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MISRECOGNIZED IDENTITIES: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE IDENTITY STRUGGLE OF DE-NOTIFIED, NOMADIC AND SEMI-NOMADIC COMMUNITIES OF INDIA

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Abstract: India stands as a mosaic of diversity, its cultural heritage and intricate social fabric enhancing its complexity. Within this context, a distinct amalgamation of ethnic groups, each distinguished by culture, language, and traditions, finds its abode. However, this tapestry bears threads of fading identity and existential turmoil that intertwine with the De-notified, Nomadic, and Semi-nomadic communities. Hence, this research explores the critical factors surrounding the ethnic identity of these communities within India, simultaneously delving into the influence exerted by globalisation upon their livelihood practices and the anomalies in self-identity amid the diverse Indian milieu. The study is rooted in an investigation encompassing five communities: Dhara/Dhibar, Bansphor/Bansforda, Khurpalta, Muriari, and Savar. These communities are drawn from clusters in West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed to identify and select the community members as participants, followed by the collection of data through numerous qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, observation, field notes, and focus group discussions. In addition, existing literature was undertaken to supplement existing knowledge through literary sources, governmental reports, and unpublished reports. The study's findings illuminate how the erosion of traditional livelihood practices has propelled these communities to the verge of marginalisation, concurrently exacerbating the intricacies of their identity predicament in their daily life.

Keywords: de-notified; nomadic; ethnic identity; Indian communities; marginalised groups; intersectionality; social inclusion; social justice; identity struggle; livelihood

Introduction

India is a diverse country with a rich cultural heritage and a complex social structure. The country is home to various ethnic groups with distinct cultures, languages, and traditions. Ethnicity in India denotes the process by which people relate to each other based on social, cultural, linguistic, and hereditary factors to establish a social network of ties (Zehol, 2008; Ford & Kelly, 2005). It is a complex issue due to the country's long history of migration, invasions, and assimilation of various cultures (Manor, 1996; Hamer et al., 2018). In a pluralistic society, there are complex and culturally distinct ethnic groups with multiple identities in a particular context. A stable ethnic identity is constructed in an atmosphere of harmony but suddenly

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becomes reconstituted in times arises crisis in ethnic identity. These phenomena are becoming increasingly relevant in India. It was found that each individual endowed with a diversity of identities tends to use that identity for the self-definition more relevant in the immediate context.

The phenomenon of fading identity and existential crisis has been observed among certain Indian ethnic groups collectively referred to as De-notified, Nomadic, and Semi-nomadic communities (or tribes) (Radhakrishna, 2007). De-notified communities (DNTs) encompass a diverse array of communities in India that were historically classified as 'criminal tribes' during the British colonial era under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 (CTA)

Commission (1953), the designation of 'criminal tribe' was replaced with 'de-notified tribes' (Viswanathan, 2002). Nomadic communities (NTs) represent social groups without fixed places of residence, constantly seeking livelihood opportunities by moving from one location to another. Their primary activities often revolve around herding, fishing, and gathering forest produce (Pant, 2005). On the other hand, Semi-nomadic communities (SNTs) are social groups adopting semi-settled lifestyles characterised by periodic movements between two or more locations throughout the year. While they may have a home base where they spend a specific period, they relocate to other areas for seasonal work or other purposes (Renke, 2008; Idate, 2017).

In the aftermath of India's independence, the government embarked on various initiatives to address the challenges faced by these communities. Several committees and commissions, such as the Lokur Committee (1965), Mandal Commission (1980), and Justice Venkatachaliah Commission (2002), were established to resolve the issues faced by these communities. Subsequently, in 2005, the National Commission for De-notified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Tribes, under the supervision of Balkrishna Renake, was instituted to seek appropriate solutions for the upliftment of the DNTs. In 2008, the commission presented its report, which encompassed crucial proposals for enhancing the status of DNTs in various spheres, including employment, education, political representation, and housing. Among the key recommendations was introducing a reservation system for DNTs in government services, promotions, and legislative bodies such as Parliament, Assemblies, Local Civic Bodies, and Panchayats.

Furthermore, the commission advocated for a separate budget for the development of DNTs, the establishment of a DNT Development Corporation, the creation of residential schools, the provision of financial loans and scholarships for higher education, and a dedicated fund and 7% reservation for DNTs in various Government Housing Schemes. Additionally, it emphasised the urgent recognition of DNT *Tandas* (inhabitants) as revenue villages. The commission also proposed an amendment to the Constitution to provide a 7% reservation for DNTs, who do not fall under the SC/ST category within the 27% reservation quota allocated for

Other Backward Classes (OBCs), enabling them to avail of government programs and schemes akin to SCs and STs (Renake, 2008).

Despite the recommendations of the Renake Commission, notable progress was lacking in the government's initiatives. Subsequently, in 2015, the Government of India established another National Commission for De-notified, Nomadic, and Semi-nomadic Tribes, popularly known as the Idate Commission. This commission was tasked with identifying these communities state-wise, assessing their developmental status, and proposing measures for their upliftment. In 2017, under the guidance of Bhiku Ramji Idate, the commission submitted its report, designating The DNTs as the most impoverished, marginalised, and downtrodden communities vulnerable to social stigma, atrocity, and exclusion. The commission recommended protecting DNTs, NTs, and SNTs under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 and suggested a Constitutional amendment to add Scheduled DNT/NT/SNT as a third category after Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the Act.

Moreover, it highlighted the historical burden carried by these communities, as they were once branded as criminals during colonial rule under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. Even after the repeal of the Act post-independence, subsequent legislations had forcibly dispossessed them of their traditional occupations and dwellings. The commission further called for the release of the 2011 caste census, particularly pertaining to the DNT, NT, and SNT communities, to inform targeted policies for their development (Idate, 2017).

