



E-ISSN: 2706-9117
P-ISSN: 2706-9109
Impact Factor (RJIF): 5.63
www.historyjournal.net
IJH 2025; 7(12): 04-09
Received: 06-07-2025
Accepted: 08-09-2025

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Socio-Cultural Transformation and Livelihood Shifts among Gond Tribe: A Case Study in Keonjhar District

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DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.22271/27069109.2025.v7.i12a.577>

Abstract

This paper examines the socio-cultural change and changing patterns of livelihoods in Gond tribe of Odisha in eastern India. The Gond community, which represents one of the largest and the oldest tribal communities in the area has always had a symbiotic relationship with nature both in terms of cultural livelihood through agrarian subsistence forest based activity as well as a well-established cultural heritage. Nonetheless, with the influences of formal education, development of infrastructural networks, government welfare programs, forced removal of settlements through the mining process, exposure to market based economies, modernity has brought up a radical change in the socio-economic structure of the tribe. Basing the study on critical analysis the paper explains how the external forces have destroyed the traditional jobs, promoted the shift to wage earner, urban migration and commoditization of tribal art and traditional handicraft. Education has also played part to the dilution of the indigenous knowledge systems, language preservation and rituals. The research is set in the mixed approach and concentrates on the agency of tribal youth and women, which turn out to be more and more important actors in processes of adaptation and innovation. The paper also gives the reflection of how such changes are likely to impact cultural identity, community cohesion and inter-generational transfer of knowledge. One factor that has contributed to the resilience of bridge building process of the Gond tribe is their capacity to re-define cultural processes and a feeling of belonging about the evolving socio-economic circumstances.

Keywords: Tribal livelihood transition, cultural transformation, tribal policy, Gender Roles

Introduction

Gond tribe which is one of the olden communities of India has a very ancient connection with its natural environment. Their life was based on living in the forest, shifting cultivators as well as subsistence farmers in the mineral rich area of Keonjhar district. Their culture with colorful wall paintings, their folk songs and dances associated with rituals, oral tradition shows that they have a holistic picture of the world which values biodiversity, tracing their roots and being at peace with the spirit world. Nevertheless, the tribe has experienced tremendous socio-cultural and economic changes in the recent past decades. Deforestation displacements as well as environmental degradation due to industrialization especially mining activities and other infrastructural development activities have interfered with their traditional way of relating with the forest. The government-sponsored development programs, educational programs, the experience of digital media and the market-oriented economies have brought in a variety of opportunities and difficulties hence giving the community varied experience. ^[1] The shift which is the move towards wage employment and mining-related daily labor and rural to urban migration, can be defined as one of the major shifts in economical landscape of a tribe. Most of the Gond young men have ended up working in the semi-skilled labor sector in the towns and cities and in some cases have even ended up losing their traditional body of knowledge and languages. Whenever the elders are trying to grow old and cultural transmission fails the young generation is usually torn between the legacy of the forefathers and the contemporary desires. ^[2] This research involves an in-depth investigation of these changes and their repercussions of the Gond tribe in Keonjhar and the effort to record and discuss how the people of the community come to terms with and react to the changes in their culture and economy. The study will be designed

as both qualitative and ethnographic, relying on the use of interviews, case studies and participant observations in the uncovering of what it is like being a Gond. It locates these local experiences in the context of greater discourse of tribal development, cultural sustainability and indigenous rights in India.^[3]

