs for writing. But it may be argued that there are still innumerable probable sites to be examined and as long as these sites remain unexplored. We are not in a position to acknowledge the total absence of a few features that distinguish the culture of the Indus valley from that of Chotanagpur. Comparing a great people with a small, we may suppose that the unique opportunities for development of the contemporary culture in the Indus valley, which was the meeting ground of other ancient seed plots of the prehistoric civilization, were completely absent in Chotanagpur. Truly, the writer of the article on "Caste, Race and religion in India" remarks, "the two cultures have a family likeness although the difference between them is as great as between an illiterate are seen brought up in rude surroundings and a highly cultured big brother accomplished in various arts and sciences in more than one celebrated foreign university were intimate contact with diverse peoples of diverse cultures has further improved his culture to an extra ordinary degree". But both the makers of the Indus valley civilization and the prehistoric Asuras of Chotanagpur would appear to belong to the Mediterranean race to which, again, the Dravidians of the Southern India may be included in respect of racial and cultural affinities. The copper stone or Chalcolithic age intervenes between the Neolithic and the Copper age and although we have unearthed only a few artefacts of the Palaeolithic age or the Old Stone Age, we have no less than two hundred stones implements of the Neolithic age and about the same number of finds belonging to the Copper age. The Neoliths comprises hand-axes; bone shaped stone hammers, spear heads, chisels of many shapes and sizes, flakes, cores, medium sized triangular polished celts. These artefacts speak for themselves. They are imperishable proofs of the most ancient history of Chotanagpur. We are in possession of a large number of imperishable materials which furnish unmistakable evidence of the

existence of the Copper age in Chotanagpur. The most important copper artefacts, bracelets, vessels only one on stand " Handy" Jars, axe heads, in the Bronze implements include ear rings, cubs, dishes, bells, bracelets, and anklets. Besides these there have been discovered more than a dozen earthen ware urns, resembling in size and designed a similar finds in the Indus valley which contained traces of bones presumably the post cremation burials. Fortunately, we are in a position to show iron implements such as bracelets, rings, arrow heads, and other miscellaneous finds. They are now in the Patna museum.

7. Social organization (Society, Clan system):

- Social: Family is the minimum social unit among the Asur. A family is composed of husband, wife and their unmarried children. After marriage a son is asked to establish a separate household. However he receives full cooperation from the parents and other sibling. In this way, the family is essentially nuclear and is the centre of social, economic and religious activities. The family is matrilineal, kinship is reckoned through lineage in the line of father. Thus in a village one finds the patrilineal descent group.

There is peculiar custom of marriage among the Asur which is known as Idi-Tai-Maa or Idi-Mi. In this system of marriage, no formalities are required. A male and a female meet in the forest or in local hat and decide to spend life like a couple i.e. husband and wife. The permission of parents is sought before taking such decision. Villagers are also made care of it and they never criticise this practice. Rather they encourage this practice which is suitable for their economy. Children born from these couples are treated as legal. But the couple has to fulfil the formality of marriage before the marriage of son and daughter in presence of kith and kins. Giving feast on this occasion is not essential.

Besides this practice of marriage, marriage is also arranged by parents. Marriage takes place amidst Barati. Nominal bride price is also paid. Marriage by service also exists.

Generally monogamous marriages take place but instances of bigamy also come into existence. The instances of divorce are very rare. The marriage season is from Pusha to Phalgun month.

In the occasion of marriage the Asuras bride gives iron bracelet to the groom. (Deoram Tasa Rachanavali: Ganesh Chandra

Kurmi, Forest and tribals in India: Ajit K. Singh, Gaya Pandey and Prabhat K. Singh)

- Clan: The Asur have a clan system based on totemism. The clan is named after bird, animals, plants, and trees. The Asur were divided into ten totemic clans. Those were: Lila, Barwa, Dhan, Kerketta, Toppo, Khusar, Titio indawar Benga and Minj. The clan in Asur is patrilineage. Hence marriage between lineage members and clan members is prohibited. They follow village exogamy rule in marriage. Marital distance is found within the radius of 10-12 kilometers.(Forest and Tribals in India: Ajit K. Singh, Gaya Pandey and Prabhat K. Singh)

10. Political life (Customary law, Kinship)

At present, the political behaviour of the Asur can be discussed under the heading –

The traditional political system and the modern political system.

The traditional political system: The traditional political system is still functioning in the village of the Asur. Each Asur village has a political head of the village. If an Asur village is a multilineage one then each lineage group has its own head. The head of all lineage groups select the head of the village. In a Môn lineage village the eldest male member of the village occupies the post of village head. In multi lineage group village, the eldest member of each lineage group becomes the head of the lineage. The eldest member among the heads of the lineage group becomes the head of a multi lineage Asur village.

The head of the village is known as the Pradhan. All adult and elder male members of the village assist the village Pradhan. The village head takes political decisions in a democratic manner. He takes a decision in consultation with the counsel of elders.