In 2022, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment launched the Scheme for Economic Empowerment of De-notified Tribes (DNTs) - SEED. The primary objectives of this scheme encompassed providing high-quality coaching to DNT/NT/SNT candidates to enable their participation in competitive examinations, offering health insurance coverage to the DNT/NT/SNT communities, facilitating community-level livelihood initiatives to strengthen small clusters of DNT/NT/SNT community institutions, and extending financial assistance for house construction to members belonging to these communities (Lakshman, 2022; Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, 2022).

Background of the Study

Even in the post-independence era, these communities continue to face significant challenges and hardships. These communities endure the lack of proper residences, valid identity cards, adequate education, and sustainable livelihoods, among other essential aspects. The prevailing conditions have resulted in extreme poverty, marginalisation, and economic deprivation for most of these communities (Agrawal, 2015; Hasan, 2020). An additional critical issue these communities face is the absence of official recognition as a distinct group, similar to the Scheduled Castes

(SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). Although some states have included specific communities under the constitutional categories of SC and ST, a majority of these communities have been left unrecognised and unaccounted for (Bokil, 2002). This lack of enumeration significantly affects their ethnic identity (Korra, 2017; Gowda, 2023).

These communities suffer from limited acknowledgement and are often sparsely dispersed across various regions. Historical associations with criminality have left a lingering social stigma, prompting many community members to conceal their true identities or assimilate into other communities to avoid the associated prejudice (Gandhi and Sundar, 2019). Nevertheless, despite their efforts to blend in, these communities still face discrimination, exclusion, and prejudice from others, adversely affecting their mental and physical well-being and their social and economic opportunities. The issue of identity for these communities encompasses multiple facets, such as seeking constitutional recognition, accessing government welfare schemes, and striving for higher status in society (Torgalkar, 2016). These considerations underscore the complexity and importance of addressing the identity-related challenges faced by these communities.

Objectives

The objectives of the present study are:

i. to contribute to the existing literature on ethnic identification by providing empirical evidence and insights derived from comprehensive fieldwork
ii. to investigate the factors influencing the crisis in ethnic identity among distinct communities (DNT, NT, and SNT) in India
iii. to examine the influence of globalisation upon their livelihood practices and its impact on the construction of self-identity among individuals in the diverse Indian milieu.

Methodology

The study was carried out in a variety of districts in West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh; these areas were chosen because they are crucial to the existence and cultural relevance of the investigated communities (see Fig. 1). For this study, five communities—Dhara/Dhibar, Bansphor/Bansforda, Khurpalta, Muriari, and Savar—were purposefully chosen (see Table-1).

Figure 1: Geographical representation of states covered in the study

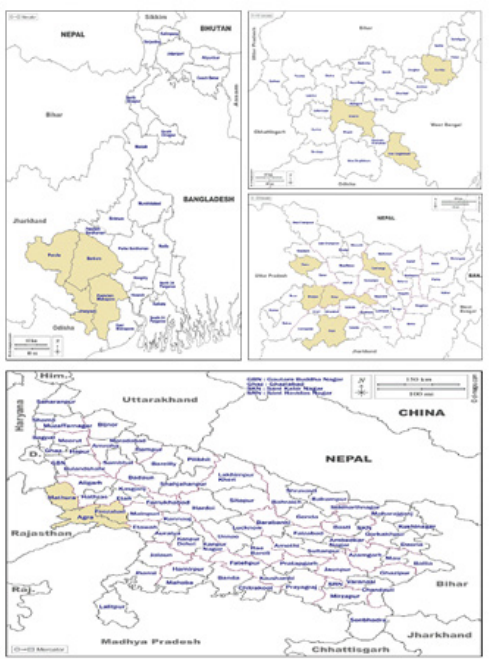

Figure 2: Geographical representation of the states and districts encompassing the study area for the present study

These communities were chosen for the study to thoroughly represent ethnic variety based on their historical, cultural, and geographic value.

TABLE 1: THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE STUDIED COMMUNITIES

Name of the Community	State	District	Settlement / Village
Dhara/ Dhibar	Jharkhand	East Singhbhum	Amainagar, Ghatshila, Madhuabera, Baharagora
		Dumka	Kumrawad
Bansphor	Jharkhand	Ranchi	Beldar Mohalla, Doranda, Karwala Chawk, Gudri, Muktidham, Harmu, Tulsi Nagar, Bhuniya Toli
	Bihar	Patna	Kankar Bagh, Bakhar Gaunj
		Siwan	Kachahari Road, Nayabazar
		Darbhanga	Kabilpur, Chunavatti, Darbhanga Medical College and Hospital
		Gaya	Mangla Gauri
Khurpalta	Uttar Pradesh	Agra	Rambagh, Lohamandi
		Firozabad	Tundla
		Mathura	Bhuteshwar Railway Station, Ram Mandir, Janmabhoomi Railway Gate/ Deeg Gate, Koshi, Govardhan
Muriari	Bihar	Patna	Kurji Pool
		Bhojpur	Koliwar
		Gaya	Belauti
Savar	West Bengal	Bankura	Maula, Katiyam, Banskanali, Sagarbhanga
		Purulia	Amjharna, Burijhor, Gholhura, Kadru, Popo, Jara, Akarbandth, Adabana
		Jhargram	Asanbani, Karbonia, Humtia Amorda, Athangi, Jalbenti
		Paschim Medinipur	Jagul, Bhangadali

