

Historical background of the *Ganjhus* of Jharkhand with special reference to the Naxalite movement

Dr. M.K. Joseph

Principal, St. Xavier's College, Mahudanr, Latehar, Jharkhand, India-822119

Abstract : This article primarily aims at presenting a lesser known but important community of Jharkhand namely the *Ganjhus* and their actual identity along with their relation with the Naxalite movement. The *Ganjhus* are a group of *dalits* living mainly found in Jharkhand and in some parts of Bihar and West Bengal. Though considered as *dalits* according to the government but basically they are tribal people. Their life is very simple and their living conditions are poor. Most of them live below the poverty line and hence are mostly oppressed by the higher community of the society. This has led to the involvement of the *Ganjhus* in the Naxalite movement. Therefore, this study briefly highlights these aspects of the life of the *Ganjhus*.

Keywords: Tribal culture, Lower caste, Naxalite movement, Social backwardness

INTRODUCTION

This article presents an overview of the *Ganjhus* in Jharkhand, a *dalit* community, from the literature available on the subject. The *Ganjhus* are a poorly-studied and understood ethnic group of people due to scarcity of documentation about them. They belong to the scheduled castes and form one of the lowest strata in this category. An attempt is made to understand their origin, their clans, their identity, etc. The *Ganjhus* were known as *Bhogtas* in the past, a sub-tribe of the *Kharwars*. The ancient oral as well as written tradition shows that the *Ganjhus* were *Bhogtas* and in old government documents it is clearly mentioned that the *Bhogtas* used *Ganjhu* as their title [1]. They say that the *Bhogta* name reminds them of their golden past and their great ancestors like Bansingh, Nilambar-Pitlamber, whereas the *Ganjhu* name is more associated with the *Naxalite* group called the M.C.C. party (Maoist Communist Centre), or Communist Party of India (Maoists).

Mythical Origin of the *Ganjhus*

Tracing the origin of the *Ganjhus* is not an easy task as there are no written documents available on the subject. According to a myth of their origin, long ago some of their religious preachers had migrated from Kashi and settled down in Ramgarh where they were exposed to tribal women. The children born to these women were known as *Bhogtas*. They are found mainly in Jharkhand but some are found in some parts of Bihar, Bengal and Orissa. According to the elders, the researcher interviewed in Gali village, the history of the *Kharwar-Bhogta* starts with Bansingh-- the great. Bansingh was the King of Khairigarh. According to one source of information, Bansingh had seven brothers and Bansingh was the eldest. According to another source of information, Bansingh had four brothers, among them he was the eldest. His brothers were Mansingh, Dhansingh, Sidhnathsingh and Shaktisingh. This information is more likely to be true as there are five pillars in the Temple of Bansingh indicating the five brothers. Each *Ganjhu* village has a temple dedicated to Bansingh and his four brothers have a place in the temple. Gaya was the neighbouring

kingdom of Khairigarh with its own King known as Virat. Both Bansingh and Virat knew each other and lived peacefully in the initial stages. There was no enmity between the two, but once due to some misunderstanding between the two, fight begun between them and King Virat cunningly killed Bansingh and his brothers by inviting to his palace in the name of settlement. While Bansingh and his brothers were fighting the King, they had left the women and their children at home. When the news reached their village that Bansingh and the brothers were killed the women took their children and fled from that place. There were eight children altogether and they fled to different places before Virat's men came in search of them. The women and their children had already moved out but got lost in the jungles and the eight children had fled in eight different directions.

THE DESCENDANTS OF BANSINGH AND HIS BROTHERS

Duswari Kharwar

The first descendants of the *Kharwar* is known as the *Duswari Kharwar*. The first child was very fast in running and he reached a safe place in the jungle and settled down there. He then got married and his descendants are known as *Duswari Kharwar*. They wandered around in different places and settled in different parts of the country. They are known as *Duswari* because they made fast movements to escape from the hands of the King and the first to reach the jungle.