It is the duty of the village head to see whether social, economic, religious and political orders are being maintained in the village or not. He tries to solve the conflict between husband and wife, between two families, between two hamlets, between two tribes and between two villages. The oath on truth or false, compromise, etc takes place in the Sarana where all elders of the village assemble to participate in the trial for justice. If the culprit accepts his faults before the village head amidst the elders of the village and also before the spirits, the head with the permission of the village elders may grant pardon. The culprit may be asked to organize worship in sarana and a feast to the village members.

The decision of the village head is obeyed by all. The village priest Baiga also takes help of the village head at the time of worship. They assemble in sarana only at the time of trial. It is believed that no body dares to speak lie before the spirits. General meeting of the village council is held at the Akhara. The post of the village head is not hereditary. The eldest male member of the village becomes the Pradhan of the village.

11. Religion:

- **Natural Worship:** The Asur worship natural objects like the sun, the moon, the stars, the earth, river, pond, hill. They also worship living natural things like snake, tiger, trees, plants, bushes, crops, birds, etc. The Asur believe that sun god is the supreme-god and earth is the supreme goddess. They also believe in moon god and star god. They have faith in hill-god, well-god, and forest-god. As family is the centre of religious activities, worship of these natural God and Goddesses is desired at the level of family. For the welfare of family, the natural Gods and goddesses are worshipped, there being no fixed time for it though. Whenever the natural gods help a person, he makes a manauti to offer a special worship and the worship is held according to the promise already made.
- **Spirit Worship:** The different Gods and Goddesses are known as spirits. They occupy their seat at a particular place which is known in the name of that particular deity. The places occupied by spirits constitute sacred centres. The important sacred centres of the Asur village are situated in and around Sarana.
- **Sarana:** This is the sacred place of the village. This place is surrounded by Sal trees. It is regarded as the abode of village Gods and Goddesses. The various Gods and Goddesses of Asur are Gaondewata, Patdewata, Duariadewata, Mahadaniadewata, Devi Mai, Goraeya. They reside in Sarana, Darmesh, Dharati Mai, Baghdeo, Lakararadeo, Nagdeo, Jaldeo, all reside in the Sarana. All these Gods and Goddesses are benevolent and their worship takes place annually at community level. There are some malevolent spirits, these malevolent spirit are also worshipped.
- **Ancestral Spirit:** The ancestral spirits like Burha Deo, Kuldeo, Vanshdeo, Kulmai, etc., reside in the burial ground. The worship of ancestral spirits is performed at family level whenever a child is delivered in the family or a marriage in the family takes place.
- **The festival:** The important festivals of the Asur are related to agriculture, hunting, iron-smelting and the ancestors. The main festivals related to agriculture are Dharati Puja, Halpuja, Hariyali, Dhankatani, Nawanna, etc. The festival related to cattle is sohrai. The festival related to the worship of Sal tree is Sarhul and that of Karam tree is Karama. The festival related to hunting (Sendra) is about to vanish. In Phalgun, they celebrate Phagu festival. The Ba festival is related to ancestral worship. They also celebrate Dussehra and Diwali. The festival related to the iron-smelting is Sarasi- Kutasi. This festival is also vanishing because the Asur have given up their traditional occupation of iron-smelting.
- **The sacred specialists:** The Baiga priest is the sacred specialist of the Asur. It is he who mediates between the Asur and the various kinds of spirits. Also, he decides the day and time festival, types of animals to be sacrificed and the persons to participate in the festival. The Baiga priest is assisted by the Gorait.
- **The Sacred Performance:** The sacred performance at family level takes place without the aid of sacred specialist. The old family member gets the rituals done. But at the level of community, sacred

performance is done with the help of sacred specialist, the Baiga Priest and his assistant, the Gorait.

- Similar ranks as Hindus have been acquired by the Gowalas, Telis, Hoiris, Hajjas, Kumhars and Barhis and Kamars of Singhbhum; nonand the Chiks, Baraiks, Mahalis, Pans, Lohars Bhogtas, Rantias and Garaits of Ranchi who though probably non Aryan in decent claim to be and are recognised as Hindus.

12. Line of descent

13. Disposal of death

Disposal of the dead by cremation is rare, and only resorted to in case of old people. All the clothes belonging to the deceased are buried with him and those who can afford to rape the clothes in a new cloth. Some pieces are put into the grave and one piece is put into the mouth of the deceased. They burry their dead with feet to the south. They must bath when returning from a burriel. The Kaman or dinner in honour of the deceased takes place in the usual way, eight days or a fortnight after the death. If at that time there is no rice available it is postponed till it can be procured. They observe the ceremony of recalling the shadow of the deceased and for this they still have the Mundari " Umbul Ader" though the sadri word, Khai bhitrael is also used. On this point Father Dejaegher writes as follows—" It is done, not on the burial day but on the Kaman day in a place between the ceremony and the house. They make a small machan which they cover with "kher thatching grass". Then they bring a bit cloth which belong to the dead person, and with it they put fire to the whole. Then they say to the dead persons soul, "now run away, thy house is on fire. Go to the cemetery and never return to thy old home". The dead are buried in place known as sasan and a stone for each one is put there. Usually such a place is situated near a water shed but out of the settlement.