Background the Gond tribe of Keonjhar

Gond is a Scheduled Tribe concentrated in Gond tribe, Odisha one of the oldest Adivasi communities of India and is located in the district of Keonjhar in Odisha in eastern India. Their identity is unique with the relations to the natural environment which in turn their traditional settlements are strategically located in hills and plateaus rich with forest cover. Their economies were diversified in nature or a subsistence economy consisting of shifting cultivations, hunting and seasonal farming. They have a rich cultural heritage, folk epics, totemic clan symbols, religious chants and tales of mythology.^[4] Nevertheless in the past few decades it was the case that the Gonds in Keonjhar have undergone a rapid socio-economic transformation. They have experienced deforestation land alienation and displacement as a result of the industrial mining activities which involved their traditional forest based economy. Lifestyle changes have been hastened by the increased accessibility to road systems, market systems as well as government sponsored welfare schemes which have impacted on their traditional forest-based economy. Intensive movement on mobile technology has affected the living status of the youth in a very remote manner with introduction of formal education the youth have lost their roots.^[5] Through these developments, adaptive resilience is displayed by the Gonds of Keonjhar, as CBOs and NGOs are striving to preserve traditional local arts and involve tribal elders and educated young people in Gram Sabhas, Forest Rights Act campaigns and local decision-making. Such knowledge plays a role in policy discourses about inclusive development, cultural sustainability and indigenous rights in the modern-day India.^[6]

Literature review

Samal, K. C. (2005). "Livelihood Diversification in Tribal Regions: A Case from Odisha". Deforestation, legal and policy challenges and resource loss have reduced lifestyles in tribal communities in Odisha, particularly the Gonds. This has led to alternative income sources like migration to metro cities, wage labor schemes like MGNREGA and petty retailing. This diversification often results in low-paying jobs. The Gond people of Keonjhar are redefining their social-cultural identity by distancing themselves from traditional forest occupations and ritual economy, resulting in new social interactions, skill acquisition and culture negotiations. This study aims to bridge this knowledge gap by studying the social cultural processes associated with this economic change in the Gond community.

Mishra, A. (2015). "Cultural Transformation among the Gond Tribe of Central India", The investigation of Gond settlements in Central India shows how gradually the traditional belief system is being destroyed and tribal rituals and festivals are decreasing. This paper is an examination of cultural transformation of the Gond tribe in Keonjhar district of Odisha and it states that this process is not linear but a complex dance between continuity and change. The study will contribute in bridging the research gap by

offering a geographical ethnography discussion of the reformation of localized identity, gender relations and the intergenerational knowledge transfer under pressure.

Pattnaik, N. (2020). "Gender and Livelihood Patterns among Tribal Women in Northern Odisha", the research paper examines the position of tribal women in northern Odisha, especially among the Gond community, as they adjust to falling livelihoods based on forests. These women are looking at other earnings and one of them is wage labour, handicrafts and small forest-based enterprises. The change is transforming customary gender divisions in Gond society. This change however also undermines and destroys the customs of the culture like ritual singing and storytelling. To fill this gap, the study seeks to discuss how the integration of gender, livelihood change and cultural transformation should achieve a village scale.

Nayak, P. K. (2010). "Tribal Development and Displacement in Odisha", a research into the mega development works in the state of Odisha and specifically in Keonjhar points to the displacement of the tribal communities and destruction of the old-age patterns of livelihoods. It has resulted in reliance on the unstable unskilled workforce on daily wages, which has changed economic independence and the social fiber. The paper also brings out the social-cultural and environmental burdens that are incurred among the natives. But the knowledge gap held here is how the socio-economic displacement alters Gond rituals, oral tradition, gender system and the indigenous faith. To fill this gap, the study would be a localized and culture-centering analysis.

Jena, M. (2018). "Cultural Politics and Indigenous Knowledge: A Study of Tribal Odisha", is an exploration of how indigenous knowledge systems and cultural identities in the tribal communities in Odisha are restructured and led to a hybrid one. The transformation is highly political which is influenced by power relations and marginalization of tribal voices when it comes to policy making. The case study is on Gond tribe of Keonjhar wherein traditional ecological knowledge, sacred process and community rituals are either questioned or usurped by the foreign forces. But the problem with the work that Jena has conducted is that no village level ethnographic information is given on it creating a research gap on the way Gonds react to culture assimilation and adaptation to economy.

Dash, S. & Pradhan, B. (2016). "Forest Policies and Tribal Livelihoods in Odisha: A Historical Review", An analysis of forest policies in the state of Odisha portrays how the colonial laws dispossessed tribal people of their traditional rights to forests lands and resources. They made shifting cultivation criminal deny access to forest produce and establish administrative control over land and declassify tribes such as the Gonds. It also brings out the lived outcomes of such policies even on the Gond tribe of Keonjhar district that previously were sustained by village-specific livelihood systems that have been broken and their cultural and spiritual connection with the forest also undermined.