Bhogta Kharwar

The second descendant is known as *Bhogta Kharwar*. The *Bhogta Kharwars* were the sons of Dhansingh. Dhansingh was a *Bhagat*. The *bhagat* is a vegetarian; he has a special place in the community. From *Bhagat*, the word *Bhogta* originated according to Mitu Singh, the eldest *Ganjhu* man in Hazaribag district. So the descendants of Dhansingh the *bhagat* are known as *Bhogta*.

Chero Kharwar

The third descendant of the *Kharwar* is the *Chero Kharwar*. The *Chero Kharwars* fled to the jungles and made their own houses. They depend on the jungles for survival and lived close to the hills.

Bagua Kharwar

The fourth descendants of the *Kharwar* is known as *Bagua Kharwar*. The *Bagua Kharwars* were known as the clever ones. After escaping from the clutches of the King they changed their names and titles. They captured a lot of land in different places and began to live like Kings of the area. They called themselves Kings and had control over the local people. Hence the *Bagua Kharwar* clan is known as the Kingly class.

Birhor Kharwar

Birhors are known as a wandering people. They moved from place to place. They too settled down in the jungles but from time to time they moved from place to place. Therefore they are known as *Birhor Kharwar*. The *Birhor Kharwars* were afraid of others and considered themselves as a small people. "We belong to the small *Jati*." Most of them settled down in the jungles of Palamau.

Pahariya Kharwar

The *Pahariya* group also settled down in the Palamau jungles. Since they chose to live close to the mountains they are known as *Pahariya Kharwar*.

Milwar Kharwar

The *Milwar Kharwars* first settled in the hills but they were not comfortable there. They did not want an isolated life. Hence they moved out of the hills and jungles to the plain areas where other people were living. They were a friendly people and mingled with others and gained social respectability. Since they were an easily mingling and friendly people they are known as *Milwar Kharwar*.

Binjiya Kharwar

Binjiya means an illegal child. The eighth child of the Bansingh clan was an illegal child. So the descendant of the eighth child is known as *Binjiya Kharwar*. The eighth child was not born in his house. He was born at the back of the house. They say that since the child was illegal he was born in the garden which is situated at the back of the house where they had the well. Though the eighth child was illegal the *Kharwars* accepted this clan as the eighth and last clan of the *Kharwar Bhogta*.

Clans of the Bhogtas

The following are the different clans of the *Ganjhu-Bhogtas*.

Sonwar

Sonwar is one of the clans of the *Ganjhu-Bhogta* Community. Since this clan is named *Sonwar* they don't wear any gold or golden ornaments.

Chudiyar

Chudiyar Ganjhus are known as drum beaters. They play drums and other traditional musical instruments. Since they are known as *Chudiyar* they don't wear any bangles. But they are allowed to wear bangles made out of rubber.

Hansdagiya

This group of *Ganjhus* does not go to the Ganges (Gaya-Ganga) for getting salvation. They collect the bones on the seventh day of cremation. The bones are packed in a new piece of cloth and on the 10th day they are immersed in the nearby river. Therefore they are known as *Hansdagias*.

Tidwar

The next group of *Ganjhus* is known as *Tidwar*. They are also known as drum beaters. They play the traditional musical instruments as the *Sonwar Ganjhus*. The *Tidwars* don't wear bangles.

Sager

The next group is known as *Sager*. They cannot enter into a *Sagai* (Remarriage) marriage relationship.

Chhadariya

Chhadariya is a particular tree. Following the name of the tree, the next clan of the *Ganjhus* is known as Chhadariya. Chhadariya *Ganjhus* cannot cut down this particular tree nor can they sit under the shade of the same tree.

Hemarwar

Hemarwar is another clan of the *Ganjhus* followed by *Sahisonwar* (real Sonar), *Sachiniya* and *Butmadwar* and *Chuniar*.

LANGUAGE OF THE GANJHUS

The *Ganjhus*' mother tongue is *Khortha*. It is a mixture of *Sadri*, *Magahi* and Hindi. It is spoken among themselves and Hindi is used with the non-*Ganjhus*. The *Ganjhus* use *Devnagari* which is the common script for a number of spoken languages.