Dhara is a fisherman community in the Dhalbhum sub-division of the Singhbhum district. Its synonyms are Dhada and Dhibar. Etymologically, Dhara means 'to catch'. Since men of this group catch fish in the rivers and ponds, they are known as Dhara (Mahato, 1994). Risley mentioned, "*Dhibar, a sub-caste of Kewats in Western Bengal, and a synonym for Kaibarta.*" (Risley, 1891: 224). Presently the community members are engaged in their traditional occupation of catching fish from the Subarnarekha River, and women are engaged in the extraction of gold from the river. Gupta (1975) argues that Dhibars, the highest sub-caste among the fishermen in West Bengal, mentioned that the Dhibar community members had

been devotees of the goddess Manasa for a long time as they believed their origin was from the goddess. He discussed mythology related to the origin of the Dhibar community as follows:

> "*According to their mythology, the Dhibars were created by Manashadebi. After Lakhindar, 'Sati' Behula's husband, was killed by a snake bite, the latter propitiated the deity by prayer when the dead body of Lakhindar was being taken down the Ganga, a 'boal' fish devoured a vital part of Lakhndar's body. It was necessary to recover that part of the body in order to revive Lakhindar. So, Manashadebi created the Dhibars to catch the 'boal'.*" (Gupta, 1975: 18).

Bansphor is a Scheduled Caste community spread across Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Assam, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Arunachal Pradesh (Singh, 1993). This community is a subgroup of the Dom community, and its name is derived from the Hindi words '*bans'* (the bamboo) and '*forda'* (making a hole or splitting). While describing the Bansphor community, Risley designates-

> *"Bansphor, Baspurarui, Bansbakura, "bamboo-splitter," a subcaste of Doms in Behar who are mat and basket-makers and do not remove filth. They have nothing to do with funerals, and do not eat beef, offal, or other people's leavings."* (Risley, 1891: 60)

Within Jharkhand and Bihar, the Bansphor community traces its lineage back to Supan Bhagat, a prominent untouchable saint renowned for his bamboo craftsmanship. Additionally, they consider Kallu Dom, responsible for conducting funeral rituals, as another ancestor. The Bansphor community uses split bamboo pieces to craft various artefacts, such as *supli*, *mouni*, *pouti*, *dali*, and *tokri*. They primarily speak Bhojpuri and Hindi with outsiders, as noted by Das (2007). Their expertise in producing bamboo goods for residential and other purposes has been well-acknowledged throughout history. Apart from the name Bansphor, this community is known by various other names, including Basor, Banbasi, Bansfor, and Bansphorwa-Dom, with regional variations in terminology such as Bansphorwa-Dom in Bihar and Bansfor in Jharkhand.

Khurpalta, a De-notified community in Uttar Pradesh, is known as Sathia in certain regions of Rajasthan (Ruhela, 1968; Verma, 2013; Singh, 2005). Historically, the community sustained itself through the trade of bullocks and cattle. The etymology of the term Khurpalta reveals its origin from two words - '*Khur'*, signifying the hoof of cattle, and '*Palta'*, which denotes the act of mending. Thus, the community became known as Khurpalta, as they mended cattle hooves. An alternative interpretation proposes that the name was derived from the association with the cattle they traded, presenting another perspective of '*Palta'*. The language of communication among the Khurpalta is primarily Hindi, while they also converse in Rajasthani, which shares specific linguistic characteristics with Gujarati when communicating amongst themselves.

The Muriari community, extensively dispersed across Bihar, particularly near the rivers Sone and Morhar, traditionally settled along the riverbanks due to their occupation of fishing. In Bihar, Muriari is recognised as a subcaste of Nishad and holds the official Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs) designation. In contrast, according to Risley-

> *"Muria or Muriari, a sub-caste of Mallahs in Behar…… other authorities, however, connect them with the Kewat."*(Risley, 1892: 109).

The name Muriari originates from the amalgamation of two words, namely '*Muri*,' signifying head, and '*Ari*,' conveying twisting. Thus, Muriari translates to '*the one who twists the fish's head to kill it*'. This designation finds its roots in the occupation of the community, which historically revolved around catching fish from the rivers. In the legendary Indian epic Ramayana, a Kewat, belonging to the sub-caste of Nishad, aided Lord Rama in crossing the river during his period of exile. Over time, the traditional occupation of fish-catching has evolved, and nowadays, a significant proportion of Muriari individuals engage in diverse livelihoods, including daily wage labour, agricultural labour, driving, security guarding, and cooking, among others. Linguistically, the Muriari people employ the dialects of Bhojpuri and Hindi for communication. It is important to note that in other states, they are often called Mallah. The transition from a predominantly fish-catching occupation to various contemporary livelihoods reflects the Muriari community's dynamic nature and adaptation to changing socio-economic circumstances.

The Savar people (also *Shabar* and *Saora*) are one of the tribes of the Munda ethnic group who live mainly in the forest terrain of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and West Bengal. They are conventionally designated as gatherers and hunters. In West Bengal, they mainly live in Purulia, Medinipur, and Bankura districts. As Singh(1992) mentioned, the word 'Savar' means a corpse. Savar is the same word as 'Sagar', the tribe that has the habit of carrying axes. Here 'V' and 'G' are interchangeable letters. They used to collect and sell minor forest products to neighbouring communities. Traditionally, they were largely dependent on foraging forest products, but after rigorous implementation of the legal provisions related to the protection and preservation of Indian forests, they are being displaced and barred from their prolific foraging activities. The mythological connection between Savar and Lord Jagannath is well established. Bengali is their main dialect for writing and communicating (Singh, 1992).

