

Forest Ecology, Livelihood and Cultural Responses of the Abuj Maria of Chhattisgarh: A Study of their continuity and change

Ms. Nirmala Tigga¹
Dr. Nilakantha Panigrahi²

Abstract- Human society has maintained symbiotic relationships with nature and natural resources. Due to internal and external forces experienced over centuries man-nature relationship have changed. The tribal societies who once upon a time were living with the nature and natural resources have also started drifting and living on the nature and natural resources. The depletion of natural resources due to the interventions by the State and market, forces the tribal communities have coopted with the changes observed in their various livelihood resources like forest, animal husbandry, hunting and gathering, shifting cultivation, plain land agriculture. This has also brought in certain changes in their socio-cultural practices, beliefs, attitude and behavior of the tribal people. But the fact remains that the market forces have little impact on the life and living of many tribal communities who are inhabited in inaccessible regions of the country. The present study among the Abuj Marias of Bastar region of Chhattisgarh establishes the fact that the symbiotic relationships with nature and natural surroundings of the Abuj Maria are still continuing in spite of the intervention of the outside forces.

Key words: Symbiotic relations, natural resources, cultural practices, interventions, livelihood, Abuj Maria.

INTRODUCTION

The human society from the primeval times have been depending on the forest and forest-based resources as a perennial source of livelihood, which influence their life and living from birth to death. The forest resources in the form of plants, animals, birds, fruits, etc. are used in various cultural practices in the form of totems, beliefs, customs and symbolizes the community as integral to the physical as well as to metaphysical entities. Internal and external pressures across time have changed man-nature interactions including the tribal communities who live in natural resources rich regions. Their living in the forest has changed to living on the forest and then living away from the forest. With the depletion of forest resources, the livelihoods of tribal communities are diversified based on self-generating natural resources like denuded forest, water, land, animal husbandry, hunting and gathering, shifting cultivation and high land agriculture. Adoption of market-oriented modern agro-inputs have marginal impact on many tribal communities due to their geographical isolation, adherence to socio-cultural lifestyle and perception to development. The symbiotic relationship within their customary practices with local ecological system are still unique need to be restudied. In this context, it is understood that the tribal societies are the organic components of Bharat however due to historical reasons they are known as the *vanyajati*, *girijan*, *janjati*, *adimjati* and Scheduled Tribe as now in Indian Constitution.

¹ Doctoral Fellow, UGC NET JRF, Department of Anthropology and Tribal Development, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya (A Central University), Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, Email-nirmalatiigga01@gmail.com, (Corresponding author), Phone no. 9399563075

² Professor of Anthropology, Department of Anthropology and Tribal Development, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya (A Central University), Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, Email-nilakantha.panigrahi@gmail.com, phone no. 8249300592

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Anthropology studies the man-nature relationship from a holistic perspective. Ecological anthropology aims at studying the interaction between culture and environment consisting of behavior components of human groups with that of land, water and forest resources. The development of man-nature relationships has been viewed in theories like cultural ecology, neo-evolutionism and neo-functionalism and finally processual ecological anthropology. All these debates originated mainly from two broad views such as determinism which emphasizes on the interaction between the environment and culture of a society and possibilism (Hardesty, 1977) Ratzel (1909) studied the interaction between man and his surroundings from anthropo-geographic perspective and supported the environmental determinism. Smith (1925) used environmental determinism as a guiding principle in the life of the people. Huntington (1915) argued that climatic conditions are the dominant forces in the development of great civilizations all over the world. In later period, Evans-Pritchard (1940) and Barth (1956) illustrated the deterministic point of view in which they established the role of ecological factors in shaping the culture, social structure and facilitated the interaction with one another.

Another school of thought highlighted that the environment has a limiting factor to the development of cultural characteristics popularly known as Possibilism (Kroeber, 1939). The experimental studies of Honigmann (1976) and Anderson (1974) tried to bridge the gap between these two approaches through adaptation perspective and argued that society has to cope-up with cultural as well as natural influences. Steward (1955) in his concept of 'cultural ecology' talked about the relationship between society and culture as mutual, which develops certain mechanisms to utilize the environment and its resources for sustenance and economic arrangements which is popularly known as 'Culture Core'. The 'Human Ecology' approach of Duncan and Schnorr (1959) revealed the nature of ecological links to formal organization, technology and economy. The contemporary debates on natural resource management of Hardin (1968) revealed that common resources are subjected to over-exploitation and the role of the State in natural resource management in line with local communities is important. Olson (1965) has stressed the collective action and cooperation as a means of effective management of common property resources, while Ostrom (1987) highlighted the role of social institutions in limiting over-exploitation of natural resources, and hence making the natural resources more sustainable.

Ecological theory-oriented researches in anthropology contributed by Western scholars have also influenced Indian scholars like Vidyarthi's (1963) 'Man-Nature Spirit Complex' studied among the *Maler* community, Das Gupta (1980) on 'Ho' Tribe, Morab's (1980) study on the *Soliga* tribe, Chandra's (1980) study among the *Kinner*, Reddy's (1982) study among the *Nicobarese*, Mann's (1988) work on *Ladakhi* and so on. Looking at the importance of man-nature interaction and the contribution of anthropologist across time and space the present study has the following objectives.