Points to be considered for the Ethnographic Study?

A. Name, Identity, Origin and History

1. Name of the community, other name, name referred by other communities, meaning associated with the name.
2. Name mentioned above are considered derogatory in any manner?
3. Traditional demography.
4. History of origin of your community
5. Myth and legends, if any, associated with the origin and migration of your community.
6. Any other information.

B. Habitation pattern

1. Type of village
2. Whether mixed with other communities/religious groups etc.
3. Neighborhood pattern

4. Dwelling unit. Ground plan of the dwelling unit i.e. Rectangular / square/ oval/circular/any other.

5. Any other information.

C. Food and drink

1. Type of utensil used for preparing and serving food and drinks.

2. Staple food.

3. Food items.

4. Drinks and types of drinks.

5. How many meals take everyday.

6. Any other information.

Address and Ornaments

1. Type of dress worn by a) Adult male/ Adult female – i)

head gear, ii) Upper garment, iii) Lower garment. b)

Male child/Female child – i) head gear, ii) Upper garment, iii) Lower garment.

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2. Uniqueness of the dress pattern.

3. Type of dress worn during festivals/special occasion etc.

4. Type of dress used by the Priest, Headman and Medicine man.

5. Ornaments worn by male and female and parts of the body where worn.

6. Materials used for preparation of the ornaments.

7. Any other information.

E. Family, Clan and other Analogous division

1. Type of household

2. Where a couple does usually reside after marriage

3. Traditional practice of descent.

4. Role of family members.

5. Sub caste/sub tribes.

6. Etymological significance of name of each sub castes/sub tribes.

7. Myth and legends associated with sub castes/ sub tribes.

8. Traditional occupation of sub castes/ sub-tribes.

9. Clan/ Gotra of the community.

10. How clan regulates marriage.

11. Any other information.

F. Economic activities

1. Traditional occupation, main occupation pursued now a days and other occupation.

2. Main crops produced.

3. Months of the following activities i.e. ploughing, sowing, weeding Y& harvesting.

4. Activities usually performed by adult male, adult female, male child, female child.

5. Magic-religious ceremonies performed during ploughing, sowing & harvesting.

6. Implements used for ploughing, sowing & harvesting.

7. Any other information.

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Fishing & Hunting

1. Where & how do you fish and how?

2. Implements used for fishing & hunting.

3. Any other information.

G. Life style

1. Beliefs associated with conception. Barrenness, prolong delivery, delivery of dead child & maternity death.

2. Restriction imposed on mother during pregnancy on – Diet, Work, Visiting any place.

3. Who provides assistance during delivery?

4. What type of instruments is used to sever umbilical? cord?

5. How placenta is disposed off.

6. Duration of confinement of mother after delivery.

7. Any other information.

Marriage

1. Age of marriage

2. Type of marriage (elopement, capture, service etc)

3. Whether following practices are prevalent – Child marriage, widow marriage, widower marriage, remarriage, polyandry, polygyny, levirate, sororate and divorce.

4. Custom and practices associated with marriage.

5. Dowry and Bride price.

6. Any other information.

Death

1. Beliefs associated with death.

2. Rituals performed and ritual objects used at the time of disposal of the dead body.

3. Place where dead body is disposed off.

4. Manner in which dead body is disposed off – Cremation, Infant, accident death.

5. Who prepares the site for cremation?

6. How the dead body is placed in the grave/pyre/

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7. What are the offering made to the deceased.

8. Rituals performed at the time of disposed off.

9. Duration of pollution period.

10. Restriction observed during pollution period.

11. Who officiates in performing death rites?

12. Any other information

H. Religion

1. Supreme deity.

2. How supreme deity is associated with the life of the people?

3. When this deity is propitiated?

4. Village deity.

5. Clan deity

6. Malevolent spirit

7. Ancestor worship.

I. Traditional system of social control

1. Traditionally recognized agency/traditional/political

Organization (e.g. Customary law, Panachayat, etc) If yes, are there any permanent set of office bearers.

2. Functions of traditional/political recognized agencies.
 3. Any other information.
- 10.

CHAPTER – II

Five Criteria

1. Primitive traits.
2. Distinctive culture
3. Shyness of contact with the community at large
4. Geographical isolation
5. Backwardness

Conclusion

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CHAPTER – III

Replies to the queries made by RGI/National Commission for SC/ST

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CHAPTER – IV

Conclusion