Sahu, N. (2011). "Livelihood Vulnerability and Adaptation among Forest Dwellers in Odisha", puts a marker on the vulnerability of forest dwelling tribal people in Orissa, such as Gonds, to environmental degradation, climatic change and the oppressive forest policies. These forces have either compelled them to change their traditional subsistence activities to other forms of livelihood such as wage

employment, seasonal migration, production through agro-forestry and small time trade. This is an economic weakness also but a very fundamental cultural one with habitual customs taken over or not remembered. Nonetheless, in the work of Sahu, the results are also devoid of rich ethnographic information on how the culture adaptation process affects the socio-cultural identity of individual tribal groups.

Singh, K. S. (1993). "The Scheduled Tribes. Oxford University Press", An ethnographic description of the tribal societies of India, such as the Gonds, plays a critical role in comprehending their social formations, kinship designs, perceptual systems as well as economic activities. Nevertheless, the modern pressures of industrialization state development plans and loss of cultures are impacting the aboriginal identity, language, values cross-generational inheritance and continuity in the rituals. The present study attempts at providing a contemporary ethnographic description of Gonds in Keonjhar district, Odisha based on how they experience their lives in a situation of socio-economic transformation and cultural accommodation.

Ekka, A. (2022). "Migration and Tribal Youth: Aspirations and Identity among Odisha's Tribes", the study examines tribal migration involving the young people within the Odisha communities, especially the Gonds. The migration will present economic gains but weaken traditional communities and their social ties. The research also indicates a decrease in language use and attendance in the native festivals. The argument of the research is that migration is an economic change but also it is a cultural and psychological break that disconnects Gond youth with heritage knowledge systems and cultures. These transformations have not been locally documented in the study and this is the gap that the research is attempting to close by looking at the socio-cultural identity of the Gond tribe in the villages of choice.

Tripathy, A. (2017). "Tribal Women and Economic Shifts in Odisha", A research on Gonds in Odisha shows that women are engaging more in income-generating activities and as a result there is a reorganization of household power and social engagements. This transition is influenced in cultural norms, location freedom, education and participation in rituals. It concentrates on Gond women of Keonjhar, their position as custodians of the culture and economic providers. The author however does not give the study the ethnographic depth which has created the difference in the way we understand how women balance between tradition and modernity in the transitioning villages.

Aims of the Research

- The study looks at Gond tribe's customary livelihoods in the context of Keonjhar district in relation to causes of deforestation, industrialization, displacement and Government constructed development policies.
- The study looks at the impact of livelihood changes on the socio-cultural fabric of Gond society, viz. the changes in rituals, festivals, oral tradition, kinship ties, gender roles and intergenerational transmission of knowledge.
- The paper focuses on the effect of migration, wage labour and government initiatives such as MGNREGA on the economic activities and culture identity of Gonds people more so in rural and semi-urban places.

Research Methodology

Based on the mixed approach (qualitative and quantitative), the research topic examines socio-cultural change and livelihood trend of Gond tribe in the state of Odisha. It applies both quantitative and qualitative approaches to the capture of demographic, economic and lived experience. In a bid to find an answer to the above question, the research is meant to comprehend the effect of globalization, policy interventions and environmental influence on the traditional Gond livelihood and their cultural identity.

Research Design

The study uses descriptive and exploratory research design i.e. documentation of livelihood practices and cultural factors, exploration of new socio-cultural changes and survival mechanisms.

Data Collection Methods

Secondary Data

- **Primary Data:** The research applies household survey, key informant interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation to collect information on demographics, sources of income, education, health services and socio cultural perception. It accommodates interviews with members of the community, elderly people, local authorities, personnel of non-governmental organizations and government representatives, observations of cultural ceremonies and festivals.
- **Tools and Instruments:** Interview schedules are formed using the semi-structured and open-ended questions in the form of Odia or specific local dialects paying special stress on the thematic questions regarding rituals, gender roles, migrations and their use of forests.