The study employed qualitative methods for data gathering and analysis to glean in-depth knowledge about the experiences and viewpoints of the specified communities. A purposive sampling technique, combined with the snowball method, was employed to identify community members from various study areas in India and select participants for the study. This sampling strategy allowed us to target individuals with extensive knowledge of their respective communities and enabled

us to access hard-to-reach populations. Qualitative data were collected through multiple methods to triangulate findings and enhance the study's robustness. Adult male and female community members participated in in-depth interviews to fully grasp their perspectives on social norms, cultural practices, and community identity. The semi-structured interviews used a well-developed guide covering pertinent subjects to preserve consistency while allowing unscheduled and in-depth responses.

Additionally, focus group discussions were organised with community members, focusing on specific themes associated with community identity. These group discussions fostered dynamic exchanges of ideas and encouraged participants to share their collective experiences and perceptions, complementing the insights gained from individual interviews.

Furthermore, observation methods were used to fully immerse the researcher in society's customs, rituals, and happenings. The data was gathered through interviews and focus group discussions, which allowed for a more profound knowledge of cultural practices. This was a cross-sectional study conducted under the national project 'Ethnographic Study of the De-notified, Nomadic, and Semi-nomadic Communities' by the Anthropological Survey of India. The study was carried out from 2020-22. The extensive time frame includes a preliminary literature review, formulation of research design, systematic collection of the empirical data from the fieldwork, analysis, and interpretation of the findings.

Findings

Declining livelihood system: Ground realities

Numerous marginalised communities in India currently confront a multifaceted array of dynamics, including economic transitions, environmental variables, technological progression, and sociocultural influences. These collective factors synergistically culminate in the erosion of time-honoured livelihood practices. Consequently, this erosion precipitates a range of socioeconomic challenges encompassing unemployment, impoverishment, and inequality, exerting a direct and profound impact on both individuals and communities. The present study is oriented toward comprehensively delineating and analysing the intricate web of circumstances confronted by the communities under examination, thereby shedding light on the complexities inherent in their predicament.

In the contemporary scenario, most Dhibar community members continue fishing activities in the Subarnarekha River, adhering to their long-standing traditions. However, our informants assert that the present circumstances exhibit notable disparities compared to the past. They highlight that the Subarnarekha River once thrived with abundant fish, but the construction of additional dams and industries in its vicinity precipitated a significant decline in the fish population.

During the rainy season, the river experiences periodic flooding, creating a brief window when fishing yields some results. It is during this time that the community can manage to catch a few fish. Interestingly, even the female participants corroborate the observation that in the past, they occasionally stumbled upon small fragments of gold in the river. However, the current scenario starkly contrasts, as they now find such occurrences exceedingly rare. The value of the found gold dust, ranging from Rs. 100 to 200, is deemed insufficient to justify their laborious efforts. This transformation in the Subarnarekha River's ecosystem and the diminishing returns from fishing and gold prospecting form significant elements of the community's evolving socio-economic reality. These changes warrant careful examination of the nuanced implications for their livelihoods and cultural practices.

However, due to the poor prospects in their traditional occupation, a few community members are currently switching to new livelihood opportunities nearby. As stated by one of the informants,

> "*There were lots of fishes in the Subarnarekha River; we were easily earning our livelihood through this. But after big dams and factories were constructed near the bank of Subarnarekha, most fish died due to the toxic chemicals of the river… For this reason, it is challenging for us to survive in this occupation we have engaged in through generations. Most of the younger generation members of the community are searching for alternative livelihoods, for instance, cooking in the nearby hotels, wage labourers, factory workers, etc.*"

In another instance, Muriari, a subcaste of Nishad, is unique to Bihar. Traditionally, Muriaris have been engaged in fishing activities, but over time, they have transitioned away from their traditional occupation and are now predominantly involved in daily wage work. In the Bhojpur region of Bihar, the community members are mainly involved in daily wage activities, whereas in Gaya, particularly in Belauti village, many individuals are engaged in agricultural labour activities. Due to the water scarcity in the Morhar River, a significant portion of the Muriari community has shifted to sand-related work. The shift in the occupation of the Muriari community reflects the impact of changing circumstances and economic opportunities in the respective regions of Bihar. The transition away from traditional livelihoods highlights the adaptability and resilience of the community members in response to environmental and socio-economic factors. Despite this, they take great pride in their cultural heritage, attributing the decline of their traditional occupation to government policies and actions. One of them stated,

> *"We (Muriaris) were traditionally engaged in fishing in different rivers of Bihar. However, the government rules forced us to leave our traditional occupation and look for alternative livelihood opportunities."*

In the case of the Khurpalta of Uttar Pradesh, they could be characterised as a socially isolated community. Though they were traditionally engaged in the occupation of changing the hoof of horses and cattle; presently they are squatters and predominantly reside near railway tracks, having unlawfully occupied government or private land to establish slums, rely heavily on daily wage labour, often seeking livelihood opportunities due to limited access to formal education. One of the female participants of 48 years said,

> *"Unfortunately, we are considered to belong to a lower caste, experiencing untouchability from neighbours. Our community members face significant constraints regarding livelihood options, primarily confined to daily wage work. Even, a few of us resort to seeking alms as a secondary source of income, while in some instances, it serves as our primary livelihood."*

On the other hand, the Bansphor community revealed that they presently do not actively pursue their traditional occupation of bamboo crafting, which was historically fundamental to their sustenance. It is noteworthy that this sub-group has ancestral ties to the Dom community. As a result, some members still participate in the solemn task of cremating deceased individuals at crematoriums in Ranchi, Darbhanga, and Patna. However, in contemporary times, the current generation of Bansphor residing in Bihar and Jharkhand rarely finds themselves engaged in daily bamboo crafting activities. The diminished involvement in this traditional livelihood signifies a shift in their occupational practices over time, possibly influenced by various socio-economic factors and changing aspirations within the community. As one of the elderly female participants said,