OBJECTIVES

- To describe the socio-economic life and living of the Abuj Maria PVTGs³ living in Chhattisgarh.
- To find out the major sources of livelihood of the Abuj Maria and the contribution of forest resources to their food basket, and changes observed their-in.
- To describe the cultural continuity and changes of the Abuj Maria households observed in their day-to-day life and living.
- Finally, the paper gives couple of contextual suggestions to strengthen the livelihood basket of the Abuj Maria community.

³ PVTGs: Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) denote indigenous communities characterized by declining or stagnant populations, pre-agricultural level of technology, and extremely low literacy rates. They are identified by the Government of India for focused policy intervention and developmental support.

Research Methodology

The present study is a part of the larger study “Forest Ecology, Livelihood and Culture Responses of the PVTGs in the Globalization Era: An empirical study in Chhattisgarh” funded by ICSSR New Delhi, 2023-24. The study covered two villages in Orcha block of Narayanpur district and the fieldwork was carried out in the month of April 2024 for a period of 12 days. Again, revisit was made in the same villages by the authors during the winter vacation of December 2025 to find out certain data and to enrich the analysis through qualitative data. The study accounted the profile of the villages, socio-economic life of the Abuj Maria households, the impact of development indicators on them, their land profile, customary rights on land and land-based resources. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were carried out among different categories like Women Self Help Group (WSHG), village *mukhias* and youths to know the customary practices, along with secondary sources like official records, survey reports, census reports, districts hand book and gazetteers.

The Study Universe-

Chhattisgarh is one of the centrally located tribal dominated States of India, came into existence through bifurcation from Madhya Pradesh on 1st November 2000 and became the 26th State of India. The geography of the state accounts to the tune of 135191 sq km with three distinct geo-physical and socio-cultural regions of Northern and Southern rich in forest resources and different tribal communities, while the central region is popularly known as the 'Rice Bowl' of the State.. The tribal dominated districts of the State include Jagdalpur, Bijapur, Dantewada, Gariaband, Jashpur, Bilaspur, Kanker, Kondagaon, Narayanpur, Sukma, Gaurela - Pendra - Marwahi, Surguja, Kondagaon, Ambikapur and Surajpur. The State has 42 Scheduled Tribe communities of which 05 tribal groups are declared as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) by the nation, while the State Government has declared two tribal groups as State declared PVTGs spread over the scheduled areas of the State.

Narayanpur district is created on May 11, 2007, by way of being carved out from the Bastar district. It is one of the 33 districts of Chhattisgarh. It has a total population of 1,39,820 as per the Census Report (2011), distributed over 366 villages which are located in the Red Corridor of the State. The diversity of the population tunes to 20 inhabitants per sq.km. The sex ratio of the district is 998 females per 1000 males, while the literacy rate of the district turns to 49.59 percent. The Scheduled Tribe population shares 77.36 percent, while Scheduled Caste shares only 3.56 percent in the district. The major languages spoken by the people in the district are *Gondi* (18.14%) *Halbi* (11.35%), *Santali* (9.06%) and *Chhattisgarhi* (4.05%).

The *Abuj Maria*, one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups of India, lives in *Abujmad* region consists of high land, deep forests and mostly lacks basic services like roads, transport, in education, and in health. The land survey is yet to be carried out in the Abujmard region. The people don't have legal rights over their harvested and agricultural lands (Panigrahi et.al.2026). The district is also inhabited by *Muria Gond*. The economy of Narayanpur district is largely contributed by agriculture and allied activities. Ramakrishna Mission Ashram of Narayanpur is the branch of Ramakrishna Mission in the State of Chhattisgarh serving the tribals in remote *Abujmad* region since 1985.

Ramakrishna Mission runs five tribal development centres in the interior parts of Narayanpur district. It runs a higher secondary school and an agricultural training and Demonstration centre. It provides agriculture training to the tribal farmers, agro-demonstration in farmer field, introduces modern bio-farming and local hybrid agro-inputs, provides vocational training for driving, electrical trades to the tribal youths. It has also a 30 bedded hospital, mobile medicinal units, a central library, orphanage, mobile fair price shops, religious activities and other welfare activities for the tribals. The Ashram activities have a good impact in the region among the tribal people.

The *Abuj Maria*: The Study PVTG

The term *Abuj Maria* has a meaningful and symbiotic relationships with *Abujmad* which means inaccessible landlocked region unknown to the larger society. The *Abuj Marias* are named differently by different people in didifferent eras. The British administrators (Welfred and Grant, 1876; Russel and Hiralal, 1916; Griegson, 1938)

called them as *Bison Madia*, *Hill Madia* and *Abuj Madia* respectively who speak the local dialect of the *Gond* which has been influenced by *Halwi*, *Marathi*, and *Gondi dialects* which are similar to *Austroloid* group. The material culture of the *Abuj Madia* people is reflected in their village, housing, grain storage, animal shed, dress and ornaments, day -to- day used items, agriculture implements, hunting items, musical instruments, food and drinks etc.

The *Abuj Madia* people live in *Abujmad* region of Orchha Tehsil of Narayanpur district in Chhattisgarh which is spread over around 3905 sqkms stretched in an area of 95x55 sq kms. They are distributed in around 4786 *Abuj Madia* households which accounts to the tune of 23330 populations consists of 11456 males and 11874 females. The sex ratio among the *Abuj Madia* was reported 1036 per 1000 males (Census of India, 2011). The land settlement activities at household level by the government in *Abuj Madia* region was started in 2009, but it stopped with the fear of Naxals in the deep hill and forest region. A look into the data of Tribal Research Institute (2002), Government of Chhattisgarh, shows that the total population of the *Abuj Maria* tunes to 19,401, among which male counts 9602 and female counts 9799. They live in 237 villages where they are distributed in varying numbers. (Tribal Research Institute Survey Data, Ibid).