Cultural Change among the Gond people

The Gond tribe (Keonjhar) in the state of Odisha with one of the oldest and most populous indigenous communities has experienced serious social-cultural transformation during the last few years. The animistic, worshipping their ancestors and ritualized gatherings of community life, a subsistence economic base of shifting cultivation of the forest and forest foragers as well as NTFP were features that shaped their traditional way of life. Nevertheless these traditional lifestyles have been facing the heat of modernization and development policies, market dynamics as well as the erosion of the indigenous languages and oral traditions. The prevalence of Odia and Hindi languages in education and governance has given lesser representation than it should give to native forms of identity. With the influx of new culture which is caused by migration especially the young people, there have been identity problems and a break in their practices. Aspirations, lifestyles and social behaviors of the Gond communities too have also changed with the introduction of digital media, mobile connectivity and consumer goods (Anon 2011). These transformations mark a massive cultural alteration of the Gond tribe, once slightly united society that follows ritual-driven and forest-based life, to that of now-fragmented forces of modernity and market reliance.^[7]

Shifts in Religious Beliefs and Ritual Practices: Keonjhar district in the Gond people has undergone great change in

religious outlook of people during the last few decades. They used to be an animist based system of faith where they revered spirits of nature, souls of their ancestors, clan and village guardians. This has however been affected by the activities of Hindu missionaries, Christian evangelism, state promoted religious festivals as well as exposure to the non tribal communities. This has resulted in some observable revival of syncretism of the Hindu symbols and rituals with the ancient gods, mainly on festivals, which are often held in a given community. The government and the missions with the support of the NGOs have contributed to this shift through their cultural programs and Christian missionaries. This has led to the fact that the customs of shamans and dewaris are becoming rather obsolete to this young generation and religious festivals are turning to become more of a part of the public display. However, ritual knowledge and local beliefs are still kept by certain elders and community leaders, even though they have changed.

Decline of Traditional Language and Oral Narratives:

The Gondi language which was an important language in storytelling and otherwise is now on the slow reduction in the face of the Odia, Hindi and Sambalpuri languages which are now dominating among the youth. Such change affects in the knowledge transfer and passage on the traditional culture where there is a gap between generations and culture autonomy. Although Gondi has been revitalized in Gondi workshops, festival and documentation efforts, there is no institutional support.

Modification in Dress, Diet and Practices of the Day: The culture is changing in the Gond tribe of Keonjhar where apart from the trend of wearing traditional clothes and consuming traditional foods is moving towards modern styles of dressing and consumption of goods. This transformation is motivated with urbanization, education and market penetration and motivated to digital technology. Modernity is replacing the traditional communal events and women are inclining to the market driven products. Such change has posed questions of cultural identity erosion, loss of bio spherical knowledge and health insecurities.

Change in Family and Kinship Patterns: Modernization, migration and social integration are leading to the massive transformation of the family and kinship systems of the Gond tribe in Keonjhar. The nuclear family style of living is also increasing where in small families take independent residences and the attachment with the large clan is also getting diluted. The change causes a clash of old exogamy taboos and house laws in passing on family secrets and rituals resulting in clashing families and disappearance of the family history and functions of rituals.

Traditional Art and Dance Commercialization: The tribe of Gond in Keonjhar has been affected with changes in the existing forms of traditional arts which were mostly aspects of religious worship and culture. This commercialization however has caused de-contextualization, commoditization and misrepresentation of the culture. Old song and traditional dances have lost their spiritual gist and community participation as they are reshaped to suit the public. Gond artists and youth are using community-led activities and intergenerational art camps to keep traditional artistic forms alive and in the limelight.

Education and Aspirational Change: Due to the improved access to education, the Gond community at Keonjhar district is going through major social, cultural and economic change. Modern education system is replacing traditional knowledge system resulting in aspiration change and empowering the community. This transition, however, brings about tensions and identity crisis as modern values tend to clash with the Gond culture which is traditional. In spite of these obstacles there are programs such as community schools and revitalization of the Gondi language that can fill this divide.