Occupation

The *Ganjhus*' traditional occupation is agriculture but they are also engaged in making rope, simple items of furniture and parched rice (*chura*). Most of them work as daily-wage labourers. Each family or house has a piece of land and a house of their own. According to the 1991 census returns, 37.79% were daily-wage labourers. About 60.54% of these labourers were engaged in cultivation, 30.88% in agricultural labour, and 1.1% in making ropes and simple items of furniture. The remaining 7.48% was engaged in various other forms of employment [2].

Religion

According to K.S. Singh, the *Ganjhus* follow the Hindu religion by faith. They have no temples but each village has a sacred grove (*sarna*). Both the Hindu and the tribal festivals are popular among the *Ganjhus*. They celebrate *Dushara*, *Holi*, *Raksha bandhan*, and tribal feasts such as *Karma*, *Jitia*, and *Sarhul*. They have their own *Pahan* (tribal priest) but sometimes they may call on a *Munda* or *Bhuiya* to officiate. The *Ganjhus* regard the *Burha* and *Burhi* (ancestors) as their family deities. Some of their folk-tales recount their origin and migration.

Social Life

The *Ganjhus* are listed in the Scheduled Caste list by the government and are therefore technically *dalits*. However, early district Gazetteers indicate that the *Ganjhus* are a clan or division of *Kharwars*, the tribals of Jharkhand. The *Ganjhus* have their own culture and religious practices. Their folk-tales, music and dances are very similar to those of the tribals. Both men and women dance together during festivals and ceremonies, where the men beat percussion musical instruments (Herbert, 1996:214). The *Ganjhus* offer sacrifices to various spirits to protect their villages from calamities. Traditionally at the time of sickness the *Ganjhus* turned to *ojhas* for healing. Witchcraft is practised at times of sickness. But these practices are less frequent nowadays.

EDUCATION

According to the 1991 census only 6.44% of the *Ganjhus* were literate. This gives an indication that education has remained very far from their experience. At present this situation is gradually changing, as more and more *Ganjhu* children have started to go to school. Apparently there is greater awareness among the *Ganjhus* with regard to education and its importance.

NAXALITE MOVEMENT AND GANJHUS

The *Naxalites* presence is very strong in Jharkhand. Of the twenty-four districts in Jharkhand they are very active in Hazaribag, Chatra, Latehar, Garhwa, Palamau, Gumla, Giridih, Khunti, Lohardaga, Kodarma, East Singhbhum and West Singhbhum. Although there are many Naxal groups operating in Jharkhand, the group that is very strong in Jharkhand is the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC). It is a fact that more *dalits* are attracted to the *Naxalites* because of their miserable life situation. When Jharkhand state came into existence about ten years ago, the people of Jharkhand hoped that the rays of development would reach them. Nine years have passed, yet the rural villages are neglected even today! In 1999 under development scheme, nineteen families of Lathiya village under Churchu Block of Hazaribag district were given Indira Aawas (Indira residence), but all of those are incomplete. Later, road and community-building construction started in the same village, but it is still incomplete. The drinking-water problems are very acute as there are not enough wells in the village. There is neither any water-pump nor any water supply from the administration. People are obliged to bring water from the river which kilometers far away, for drinking. There are no health care and education facilities. Still, facilities of electricity and telephone are beyond the imagination of the people. This is an apt example of the rural villages of India and their condition. Such villages either welcome or forced to welcome the MCC hoping that some changes may take place in their lives. Among the *dalits* the names of the *Ganjhus* are very predominant. The leaders of the *Naxalites* don't come out in the open and the villagers don't know who they are. Their top leadership including the ideologues remains in the background, unseen and unknown. The others, the wandering *dasta* are led by area commanders who hail from one of the local villages. They have a strong maoist ideology and are well armed. The *Naxalites* realize that they won't be successful in their mission without the support of the local people. So the first target of the *Naxalites* is to find a support base from the villagers. Sometimes such support is voluntary, sometimes driven by fear and sometime by force. There are a number of area commanders who belong to the *Ganjhu Samaj*. In the ongoing spate of killings and violent attacks, the names of *dalits* especially of *Ganjhus* are prominent. In response, the police target the *Ganjhu* villagers and arrest them and implicate them in *Naxalite* related cases.