> *"We are the last who devoted ourselves to bamboo works, and we knew the process of bamboo crafting but could not pass it on to the young as they are not interested."*

Furthermore, some of them are sustained through livelihood options encompassing sweeping and cleaning, domestic help/services, daily wage labour, business, and salaried service, in addition to the cremation process at crematoriums. However, the nature of their professions has led to their marginalisation within the local social hierarchy, relegating the Bansphor members to a lower rank in the societal strata. According to the members-

> *"People from other communities were looked down upon due to the corpse burning and other dirty works. They usually maintain distance and treat us like animals."*

Nevertheless, on local occasions such as festivals and marriages in the regions of Bihar and Jharkhand, the community engages in bamboo crafting and directly markets. It sells these handcrafted articles, thereby earning supplemental income through hard cash. One of our informants said that-

> *"During festivals and marriage events, we practise the bamboo works to earn some hard cash. Sometimes buyers came to the basti for urgent orders. Higher caste people and others bought those artefacts from the local market for various purposes. At that time, they never considered our artefacts or us as dirty."*

In the case of *Sabar* of West Bengal, participants of four districts Bankura, Purulia, Jhargram and Midnapore confirmed their traditional occupation as forest dwelling where land and forest played an essential role in providing protection and sources of livelihood. They believe their Gods, Goddesses, and spirits reside in the forest, safeguarding them from various dangers and natural disasters. By recollecting old legacies of forest ownership, one participant (55 years) said:

> *"Our ancestors lived as hunter-gatherers, deeply rooted in these woods for many generations. But nowadays, local forest officers restrict our entry into the forest. We are only allowed to collect firewood, which serves both our domestic needs and becomes a source of income through sales at local weekly markets. That was a great source of our economic security. Due to the scarcity of sizable agricultural lands and our lack of expertise in farming techniques, we are unable to rely heavily on cultivation. The soil here is barren and with minimal capacity for retaining water, resulting in predominantly annual crop yields. Crops are yielded mostly once a year. We depend on the forest as it is the place where our God and Goddesses lived, and they provided us with various edible roots, tubers, leaves, fruits, flowers, etc., throughout the year to fulfil our hunger*."

The Sabar population has been searching for an alternative means of subsistence; again, another section, with relative success in retaining access to land and forests, has been struggling to attain decent standards of living. Nowadays, most of them earn their livelihoods by working as wage labourers in agricultural fields, tea plantations, construction of roads, mines, etc (Das et al., 2019).

In the land, where I am living

The Dhara/Dhibar community members are going through a difficult period as they deal with poverty, an economic crisis, and, most crucially, an identity crisis, according to the narratives from the present study. One of them said,

> *"Even though our relatives from other states (Odisha and West Bengal) are receiving caste certificates and constitutional status of Scheduled Castes (SC), the Dhibars of Jharkhand aren't receiving status or benefits from the government."*

Based on the empirical data collected during the fieldwork, a noteworthy aspect that emerges is the prevailing confusion surrounding the community's identity under

study. Contrary to the popular designation as "Dhara," our research revealed that the accurate and synonymous name for this community is "Dhibar," as documented in the literature (Mahato, 1994). The term "Dhara" originated from their occupation, primarily focused on fish-catching and boat navigation in the Subarnarekha River.

It is essential to highlight that within the Jharkhand region, numerous fishing communities coexist; however, the Dhibar community holds a prominent position in the local caste hierarchy. It was observed several caste groups engaged in fishing practices, such as Kewat and Keot, have adopted the surname "Dhibar" to elevate their status within the local caste hierarchy. This phenomenon has been particularly evident in the Dumka District of Jharkhand. According to them,

> "*In recent times, for 50-60 years, we (Keots) have been using the surname of Dhibar to get higher status in the local caste hierarchy because it was believed that Dhibar is the highest among all fishermen communities present in the state of Jharkhand.*".

Within the East Singhbhum District of Jharkhand, specifically in the Ghatshila and Baharagora blocks, a notable shift in terminology is observed among the local people concerning the community members. Referred to as "Dhora" by the locals, this term, originating from Bengali, conveys the activities of catching or capturing. It is worth noting that Bengali is the predominant language spoken in this region. The community designated as Dhora in this area corresponds to the community mentioned in the existing literature as Dhara (Mahato, 1994). Their lifestyle, religious beliefs, and occupations remain consistent with previous accounts, encompassing boat navigation, fish-catching, and gold dust extraction from the Subarnarekha River by female members.

However, empirical data reveals a significant aspect concerning the term "Dhora." It is perceived as derogatory by the community members, as evidenced by the narrations collected during our fieldwork. One of the community members said,

> *"Every community residing locally to us is known by their own community (e.g., Santal, Teli) name, so why would we be called Dhora due to our occupation? We preferred to be called Dhibar, which is our original community's name. We feel insulted when someone calls us by the name of Dhora."*

Watching the road behind: Old stigma

On the other hand, the Khurpalta of Uttar Pradesh faces a significant issue regarding their identity. The empirical data and existing literature on the community suggest that the Khurpalta community in Rajasthan is known as 'Sathia' (Ruhela, 1968). The terminology is onomatopoeic, signifying the sound of whipping horses and cattle. One of our participants added,

> "*My grandfather used to say that the Khurpalta, also known as*

Sarbhangi, because some of the community members were forced to eat the leftovers of Valmikis to survive their starvation."