Energy Effects and Economic Resources Transformation

A Gond tribe in the Keonjhar district has seen a major shift of economic activity over the last decades through external development policies and integration in the market, depletion of their resources as well as modernization of their social culture. Forest conservation policies, lack of access and un-sustainable exploitation has led to a decrease in the dependence of the tribe on the Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs). Consequently, numerous families of Gonds are opting to venture other destinations out of the forest ecosystem.^[7] Replacement of traditional shifting cultivation with settled agriculture takes place, although the problems associated with it are a shortage of irrigation systems and soil degradation. A number of Gonds are now under government/NGOs schemes to grow either hybrid rice or cash crops. Nevertheless, the agricultural income is prone to fluctuations caused by unpredictable rainfalls, small size of landowner and availability of credit facilities and market. Migration of wage labor has also become a major move among the Gond youth and those of a working age, as seasonal labor to the cities in construction, brick kilns and manual work. Such a way of making a living more commonly subjects the workers to exploitation, squalid living conditions and the loss of touch with their cultural heritage.^[8]

Gond women have entered into self-help groups, handicrafts, MGNREGA and other government programs, reversing their gender status and bringing income into the household. Livelihoods have now been defined as market-oriented and this notion of market orientation has brought about the aspect of monetization of the livelihoods at the expense of collective sharing to concentrating solely on individual wealth. The older values of the economy are being diluted but new openings have been thrown open by governmental subsidies, skill development and welfare schemes of tribal's. The digital technologies and mobile connectivity started to affect the economics of younger generations who increasingly show the willingness to shop online e-commerce opportunities of the traditional products might be the critical factor of change in the future. The Gond tribe experiences a multifaceted change in its economy, as some of them have successfully integrated into new ways of living their life and others are in the state of vulnerability because of insufficiency in the resources, structural inequalities, and cultural dislocation.^[9]

Gender Role Transformation

The socio-economic changes, education, exposure to re-state interventions, as well as migration have caused a drastic change in gender role among the Gond tribe in Keonjhar. Traditionally, women were crucial in the sphere

of household activities, subsistence farming and gathering forest products, underrated and not included in the official economic discourse. Economic changes and deterioration of the access to forest resources have compelled women to assume wider roles in livelihood including wage labour, small scale trading and self help group (SHG) activities. Such interventions have contributed to the financial empowerment of women as well as their roles in the decision-making at community levels.^[10]

Seasonal or long-term migration of men to work has also transformed the domain of gender relations and there has been an unclear kind of change in gender norms. The other important contributor to the gender role change is the emergence of education among girls of the tribes where they are exposed to the wider world perspective and motivate their futures by employment, postponement of early marriage and an attempt to seek independence in what they want to do. Aware of the need to create a role model, educated young women are taking stands and promoting health and hygiene as well as rights- based information in the communities.

Ritual and cultural spaces that are normally inaccessible to women are gradually opening up to them leading to some of them being included in festival planning, community meetings and local governance institutions such as Gram Sabhas. There are still obstacles, however, such as patriarchal concepts, experienced violence based on gender, discrimination in the employment position, and social stigma toward women who leave their homes or become highly educated. Women have had to juggle between the traditional roles already assigned to them and the new roles of providing income which has meant that women have had more labor burdens piled on their laps. Finally, there is a slow but effective change in gender roles in case of the Gond tribe in the region of Keonjhar, as the women are now moving towards the epicenter of the economic survival, social change and community development.^[11]

Government Policy and Interventions

The socio-cultural change along with the livelihood transition has been observed in the Gond tribe of the Keonjhar district owing to different government policies and welfare concerns. The objective of these policies is to make it inclusive development, protection of tribal rights and sustainable livelihood. In the Indian Constitution the Scheduled Tribes (STs) have been recognized to have certain rights that must be uplifted by the state. In Keonjhar, the state government has given good position to development by making protective laws and reservation policy in schools, jobs and politics. The Gonds have been facilitated by such livelihood and employment programmers as MGNREGA scheme, National Rural Livelihood Mission, and Mission Shakti infrastructure. The programs have helped in diversifying incomes and lessen reliance on conventional forest-based livelihood more so, women.^[12]