The main target groups of the *Naxalite* violence in Hazaribag, Chatra and Latehar districts were the powerful OBC class. These backward groups belonged to the *Yadav*, *Koiri Mahto*, *Kurmi Mahto*, *Teli*, and *Sundi*. They own most of the land, illegally occupied from the *dalits*. They were engaged in feudal interaction with the *dalits* and tribals and impose their power and authority over the *dalits* and tribals and

made use of their vulnerability to acquire their land through illegal means like money-lending. The MCC targeted a number of elected *Mukhyas* (heads of the villages) who belonged to the above-mentioned castes and were very oppressive. But the *Ganjhus* continued the fight and forcefully recaptured their land. The *Ganjhus* got the support of the MCC too and their land problem was solved. In those areas where there is a feudal interaction either between the upper-castes and the *dalits* and tribals or between the middle-castes and the *dalits* and tribals, a fertile ground is provided for *Naxalite* activities.

Failure of the Administration

The state, district and the block-level administration has failed to execute developmental activities in the remote villages especially of the *Ganjhus*. The police stations (*thana*) in their areas are dominated by upper-castes officers. When the poor people approach the police station to file an F.I.R, most of the time the officer-in-charge refuses to record their F.I.R. Instead there are cases reported that counter cases are filed against the victims in order to silence them. In such scenario, the MCC appears to offer the people justice which the people need to accept as they have no other choice.

Unjust Law and Order

In the name of *Naxalite* activities and violence, the police take undue advantage and arrest the innocent people. Often the poor innocent *Ganjhus* are falsely accused and identified as *Naxalites*. In this way the simple villagers continued to be arrested and jailed. Such unjust actions of the police encourage the *Ganjhus* to turn to the *Naxalites* to get justice.

The Threat of Displacement

The *Ganjhus* who are living in Hazaribag district are threatened with the fear of displacement. Their villages are notified by the government to start on open-casting coalmine on the entire area which is flourished with rich coal underneath. The *Ganjhus* also fear that their economy which is based on land and jungle will collapse. The reality is that their income is supplemented by the forest as they get fuel, fodder, fruits, roots, leaves and materials for building houses. They also fear that their age-old tradition and culture will be lost in the new scenario. Hence to save their native lands, they join hands with the *naxals* against the government.

CASTE SYSTEM AND ITS IDEOLOGY

The caste system based on the Varna ideology is an overall theoretical frame-work which explains and legitimizes the relationship between castes and groups. It classifies various castes and creates a structure based on the principle of superiority and inferiority based on the unwritten law of purity and pollution. Indian society functions according to this Varna system and almost all institutions of the country are run by the high-and middle-caste groups, and they claim to be the superior caste. For them the tribals and *dalits* are pollution, savage, primitive, superstitious, barbaric and uncivilized. Such disparity provides fuel to the *Naxals* and their activities and no wonder the *Ganjhus* have no choice than depend on them.

Fear

The *Ganjhus* are caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. Since the police is very active and using all its power against *Naxalites*, the people are forced to co-operate with the police. On the otherhand, the *Ganjhu* villages are often visited by the MCC as they are situated in an ideal place for their activities and the MCC has ruthlessly killed a number of police informers. Thus the *Ganjhus* know what happens to them if they co-operate with the police. With all these, the *Ganjhus* are now caught as if in a dice --- of the police on the one hand, and *Naxalites* on the other.

CONCLUSION

The study has highlighted that the *Ganjhus* are grappling with their very original identity of the community on one hand, while are being branded as *Naxalites* by the administration. They are socially marginalized, economically poor, educationally backward, politically powerless, and culturally sidelined. This situation of the *Ganjhus* needs a change. However, the search for an identity is taking shape and getting the attention of the state. They are looking forward to regain their lost tribal identity which would help them to preserve their land and forests in accordance with the law of Jharkhand state. Since they are put under the caste system they are forced to follow its ideology and structure. Today there is a growing awareness of the negative impacts of the caste system and the failure of the state and there are positive elements trying to change such situations. The *Ganjhus* are looking to the future with determination and are educating their children to have a better future. This is a silver lining for the *Ganjhu Samaj* and its development.

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