An alternative perspective posits that the name 'Khurpalta' originated from the conversion of numerous families within the community from Hinduism to Islam, resulting in a tarnished reputation. Though it was not observed during the study. One of the informants from the community narrates,

"*Our community members had a tragic history of religious conversion during the battle of Haldighati, as many were converted to Islam under the influence of the Mughals. As a result, most of the neighbouring communities accused us of betraying Maharana Pratap.*"

Presently, the community members predominantly identify themselves as Kanjars rather than Khurpalta, a tendency driven by the historical context of religious conversions during the Battle of Haldighati. In this context, the president of the Khurpalta community in Agra expounded on their migration history, which further shaped their present identity, where he said-

"*The tragic history of our ancestor's betrayal of Maharana Pratap leaves us with nothing but shame. During the Battle of Haldighati, some community members converted to Islam due to the fear of the Mughals. Still, most of us migrated towards Uttar Pradesh, and few remained in Rajasthan.*"

Consequently, tracing the identity of Khurpalta during the present study posed a challenge, as the community predominantly embraces the name Kanjar. Significantly, the participants in the study displayed a fusion of two ethnic identities. In Mathura, Khurpalta community members expressed a desire to be recognised as Khurpalta, whereas in Agra, they eschewed the name due to its association with a stigmatised past. The head of the community articulated their pride in being addressed as Kanjars and their avoidance of the term Khurpalta, which carries a sense of shame.

Completly unknown, like a rolling stone

The Muriari community of Bihar faces a critical challenge concerning their identity, with the risk of extinction. It is important to note that the entire Muriari community does not exclusively identify as Muriari; instead, they predominantly associate themselves with the term Mallah. This situation has made locating individuals who still identify as Muriari difficult. Certain members of the Nishad community are under the impression that Muriaris no longer exist as a distinct entity. As one of our informants said,

"*You will no longer find any Muriaris in Bihar… Muriaris and all other Bihar fishermen have also started a socio-political movement to gain their status under one umbrella community named 'Nishad.'*

When approached regarding their identity predicament, members of the Muriari community acknowledged the loss of their ethnic identity. During our investigation, we encountered diverse reactions from the community concerning preserving their original identity. Some individuals expressed a desire to preserve their identity as Muriari, even if it is only in oral traditions rather than official records. On the other hand, some community members seemed reconciled to being called Mallah, indicating acceptance of this alternative ethnic identity. One of them said,

> "*We, combined with other fishermen communities in Bihar, want to come under one umbrella community named 'Nishad' to gain political power in the State as earlier happened in Uttar Pradesh. However, we are responsible for preserving our cultural customs for the upcoming generations.*"

The complexity of their responses underscores the significance of identity issues within the Muriari community. The sentiments expressed by its members reflect the intricate interplay of cultural pride, historical factors, and socio-political influences that contribute to the dynamics of identity preservation.

Eyes drawn to the unique glow: We are beautifully distinct

Bansphor communities of Jharkhand and Bihar are unsatisfied with their existing ethnic identity. The Government of Jharkhand does not include a separate constitutional recognition for the Bansphor community. One of the informants from Ranchi said,

> *"Presently, the government is not recognising us (Bansphor) constitutionally. Bansphor isn't included in any of the three (SC, ST, OBC) constitutional categories. So, we do not have any recognition as Bansphor, but we have a Caste Certificate as Dom, which is included in the SC list of the State."*

The report of the Idate Commission (2017) cited the Bansphor community as an NT (list- 2B) and excluded them from being in any constitutional categories, such as ST/SC/OBC in Jharkhand. Notably, certain members within the community advocate for recognition of their identity as Bansphor rather than being categorised as Dom, which is regarded as a sub-group within the Dom caste. One informant conveyed,

> "*Being recognised as the Doms, we (Bansphor) are not getting all the facilities because of other sub-groups such as Maghaiya, Turi, Mahali, etc… it will be beneficial when Bansphor will get a separate identity."*

During the focus group interviews, members of the Bansphor community expressed their displeasure by saying,

> *"Turi is another sub-group of the Dom community, and they have a separate identity. So, why aren't we getting an individual community identity as Bansphor?... It's very hard to get governmental facilities*

being a member of the Dom community. We should get our individual identity as Bansphor just like Turi."

Interestingly, some members of the Bansphor community in Bihar have expressed a desire to get an SC certificate under the ethnic identity of Turi. However, a substantial segment of the Bansphor community opposes this notion, as they consider the Turi to belong to a lower social rank than the Bansphor. They apprehend that such a shift may endanger disharmony during marriage negotiations within their endogamous group. In light of these intricate complexities, the Bansphor community in the districts of Siwan and Gaya now seeks to be included in the constitutional category and obtain a certificate of SC with the ethnic identity of Bansphor rather than being categorised as Dom of Bihar.

Notably, in Patna and Darbhanga districts, some Bansphor individuals have not expressed a specific demand for a separate identity as Bansphor, implying that perspectives on ethnic identity may vary within the community across different regions. One of them said,

"*We do not want a separate identity as Bansphor. It will be difficult for us to fight against other communities like Paswan, Metar, etc. We should fight as Dom collectively; it will help us to be numerically dominant."*

Things are never quite the way they seem: Camouflage

In the search for Sabar, three ethnic groups from 4 districts of West Bengal were found such as Kheria, Lodha, and Savar. In Bankura and Purulia, Kheria communities have been found who generally call themselves and use the surname *Shabar*. Not only that, the local administration of these two districts and the CRI census report notified them as *Shabar,* but their caste certificate depicted them as *Kheria*. In Paschim Medinipur, the *Lodha* community has been found instead of *Shabar*, which is in complete contradiction with the CRI census report. Here all *Lodha* call them *Shabar,* but the surname as *Shabar* has been used by only a section of them. They used to deny the existence of *Shabar* as *jati* and repeatedly confirmed that *Shabar* is only a surname which is mythologically connected with Hindu epic as well as the worship of Lord Jagannath. A 58-year male participant from Paschim Midnapur stated:

"We are Shabar…we are a very old community…we have been residing here since the time of Jagannath…our names are written in Ramayan and Mahabharat. We are connected with lord Krishna."