Tribal education has been encouraged through education facilities and residential facilities to enhance high school education and a dropout rate though the language barrier remains a problem. There has been expansion of healthcare and nutrition services in distant tribal areas by means of Mobile Health Units, ASHA workers and Community Health Centers. ICDS also offers nutrition among children and pregnant/lactating mothers through Anganwadi centers. The connection and accessibility to the services in tribal

regions of Keonjhar have been boosted under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY-G) and Biju Pakka Ghar Yojana, though handling, connectivity and infrastructure have been enhanced. Nevertheless, numerous remote Gond villages are unsaved or partly connected and do not have equal access to the markets and institutions.^[13]

The SCSTRTI and the Tribal Museum at Bhubaneswar are also dealing with the aspect of cultural preservation and promotion. Gond dance, art and crafts are also displayed in state festivals and tribal fairs and promote a sense of cultural pride as well as livelihoods based on tourism. To sum it up the government policies and interventions have played a critical role in the transformation of the Gond society in Keonjhar, opening opportunities in the area of education, employment and infrastructure creating social mobility and altering the culture. Nonetheless, there exist knowledge, action and cultural awareness gaps.^[14]

Discussion

Modernization, state intervention and market economy are presenting a complicated social-cultural and economic transformation in the Gond tribe in Keonjhar district. The conventional life systems are also changing and the reliance of the community on shifting cultivation, forest gathering, and hunting is no longer supporting the systems. This has contributed to the movement of the youth to the urban centers specifically as wage laborers thus depriving them of both social dislocation and culture. People are no longer practicing sacred groves ancestor worshipping and engaging in animistic practices as traditional institutions such as village councils and clan gatherings have been lost. Most of Gonds are either adapting to religious practices of Hindu or participating in mainstream celebration blurring their traditional belief structures. There are also transformations in gender relations in the Gond community, and women are becoming involved in Self-Help Groups (SHGs), employment under MGNREGA and small entrepreneurial businesses. Formal education has given the Gond youth new aspirations, they now want government jobs, higher education and work in the urban areas. Nevertheless, the inferior accesses to quality education lack of language skills and socio-economic inferiority have been determinants of high dropout rates and underemployment that create frustrations and identity crisis among the young generation. Cultural change has also been commercialized and introducing a suitable culture and displaying it in form of cultural fairs and cultural exhibitions. There is also the emergence of intergenerational tensions and identity negotiation where the elders fear the loss of values and communities bonding as the younger generations are still under the struggle of how to negotiate their identity as a tribal people in the modern environment. Government initiatives have been of a moderate range of success with the intention of finding solutions to more underlying structural problems like exclusion, land rights, and cultures. Sustainable and inclusive development requires culturally diverse communities to become agents of economic development and transformative and to incorporate cultural diversity and community empowerment into economic development.

Conclusion

The tribe of Gond in Keonjhar district is undergoing a social and culture change with impact of Industrialization,

migration, formal education and government developmental schemes. This has resulted in very huge shifts in their economic cultures, religious beliefs, gender and intergenerational relations. The changes have also led to loss of traditional knowledge systems, degeneration of rituals and loss of identity and especially amongst the young generation. Commoditization of the traditional arts, kinship transformations and decay of oral knowledge also break the cultural fabric. Women have emerged as major agents of change, trying to juggle between family duties, economic role and even leadership at the community level. Nevertheless, the Gond community has demonstrated adaptive resilience in terms of re-defining cultural expression, as well as participating in the policy framework and pursuing a balance between tradition and modernity. The new strategies of tribal development should also be based on community driven approaches that promote cultural integrity, inclusive livelihoods and protection of indigenous rights.

Acknowledgement

We also express our profound reverence to Prof. Achyuta Samanta, the Hon'ble Founder of KISS, Deemed to be University, Bhubaneswar, because of which we could pursue higher studies. I also thank to my supervisor Dr. Sishir Kumar Tripathy for their encouragement and valuable suggestions in the preparation of this article.

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