Russel and Hiralal, in their book 'The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India' (1916) Vol- III explained that the *Gonds* of Bastar are divided into two groups. They are the *Maria* and the *Muria*. *The Marias* are the wilder and apparently named after *Mad* which is popularly known in Bastar region. Hiralal suggests the derivation of *Muria* from *Mur the Palash (Butea Monosperma)* tree which is common in the plains of Bastar or from *Mur* a root. The *Murias* are the *Gonds* who live in the plains and are more civilized than the *Marias*. *Abuj Madias* are divided into two clan groups like *Mandani* and *Bagh*, who use clan names as surnames. They wear a piece of loin cloth while men folk wear short coats. The women do tattoo and put an ordinary wear ring and necklace (Chandi). They normally eat non-vegetarian food, rice, pulses and largely depend on the forest for the collection of MFPs. They celebrate various festivals like *Nowa*, *Amush*, *Parav*, *Harli*, *Diwali*, etc.

Abuj Maria inhabits in the entire *Abujmad* Hills, one of the most remote and most backward areas in Bastar region. According to the common-sense interpretation based on Hindi, the word *Abujmarh* may mean 'the unknown highlands' (*Abuj* mean unknown). The tract is commonly referred to a *Mar* by other people. Based on the meaning of the word '*Mar*'. Hislop interpret *Maria* as 'Mar of the woods'. The name by which this tribe is referred to in the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes List (Modification) Order, 1956, is Hill Maria. The habitation in *Abujmarh* is fairly recent and may be about a hundred years old. Also, in his opinion, the Hill *Marias* does not originally belong to this area, but have emigrated from adjoining *Kutru*, *Paralkot*, and *Ahiri* tracts. The causes responsible for this migration is not known, definitely there are indications that the exodus, from the old *Paralkot* Zamindari took place because of oppression (Census of India, 1961). *Abhujmar* hills are one of the most remote and most backward areas in Bastar region, which provides an austere environment for its inhabitants. The *Abhujmaria* hills region has 237 villages of which only 154 villages having below 200 populations, 45 villages having 200-499 populations, 6 villages having 500-999 populations and only 2 villages having 1000-1999 populations, whereas 29 villages are having no population. The individual population of *Abhujmaria* is not published in the Census, as it comes under the main ST group i.e., *Gond*. (DWO, Office, Narayanpur, 2025)

The Study villages-

The first village *Gudali* is covered under Orcha Gram Panchayat under Orcha block of Narayanpur district. The village has 65 *Abuj Maria* households spread over the length and breadth of the village which is linked by a 6 Kms kutch motorable road. However, many households do not have road and follow path ways to walk. The village is located 6kms away from Orcha head quarter. In Orchha Tehsil and also block head quarter none of the government officials stay due to the fear of the Naxal menace. The village *Gudali* has one Integrated

Child Development Service (ICDS)⁴ center, PDS⁵ center, one L-I center, but for all other services like bank, post office, bus service, panchayat office, high school, health services, market etc the villagers depend at Orchha. The major clan groups of the *Abuj Maria* community living in the village are *Akadpitter*, *Karama* and *Koram*. There are seven *Abuj Maria* households who have taken Christianity recently in 2012. The village has no irrigation facility over a total of 460 acres of agricultural land, which are owned by the *Abuj Maria* households without any legal entitlement over this land. None of the households in the village is given legal ownership over both homestead and the agricultural land. The village has rich forest land used for community agriculture purpose, *gothan* and village forest. The village has rich forest resources from where the *Abuj Maria* people collect timber, MFPs and fuelwood for personal use. The village has one *Ghotul* (Youth dormitory) house, one *Gudi Mata* (Religious house) and one mobile community toilet (Not used). There are two women Self Help Groups functioning in the village.

The Second Village *Mandali* is one of the villages of Orchha Gram Panchayat under Orchha Block of Narayanpur District is also covered in the study. As the oral history goes, the village has started 4 to 5 generations back when a few *Abuj Maria* households came and stayed here. The village is inhabited by 48 *Abuja* households of whom 06 households have converted to Christianity recently in the year 2012. The village is connected by a 7 kms of kuchha road from Orcha block declined by a small nala which normally detaches the communications to the village during rainy season. The village has one ICDS Center, one PDS Center, and one Primary cum- Middle school. The village has 06 solar based overhead water tanks filled with water from deep bore wells, but only 04 overhead water tanks are supplying water. In addition, the village has one nala and one pond to meet the water requirements of the village. The village possess around 180 acres of unirrigated agriculture land, 50 acres of village forest full of varieties of trees which supply timber, MFPs, and fuelwood for household consumption. The village has separate land areas for community agriculture, and as cultivable waste. Around 300 acres of forest land of the village area have been controlled by the Forest Department and also left by the villagers for natural forest growth. The village produces varieties of cereals, millets, pulses and oilseeds as their major agricultural produces. The village has one *Gotul* house for the villagers to sit, organize small meetings, recreation activities and to take rest in day time. The *Gudi Mata* temple, a small house, is located adjacent to the *Gotul* where *Gudi Mata* is worshipped by the villagers. Government has constructed a small space of 20x 30 feet tin roof cemented space attached with *Gudi Mata* temple for the villagers, but due to heavy rain and cyclone three pieces of roof tins were damaged in 2024. None of the villagers have patta land given by the government, even though the villagers have been cultivating the occupied land for the last 15 to 20 years. Not a single household has been provided with legal ownership over their homestead land. Therefore, for the government the villagers are considered as encroachers of the forest land. The villagers do not have any land mortgage practices. In primary school, Mid-Day-Meal (MDM)⁶ is regularly provided to the students but the quality of MDM as per the menu chart of the government is questioned. Diseases like malaria and diarrhea are commonly observed among the villagers. ANM plays a very important role in disease treatment, but people also practice *Jhadphuk* and *Jadibuti* initially to treat all diseases. Village does not have any Women Self Help Group (WSHG) and also have no wage employment opportunities available under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). The village has one mobile toilet supplied to the villagers in the year 2020, but it was observed defund and not used by the villagers, due to the fact that plenty of land is available for open defecation. It seems the villagers are happy to live with nature and natural resources available in and around their village.