The scenario changed when the fieldwork started in Jhargram. Some people call themselves *Savar*, having certificates for the same but using different surnames like *Bishui, Naik, Pradhan*, etc. Sometimes they call themselves *Lodha Savar*. Informants of the Savar Community from Jhargram stated that

"We are the people (primitive) of the ancient era, used to living in forest areas. Our relationship with the forest is inseparable. Lord Jagannath

> *is our family deity. He belongs to us. Until and unless Sabars hold the rope and drag the chariot (rath) of Lord Jagannath (Lord Jagannath, Lord Balaram, Lord Subhadra), the worship won't begin. We used to visit the Jagannath temple in Puri once a year."*

Further, they added that the reason behind naming them as *Lodha Savar* instead of only Savar was –

> *"In the year 2009, an NGO organised a gathering where members of the Savar community from Jhargram were invited by a well-known figure associated with the organisation. During this meeting, we were advised to adopt the term "Lodha Sabar" as our ethnic identity, and then the practice started. Prior to this incident, we were commonly referred to as 'Savar' without the additional "Lodha" prefix. We accepted this new identity even though we were not educated and had not enough knowledge about the consequences."*

Interestingly three different ethnic groups, Kheria and Lodha with *Shabar* surname and Savar with the surname of other castes, have shared the same history of worship of Lord Jagannath. According to the participants from Purulia and Bankura, *Shabar* is a community, and the sub-caste of this community is Kheria. They stated that *Shabar/ Savar* is an umbrella term where various sub-groups such as Lodha, and Kheria are included. They characterise themselves based on their language (mother tongue). As their language is '*Kheria*' so, they name themselves as '*Kheria Sabar*'. But when they were asked the meaning of the word '*Sabar*', a participant from Bankura replied firmly:

> "*Sabar means Kheria. Kheria people used to live in the forest area. As the population grew, our forefathers used to relocate from one area to another, often near densely forest areas with lower population density. This movement allowed us to adapt to changing circumstances and find environments where resources were more sustainable and available."*

When the Kheria Sabars have been asked about the marital alliance between Lodha Sabar and Kheria Sabars, they replied that they are not allowed to marry the Lodha Sabar, as their clans are different from theirs (Kheria Sabar), and the Lodha Sabars cannot speak the Kheria language. Their occupation is also based on the forest areas like the Kheria Sabar, but still, they are different. Despite being the '*Adivasi*', they (Lodha Sabar) do not belong to the Kheria Sabar community, though they use Sabar (last name) after their first name.

Furthermore, The Muriari people of Bihar now identify themselves as Nishad or Mallah, and they even have caste certificates as OBC in the name of Mallah. On the other hand, In the Baharagora block of Jharkhand, it was observed that some of the Dhibar community members are obtaining caste certificates as OBC in the name of Keot/Kewat, possibly to secure constitutional recognition and government benefits

due to Dhibar/Dhara's exclusion from any official lists in the State of Jharkhand. This practice reflects how one community assimilates into another to gain social and legal standing. One of our informants from Baharagora said,

> "*During the last panchayat election, a local leader from the nearby village helped us to get the OBC certificate, which will help educate my children, ration for my family, and probably get me a pucca house one day in near future as promised by him.*"

Furthermore, it drew attention during the study that many Khurpalta individuals had also obtained Caste Certificates, classifying them as Kanjars under the SC category to avail of the associated benefits. However, despite possessing these certificates, some reported not receiving the anticipated advantages. As one of them said,

> "*Despite being issued the caste certificate in the name of Kanjar by giving money to the brokers, we didn't get any benefits from that, none of our children got any benefits in education due to this, and neither did we get any house or money as promised by the broker.*"

Discussion

The present study attempted to understand the modalities of the crisis in the ethnic identity of the studied communities of India. They are not homogenous in nature. Their experiences and struggles vary across regions and communities. They comprise a diverse range of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. Considering the instance of Sabar of West Bengal, where being labelled as a "criminal tribe" by the colonial administration created a deep-rooted stigma around this community, leading to social exclusion and discrimination by the mainstream society. The Sabar community of West Bengal has indeed been a subject of anthropological studies due to their experiences of ostracisation and stigmatisation (Ghosh & Guchhait, 2017a, 2017b; Chakraborty, 2021). This identity crisis impacted their self-esteem and how they perceived themselves. The whole process manifested in an adaptation where Kheria became Kheria Shabar, and Lodha became Lodha Shabar by adjoining the name of the Sabar community, and the reason behind this adoption may be to hide their past stigma of criminality and glorify their identity. On the other hand, the Savar tribal community of Jhargram migrated from Orissa is trying to label them as Lodha Sabar by adding the prefix of Lodha to access the benefits of PVTG. But in this whole process, Sabar / Savar are losing their identity as an ethnic group. Therefore, the present study has attempted to explore the ethnic prejudice and discriminatory behaviours of other neighbouring communities of Lodha and Kheria of West Bengal in the context of the experience of Self, relative social status, and social situational pressure. A complex structure between Kheria, Lodha, and Sabar has been developed based on the stigma of their past criminality, their low social position, cultural characteristics, and psycho-cultural feelings of ethnic 'impurity'.