The scanning of certain socio-economic development indicators of the *Abuj Maria* PVTG households shows their backward characteristics visible in day-to-day life. The study region of Narayanpur is equally backward

⁴ ICDS: Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) is a comprehensive welfare programme delivering nutrition, health, and early childhood care services to children below six years and women. It aims to improve child development outcomes and reduce malnutrition.

⁵ PDS: The Public Distribution System (PDS) is a state-regulated mechanism for the distribution of essential food commodities at subsidized prices to eligible households. It functions as a key instrument of food security and poverty alleviation.

⁶ M-D-M: The Mid-Day- Meal (MDM) Scheme is a centrally sponsored programme aimed at providing cooked nutritious meals to school children. It seeks to enhance school participation while addressing issues of child malnutrition and food insecurity.

due to physical inaccessibility, naxal infection and low priority for socio-economic development by the government. The study observed that both the study villages are accessible by kutchra roads. The *Abuj Maria* villages are exclusively inhabited by the Abuj Marias who live alone in their villages. Therefore, *Abuj Marias* have their own identities in the region in terms of life, beliefs, living etc. Only recently, during last 10 years a very small section of the Abuj Maria households are converted to Christianity. These converted households are earmarked with special and separate places for cremation ground and their worship. However, the converted Abuj Maria households are allowed to sit in village level secular meetings, but not allowed to attend the religious meetings in the village, because of their religious boundaries, practices, rituals and rites. However, tribal people did not oppose the process of conversion in their village. During the discussion by the research team at Ghotul with the villagers it was observed that few converted persons who were present there were not able to cope with the non-converted Abuj Maria due to psychological separation and factors created due to the adoption of Christianity and changes in their day-to-day life and living including rituals and rites. Adoption of Christianity has created a form of social and psychological alienation in their mind from the villagers. Most of the Abuj Maria believe in Hindu gods and goddesses, but they are also closely connected to nature, such as stones, trees, rivers, and other natural elements and believe them as the representatives of God and Goddesses. These households believe that their gods and goddesses are primarily reside in these natural objects, manifested in various forms. When comparing their belief systems across generations, it was generally observed that the Abuj Marias have very little changes in their relationship with nature and natural resources. Since the lives of these communities are surrounded by rich natural environments the nature directly influences the thoughts and beliefs of the *Abuj Marias*. The effects of globalised modes of development adopted by the nation have very little impact on the *Abuj Maria* households, when one looks at the availability of basic needs, accessibility to the service delivery institutions, quality of services available and their affordability to the quality services available at Narayanpur townships the district head quarter. Therefore, globalization has nothing to do with the *Abuj Maria* people and their development, to bring much changes in their socio-economic, cultural and psychological life cycle.

Abuj Maria Life Cycle (Rite-de-Passage)

Abuj Maria people considered birth, marriage and death as the cycle in human life which are the part of everybody's life and contributes to the sustenance of society. They believe that Abuj women is a natural part of the life and living. During the monthly period she does all the household activities like preparing food, cleaning house, fetching water, collecting wood, cleaning cowshed etc. They follow certain restrictions in the movement, eating, dress colour, etc which are the part of their belief systems. Child delivery is done normally outside the main house. 'Kurumali' the traditional birth attendant more around few villages in attending child delivery. In case of complexity in delivery, they perform certain rituals to mother goddesses. Knife and scissors are used to cut the naval cord which is put under the soils. The mother with the child stays separately for eight days. During the delivery period father also performs certain restrictions for himself in eating food and movements. Abuj Maria people believe on concepts like rebirth, Paap and punya. They name the child in the name of their ancestors, celebrated in a feast given to the kith and kins after the eighth day of the birth.

Abuj Maria considers marriage as a biological and social requirement in one's life. The minimum marriage age which was around 16 years for boys and 14 years for girls, has increased to 18 and 16 years respectively. They follow similar principles in selection of marriage partners as followed in Hindu religion that is not to marry within the same gotra and not deviating from monogamy form of marriage. Bride price is paid in the form of 80 kg of rice, 2 pigs, two sarees, around 30 litres of mahua liquor and Rs. 5000/- which are paid to the girl's father by boys' father. This is also followed in case of widow remarriage; however, it is rarely practiced. They follow various types of selection of mates like arranged-cum-consent marriage, exchange marriage, fled away type of marriage, marriage by capture etc, which have social approval of the *Abuj* society. Monogamy is the common form of marriage. The geographical networks followed in the selection of marriage partners range in and around 20 to 30 kms from the village where they maintain a social network which helps in knowing about the family and the bride and also to maintain relations among the kith- and-kin groups.

Abuj Maria considers death as a last stage and also believes the philosophy of the Hindu concept of human life and completion of role performance in the society i.e. Karma which is related to rebirth. They burn the dead body and maintain the pollution and purity in the line of lineage and families. Performance of rituals using turmeric, *sindur*, sundried rice and oil are common in all festivals. The youths who are the members of the *Ghotul* help in digging the pit of the dead body. Four primary kin members carry the dead body on their own shoulder followed by the relatives. Women follow the dead up to a distance. The dead body is buried along with his or her belongings used in daily life. In case of pre-matured death due to disaster or other factors normally they fire the dead body along with his or her belongings. On 3rd day of the death they clean their home and also perform certain rituals at the burial ground for the satisfaction of the dead soul and make a feast with liquor and meat for the entire village as per the family economic strength.

Religious Life of *Abuj Maria*

The life and living of *Abuj Maria* are guided by religious belief systems strongly attached with natural resources surrounding them. They are viz- hills, forests, water, trees, soil, air, sun ray etc. The pantheon of God and Goddesses worshipped by the *Abuj Maria* households includes household level deities, village level deities, local and regional level deities who are basically goddesses and attached with nature and natural products. The purpose of worshipping the deities stretch from fulfilling the personal purpose to regional and local level needs, basically meant for protection and preservation of the family and villagers. The household level deities are worshipped daily, while the distantly located deities are worshiped on festival occasions. The religious heads in the village among *Abuj Maria* popularly known as *Gayata*, and *Talok Pujari* who operate at village level and perform rituals for village deities. *Gayata* also provides *Jadi-but* for basic diseases in the village. In early days *Gayata* along with *Patel* performs various roles in the distribution of land for homestead and agriculture purposes. *Gayata* also make sacrifice of poultry bird and goat offered by *Abuj* people for village level deities. The third type of religious person in *Abuj* village is '*pen badde*' i.e. *Gotra Pujari* who play a very important role in '*kaksad*' festival and offers worship to satisfy *gotra* deities to protect the entire *gotra* members.

In study villages, quite a sizeable *Abuj Maria* (67%) households are attending hospital for treatment in case they suffer from diseases. But, it is observed that all the households follow the guidelines and treatments suggested by *Talok Pujari* in the village for the disease treatment, which shows their strong beliefs on traditional religious heads. *Abuj Maria* celebrates various festivals at household level, village level and community level. *Zeiro Hodtang* festival normally celebrated in the month of August- September. They eat *khatta bhaji* in this festival. *Gayata* play important role while offering pujas to *Devigudi* deity in the village. In each festival they offer fruits and leafs collected from forests. The second important festival is '*Baja Kodtang*' (New Rice eating) celebrated in the month of September and October. They sacrifice a pig to the deity by the *Gayata* and the get together arranged near *Devagudi* deity where people eat new rice and pig meat. They offer poultry and liquor to the deity in the house and all family members enjoy the food. Thirdly '*Jata Kodtang*' i.e. eating new harvest like paddy and daal celebrated in the months of December and January. Different types of *daal* after harvest are offered to the village deity by the *Gayata*. They sacrifice chicken and offer liquor to the deity at home. The village *patel*, *Gayata* with the senior villagers come together at *Devgudi* temple to offer puja to clan level *devta* and take their meal at the temple site to perform marry making to enjoy life and to pray to the deity. '*Kaksad*' is another festival celebrated by the *Abuj* people at clan level to satisfy the *gotra devi*. *Abuj* people belonging to one *gotra* come together where *Gayata* invite *clan devta* by biting drum, blowing Turi and singing *Kaksad* songs by the girls belonging to the same clan. In the evening all the villagers come together to *Ghotul* house and *Devigudi* temple and pray to all God and Goddesses. All the young boys and girls dance together, sing songs and make marry in front of the temple and adult members of the village.

The above discussion on various socio-cultural dimensions of life and living of the *Abuj Maria* shows that 'very little changes are observed in their belief pattern, rituals and rites, ingredients required and their community life. Road connection, educational intervention, drinking water, availability of material possessions like mobile handsets, cycle, modern clothes, allopathic medicines, access to market economy have helped to few households, but their adherence to cultural and religious practices are of traditional type being followed by the

entire community. They are closer to the nature which influences their life, thought and actions, agriculture and forestry related practices etc.

Cultural Continuity and Changes among the *Abuj Maria*:

Abuj dominated villages were shifted from locality to locality in 1950s due to the practice of shifting cultivation (TRI, Chhattisgarh, 2020). The *Abuj* community follows the patrilineal type of residents, property inheritance, and in performing rituals in day-to-day socio-cultural life. Hereditary, the family structure is of nuclear type where the son after marriage stays separately having separate hearth, but joint families are also observed in case of 36.77 percent of *Abuj* households. Family members and the villagers in *Abuj Maria* villages maintain a very close relation and value-based attachments in the line of culture and languages. The status of *Abuj Maria* women in social, economic, political and cultural life and living are either above or at par with the male counterpart. In household management, the *Abuj Maria* women are consulted by their husbands with respect to send their children to schools while taking decisions relating to marriage, visiting to kith and kin members, supporting the primary dependent etc. The most important is that the *Abuj Maria* women are not ignored. Selection of life partners in *Abuj Maria* society by boys and girls are basically made by the parents and primary kins. Very rare cases are observed going beyond the social practices which reflect the deviation of the *Abuj Marias* from their social values.