However, the legacy of stigmatisation and discrimination also persisted among Khurpalta of Uttar Pradesh, who continued to face social prejudice and marginalisation. Negative stereotypes, lack of access to education and employment opportunities, and the perception of inherent criminality can still be challenges faced by members of this community. Strikingly, in Agra and Mathura of Uttar Pradesh, a contradiction was observed in how the Khurpalta community identifies itself. In Agra, the Khurpalta community prefers not to be referred to as Khurpalta due to their sense of pride. Instead, they choose to associate themselves with the Kanjar community. On the other hand, in Mathura, the Khurpalta community is comfortable being recognized by their original identity as Khurpalta, even though the name carries a history of shame. Despite being surrounded by a densely populated area, the group experiences social isolation and is compelled to live in seclusion. To remain unnoticed, they adopt the identity of Kanjar, concealing their true selves from society. In their quest for survival and respectable livelihood opportunities, they resort to "identity mooching," believing it to be a necessary action for the betterment of their family and society. They strive to find appropriate means of earning a living, driven by their desperate need to survive and lead a respectable life.

On the other hand, it was observed that the community Bansphor of the Ranchi, who are a subgroup of Dom, feel that their distinct cultural, linguistic, or historical heritage is not adequately recognised or represented within the broader societal framework. They are not included in the SC list of the Jharkhand state under the nomenclature of 'Bansphorwa-Dom' and 'Bansfor'. But in reality, the Bansphor (Bansphorwa-Dom) of the Ranchi do possess *jaati praman patra* as 'Dom' (SC) in Jharkhand. A few of the Bansphor of Ranchi wanted a separate identity as 'Bansphor' to gain visibility and recognition, which are important for communities to assert their rights, access resources, and participate meaningfully in political and social processes. On the other hand, according to the Bansphor people of Siwan and Gaya, they want to be identified by Bansphor instead of Dom to avoid the stigma of untouchability. As they are the sub-group of the Dom community, Bansphor people are regarded as untouchable. Unclean jobs and the dead body burning profession usually corner them to be stigmatised in Ranchi, Jharkhand. They are being treated inhumanely in public places, schools, and workplaces. The larger part of the society believes that sharing the common societal platform either for an economic reason or religious sentiment with untouchable people like the Bansphor will put down their social status. Moreover, their current occupation of scavenging, sweeping and cleaning has also been endorsed as *ganda kaam* (dirty job) elsewhere in the state.

Another example of losing identity was observed during the study, where the Muriari community of Bihar (a sub-caste of the Nishad community) losing their ethnic identity by weakening or diminishing their cultural, linguistic, and traditional practices that are associated with their ethnic or cultural heritage. They started to be known as "Mallah" because the entire Nishad community strives to unite all

Nishad sub-castes under the umbrella term "Nishad" or "Mallah" and Mallah or Nishad is a sort of honorific term for them. Adopting the caste identity as Mallah not only gives them a way out to avoid the social stigma of lower caste but also allows them to be identified as a bigger stand in society. Consequently, the name Muriari as a caste is diminishing, as no one outside the community as well as inside the community, uses this name anymore, and this assimilation leads to a gradual erosion of their own ethnic identity. At the same time, Muriari community people are associated with community sentiment, nostalgia for the past, and a desire to preserve their traditional practices and customs for future generations.

Again, fishermen in India face several difficulties and challenges in pursuing their traditional occupation. These challenges arise from a combination of socio-economic, environmental, and policy factors. To exemplify the situation stated above, the present study showed the situation of Dhibar/Dhara of Jharkhand, where overfishing and unsustainable fishing practices have led to a decline in fish stocks in the Subarnarekha River (Bhaduri, 2016). Moreover, the pollution due to the construction of dams and industries destroyed its ecosystem (Iqbal & Haque, 2022). The overall situation forced them to look for other ways to make a living. However, due to the lack of government recognition in Jharkhand, economic opportunities, including access to financial assistance, credit facilities, and training programs, were very few to the Dhibar/ Dhara community. They are not included in any constitutional category of the state of Jharkhand. However, in the neighbouring states (e.g., West Bengal and Odisha), they are getting constitutional status as Scheduled Castes (SC). The plausible reason for this negative phenomenon may be rooted in various names over the years, including Dhara, Dhibar, Dhora, and Keot, which has led to confusion and uncertainty about their identity. In addition to that, very smaller population of Dhara/Dhibar in Jharkhand compared to the other fishermen communities present in the state may be the reason behind the misrecognition of this community, and the overall concentration of community members in the State is significantly less than in the neighbouring states of Odisha and West Bengal. It was very challenging to identify features of the community that can distinguish them from the Kewats of the State, except their socio-religious beliefs and the history origin from Goddess Manasha and the livelihood practices of the female members of the community as the males practise the same occupation for both the communities. Though a few community members from Baharagora issued OBC certificates in the name of Kewat (Sl no 52, OBC list of Jharkhand), most of them desire to be included in the SC list as Dhibar just like their relatives reside in the neighbouring states.

Conclusion

To the best of our knowledge, the present study represents the first initiative to emphasise the significance of investigating local interpretations and perceptions of identity labels of five DNT, NT, and SNT communities of India. The findings of the present study illustrate the shift in traditional livelihood practices which

pushed these societies to the verge of marginalisation. Concurrently, this process has worsened the complexities in their sense of identity in the everyday milieu. Furthermore, the study revealed the evolving nature of ethnic identity within the community's social fabric. This study also offers valuable perspectives that contribute to a deeper understanding of the process involved in shaping the identity to overcome stigmatised identity, and amelioration of inter-community relationships in the specific geographical regions.

List of abbreviation

CTA- Criminal Tribes Act

DNT- De-notified Tribe (or community)

NT- Nomadic Tribes (or community)

SNT- Semi-nomadic Tribe (or community)

SC- Scheduled Caste

ST- Scheduled Tribe

OBC- Other Backward Class

EBC- Economically Backward Class

CRI- Cultural Research Institute

NGO- Non-governmental Organisation

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