The division of labour in the house among members of *Abuj* family are based on gender, age and social status. Certain household activities like paddy husking by hand, fetching water, cooking food, collecting fuel wood, taking care of the children, cleaning of cowshed are done by adult female members, while heavy works like the ploughing, cutting trees, transporting head loads which needs heavy muscle power are carried out by *Abuj* adult male members.

In *Abuj Maria* community blood relatives are tied under *kutumb*, popularly known as *Tanda*. Those households who came first to the village normally plays important roles in the decision makings in village affairs. *Manda* or lineage is more organized because all the families covered under the *Manda* help each other for various economic, social, religious and political purposes.

Clan in *Abuj* villages are known as *katta*. All the members of one Clan or *Katta* trace to one origin point which is worshipped during *kakshad* festival. The major gotras are specific to geographical regions. The clan groups found in study villages include *JattaUsedi, Kamra, Juri, Poyam, Pitai, Gota, Ghurha, Oyami, Pharsad Kabaxhi, Boter and Achala*. Russel and Hiralal (ibid) have also explained two categories of clan or *kartas* groups in *Abuj Maria* villages i.e. *Akomana* and *Dadabhai*. *Akomana* word has come from *Nadi* word *Ako* i.e. Mother's father side i.e. affinal relatives. *Dadabhai* word has come from *Dada* i.e. elder brother who are related to each other by blood. In the social ranking *Abuj Maria* enjoy the particular place in relation to other local ethnic groups in the region. The tribal groups like *Halwa* and *Gond* are considered having highest social status which *Muria, Damdani, Madia, Rawat* groups are at lower level compared to *Abuj Maria* community. The social hierarchy of *Abuj* restricts their inter community marriage, but *Abuj* boys and girls in case of love marriage prepare with the boys and girls of *Muria, Halwa, Dandani, Madia, and Gond* tribal groups are accepted with whom *Abuj* maintain their food exchange in normal days.

The kinship networks among the *Abuj Maria* families are of both consanguineous and marital based. The kin members based on consanguinity are called as *Baya* (Father), *Mute* (Mother), *Muji* (Husband), *Yopi* (Grandmother), while the marital based kin member includes *Mama* (mother brother) which also reflects mode of address and mode of reference in different words. The words also reflect gender differences and role performances among kin groups. They also follow types of joking and avoidance relations which one analyse that such differences maintain social balance and social distances among the kin members, For example sister-in-law and brother-in-law (*Devar-Bhabhi*), *Jija-Sali, Nana and Nani and Pita-Pite* maintain joking relation which may lead to marriage if needed. Similarly, the avoidance practices are also followed between father-in-laws and daughters-in-law (*Saas-Damad*), Father-in-law and daughter-in-law (*Sasur-bahu*) which are reflected in day-to-day life and living in the form of prohibitions in interactions, eating and sitting together, etc keep

them away from any possible attachments and maintains social distance as per customary practices. All these kin-based relations reflect almost all the similar practices being followed by the Hindus.

Livelihood Resources of Abuj Marias and Changes

Abuj Maria feel that their relationships with the forest resources are symbiotic by nature. Forest has age old contributions in their survival and in maintaining their socio-cultural identities. It has been observed that historically they have been brought up in and around forest and forest based resources. Their dependency on natural forest-based resources has influenced their socio-cultural life and living. As a result, the economy, lifestyle and belief systems of the Abuj Maria people are influenced by the forest and forest-based resources. This has the testimony when one looks at the adopted of natural objects like species/plants, animals and birds as their totem and their ritualistic attitude towards forest resources. Some amount of loss of forest resources is due to conspicuous reasons like growth of population in their society and unscrupulous use of forests resources by other people with vested interests. The depletion of forest resources has restricted the availability of fuel wood, timber, loss of precious medicinal plants, non-timber forest produces and large-scale environmental degradation in and around their life and living. This has threatened their survival, dwelling and living.

Corporate Social Rights over Land:

Among the *Abuj Marias* not a single household poses the legal ownership over their agriculture and homestead land. The forest resources are rich in and around their villages. It was observed that people have started cutting trees in surrounding areas in both the study villages and developed land through encroachment. In both the study villages *Abujh Marias* households have cleared and developed a large size forest land around their homestead which is surrounded by large timbers and few households in Gudali village have demarcated these patches with war bade wires also. These land patches are encroached land in the forest areas developed by the Abuj people for agriculture purposes with a lot of labour. Presently they have use rights; however, in future they are hopeful of getting legal rights over these land patches.

Agriculture Land holding-

Government has not carried out land settlement in *Abujmadh* region owing to the fact of naxal menace, inaccessibility and thick forest coverage. However, in *Kamar* and *Baiga* dominated region it was observed that the Revenue Department of the government partially taken strong measures to give legal right over the encroached land (Panigrahi et al 2025). Even after the enactment of the Forest Rights Act in 2006 which includes the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights)⁷, government could have materialized and gave justice to the historical injustice made to the *Abuj Maria* by not giving legal rights over their encroached agricultural land. As informed by the *Abuj Maria* households, the encroachment of forest land for agricultural purposes ranges from 5 years to 20 years back. *Abuj Maria* households 'do not possess legal rights over their homestead, have been deprived of accessing to the bank loan-cum-subsidy based welfare schemes. Non- possession of legal rights over land by the *Abuj Maria* has also resulted a type of personality of the community who are now not able to bargain with outside agencies or State crafts since they do not have legal rights access homestead and agriculture land. The data relating to legal ownership over land was collected from the household, who mostly denied of having any government record with them in this regard. This was also confirmed from the Government Revenue personnels.

Among the *Abuj Marias* the maximum encroached land cultivated by one household is 8.00 acres, while the minimum land area under cultivation is 3.00 acres and the average land holding of the *Abuj* family under cultivation is 4.83 acres. Among the *Abuj Maria* PVTG the availability of virgin forest in and around the study villages motivated them to clean the Jungle for agriculture purposes. Secondly, the presence of Naxal⁸ in the region kept the State functionaries away from the region, as a result of which, *Abuj Maria* household confidently cleaned and encroached forest land as much as they could. Even, it was observed that few *Abuj Maria*

⁷ FRA: The Forest Rights Act (2006) is a legislative framework that recognizes and vests forest rights in forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers. It seeks to rectify historical injustices associated with forest governance.

⁸ Naxal: The Naxalite Movement refers to a left-wing extremist insurgency rooted in agrarian discontent and socio-economic inequalities. It emerged from the Naxalbari uprising of 1967 and continues to influence certain regions of India.

households have started using tree Cutter and Tractor to clean the jungle for agriculture purposes. The land holding status among them shows that around 84 (74.33%) and 29 (32.22%) households are belonging to small holding and medium holding categories respectively. In total, the data reflects that around 78 (30.35%) households are landless and the medium size holding households share to the tune of 30 (11.67%). The Abujh Maria households have free access into the forest land who have cleaned the forest land and encroached them which are yet to be settled in their names. The forest land encroached by them were long used for shifting cultivation⁹ now became permanently used for agriculture through usufruct rights over these lands. The presence of Naxals in the region and low or no role performance by the Revenue personnels has attracted Abuj people to encroach big patches of forest land under their usufruct right.

The data Regarding the periods of encroachment of land reflect that among the Abuj Marias out of 113 households, 38.05 percent have encroached land for more than 10 years, while quiet a sizeable household (35.40%) have encroached recently within 5 years. Overall, around 39.11 percent Abuj Maria households have land encroachment for more than 10 years period. The data shows that encroachment of forest land for agriculture purposes is a common practice to meet the agro-based livelihood. Secondly, under Forest Rights Act 2009 encroached land by the PVTGs are yet to be settled which shows the continuity of age-old injustice, even if the nation has recognized the injustice and assured to rectify the mistakes by giving right over encroached land to all the households.

Agriculture Economy-

Agriculture resources of all the Abuj Maria household are one of the areas which contribute to their household economy. They are identified with using simple agro-implements, traditional agro-inputs, bio- fertilizers, low production for consumption and not for sale. All the study households practice *bewar* cultivation i.e. shifting cultivation by cutting, drying, firing the trees. Such *bewar* cultivation are normally carried out on sloppy hills and undulating land, full of stones where they use broadcasting method of sowing small millets like *kodo*, *kutaki*, *kosara*, *udat*, *bajara*, *maize*, green and black gram, *kosara*, *kegani*, *khattabhaji*, *beans*, *verities of leaves*, *gurunga vegetables*, *jowar*, pulses etc. They cultivate varieties of green leaves, vegetables like brinjal, pumpkin, chilli, lady's finger and many varieties of grams and pulses produced in badi land basically for own consumption. Among the Abuj Maria very few households have started using tractor for initial land development purposes since it is labour intensive and highly time taking. They normally carry out the land development and cutting of trees in the month of March and April, firing of trees in the month of May and sowing of seeds in the month of June-July and crop cutting in the month of November every year. In low land areas which carries little water, good soil and are in limited availability in the study villages are ploughed in the month of June- July. They use cow dung as fertilizer and carry the weeding in the month of August and harvesting of crops in the month of October- November every year. In badi land almost all the households produce maize in rainy and mustard in the winter seasons. *Abuj Marias* treat forest land as *Dharti Mata*. Threshing of paddy is mainly done by using the cows and bullocks. All of them offer puja to their traditional deities before cutting and bringing the harvests to home.

Forest resources are the life line of the *Abuj Maria*, without which it is difficult to conceive their life and living. They maintain a symbolic relationship with forest ecosystems for its maintenance, in the form of support, procurement of food and making habitat. Forest for these people meant a natural eco system which produces useful plants and fungi for them. The *Abuj Marias* consider Forest produces as biological materials procured from the forest for their use in day-to-day life. The Government of Chhattisgarh (2021) has well recognized the potential of Minor Forest Produces (MFPs)¹⁰ for tribal communities which are yet to be harnessed because of inaccessibility, poor infrastructure, lack of documentation and under developed market facilities. Government has highlighted the fact that the PVTGs do not have much alternatives to forest resources which can feed them in different seasons and they also meet their ritual requirements and knowledge systems from the available

⁹ Shifting Cultivation : Shifting cultivation is a traditional form of agriculture involving the cyclical clearing and cultivation of forest land, followed by periods of fallow regeneration. It is commonly practiced among tribal communities in ecologically sensitive regions.

¹⁰ MFPs: Minor Forest Produce (MFPs) refers to non-timber forest resources such as fruits, seeds, resins, and leaves collected from forests. These constitute a significant component of subsistence and livelihood among forest-dependent populations.

forest resources (ibid). The major nationalized forest products are *tendu patta*, *sal* seeds, *harra*, gum, while the non-nationalized products are plentiful by nature which they sell to the Chhattisgarh Minor Forest Produces Cooperative Federations Ltd. on pre-determined rates decided by the Federation and also in private markets.

The study documented that around 21 varieties of MFPs are collected by the Abuj Marias in different seasons of differential availability, use value and of their sale capacity. PVTG women and children's play a major role in the procurement of MFPs, while medicinal plants are collected by medicine men and senior Abuj Marias for day-to-day use in the village. The procurement, sale and use of MFPs are determined by multiple factors like value added knowledge, ritual value, and sale potentiality during the season. Out of 21 NTFPS collected, only 09 items have market value, 10 items have socio-religious values, 10 items have both food value as well as market value. The leaf and seed varieties include chironji (*Buchanialanзан*), Karanji (*Pongamia pinnata*) Tamarind (*Tamarindus indica*), mango (*Mangifera indica*), Mahua (*Madhuca longifolia*), Char (*Buchanialanзан*), Mushroom (*Agaricus bisporus*), Sal seed (*Shorea robusta*), mahua seed (*Madhuca longifolia*), mahua leaf (*Madhuca longifolia*), mahua bark (*Madhuca longifolia*), Ber (*Ziziphus mauritiana*), kusum (*Schleichera oleosa*), Char seed (*Buchaniana alanzan*), honey (*Aphis dorsata*), Karanja seed (*Terminalia pinnata*) (amla (*Emblica officinalis*), Tendu leaf (*Diospyros melanoxylon*).

Use of Indigenous Knowledge in the processing of MFPs

MFPs play an important role in the households' economy and livelihood of the *Abuj Maria* life. In many cases the processing of MFPs is age old by nature. Very little modernization is observed among the *Abuj* people in the processing of MFPs. Most of the processing techniques and methods used by them are traditional by nature, when one looks at the processing, storage and uses of a few major MFPs collected by these households. The primary data has been processed according to the forms of procurement and processing made for each major MFP item. The value addition of MFPs is done at three different levels, i.e. pre- harvest period, during the harvest period and post-harvest period. It is commonly observed that maintenance of value addition chain within the community is guided by their traditional knowledge. All the primary processing of MFPs is done at home by the family members, while the secondary level processing of MFPs is carried out by the local level agents, while the value additions using technical skills are made by the traders at far away locations by using technological know-how, preservative methods and packaging methods to increase the market value of the MFPs. It is commonly observed that during last 20 years, the procurement agents from far away distances attend the local weekly markets at various places to purchase the MFPs either directly sold to them by the primary collectors or from the local agents. In this process the market level opportunities for disposal and pricing of certain rarely available minor forest products have increased. Despite these opportunities for MFPs, the *Abuj Maria* households are still practicing certain locally made techniques based on their traditional knowledge to meet their local needs of few MFP items which have economic values, livelihood importance and socio-cultural uses in their day- to- day life

DISCUSSION:

Anthropologists normally look at the man-environment relation from a holistic perspective owing to the fact that environment contributes in making culture at certain levels which influences the use of environment. The theory of "Determinism" as propounded by many anthropologists still have the relevance in the context of *Abuj Maria* PVTG population. The environment in the form of land, water, forest and forest produces influences their lives, living and knowledge system as a guiding principle. This contributes in shaping the believes, knowledge system and practices of the *Abuj* community.

The 'Limiting Factor of environment' as raised by Kroeber (1939) seems to be non-effective in the context of the *Abuj Marias* due to the fact that the alternative development interventions and the opportunities available to the *Abuj Marias* which are made by the State and other welfare agencies are non-significant which could have brought a drastic change in their relationships with the nature, natural objects and the knowledge system related to it. The importance of human habitat for the PVTG households determines their tools, techniques, pattern of believes and practices in the habitat is still continuing as a source of knowledge for them which is continued for generations and handed over to subsequent generations through adaptation and practices. The socially approved linkages of the *Abuj* community with the surrounding nature and the natural resources have become a part of

their social structure, technology and economy. The natural resources in and around *Abujmad* region are by and large not intervened by the outside agencies. Therefore, the nature and natural resources influence their lives. The collective management of natural resources with usufruct rights guided by their customary practices are the dominant way of life for them. The traditional technological factors and social processes do not allow them for over exploitation of their habitat based natural resources and thus these PVTG households are living with their traditional knowledge system, which does not allow commercial exploitation of natural resources.

Abuj Maria feels that their livelihood issues and MFP procurement does not impact negatively on forest sustainability. At micro level they are equally concerned about the ecological sustainability while exploring MFPs or forest produces. This is basically because they believe that nature and natural diversity is within the forest which meets their socio-cultural and economic requirements as long as they maintain symbiotic relations with the forest resources. *Abuj Maria* people have a holistic dependency on forest resources in the sense that forest provides food and income to them, fodder to their animal world and medicinal support to all during crisis, which needs to be studied holistically from emic perspective, determined by ecology and ecologically influenced socio-cultural practices.

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