

Exploring Strategies to Maintain Tribal Identity in Sundarban Island, India

Mohan Kumar Bera¹

Abstract

The Munda people are one of the first tribal settlers in the Sundarban region, but most of them are landless or hold a small agricultural land. Living in small hamlets spread in different parts of the Sundarban islands, they are influenced by the socio-cultural lives of Bengali neighbours. The tribal identity and socio-cultural and economic activities in Sundarban are a result of a long process of acculturation to live with a changing physical and socio-cultural, economic and political environment in Sundarban islands. Is it important for tribal people in the Sundarban to maintain the socio-cultural identity? Is it critical for them to adopt the process of acculturation to live with non-tribal neighbours? The main objective of the study is to explore the strategies of acculturation that strengthen tribal identity and build a consistent and socially acceptable adaptive space. An ethnographic study in a village of the Indian Sundarban island has found that Munda people are conscious of social discrimination and their identity. Socio-cultural and economic marginalisation of the Munda people encourages divisions of 'Us' and 'Them'. They experience the processes of acculturation and Hinduisation, but do not wish to convert to Hinduism. However, the changing nature of primary resource-based livelihood activities and diversification of income generation activities have created a wider space for communication and a symbiotic relationship between tribal and non-tribal communities in the village. The education, better communication and participation in decentralised democratic governance system have brought them closer to other communities. They speak the Bengali language and have adopted the socio-cultural lives of Bengali neighbours to avoid discrimination and better assimilation. The process of acculturation is not for social mobility, but a strategy for survival, along with protecting socio-cultural tribal identity in the Sundarban islands.

Keywords

Acculturation, Adaptation, Socio-cultural Identity, Munda Tribe, Sundarban Islands

¹Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Birla Institute of Technology-Pilani, KK Birla Campus, Zuarinagar, Sancoale, Goa, India
E-mail: mohan.bera@gmail.com, mohanb@goa.bits-pilani.ac.in

Introduction

The history of human settlement in the Sundarban region started in 1459 (Chottopadhyya, 1995), but the actual land reclamation began in 1765 by Claud Russell (Jalais, 2007). The colonial government wanted to convert the mangrove forests of the Sundarban islands into productive agricultural fields that could generate more taxes and distribute parts of the mangrove forest to local landlords on long-term leases so that the marshy land could be converted to farmland. Socio-economically marginalised people came from neighbouring districts and states to engage in the reclamation process as labourers, and many settled permanently in the Sundarban islands. The crisis of resources in the Chotonagpur in the eighteenth century forced numerous Munda people to leave the place. Availability of agricultural land and attraction of possible livelihood opportunities influenced them to settle in South Bengal. First, they settled in the Hooghly district (Basu, 1992) and gradually moved to the 24 Parganas district, mainly Kasiabad in Kakdwip, Purba Daragapur, Durbachati, Gadamuthura of Pathar Pratima, and Raidhighi. The Munda population, which was 688 in 1891, increased to 9,229 (1901), 7,296 (1911), 7,860 (1921), 2,901 (1933), and 20,428 (1951) (Mukhopadhyay, 1976). Although tribal people were among the first settlers in the Sundarban islands, they had to surrender largely to the culture of the dominant Bengali communities in an alien region (Raha and Bhui, 2006), and eventually became marginalised socio-economically and politically. They adopted the socio-cultural lives of Bengali people while living for many years in the Sundarban islands. The main factor for the successful completion of the acculturation process of people is the development of productive social behaviour based on individual resources. However, the acculturation process depends on a commitment towards the culture and participation in intercultural contacts. There are two important questions being raised: Is it important for the tribal people to maintain socio-cultural identity in the Sundarban islands? And is it critical for them to establish contact with non-tribal communities? The main objective is to explore the acculturation processes that strengthen their identity and build a consistent adaptive space.

Understanding the Process of Acculturation

Adaptation is the adjustment of a social group to its socio-economic, physical, and spiritual environment. The process of adaptation ensures a favourable relationship, existence, and development (Woolston, 1917) and adjusts a community's socio-cultural and economic life to its social setting. An individual or a community adopts the dominant culture to avoid inter-community conflicts (Berry, 1997). It is a system of social activities aimed at overcoming the barriers to adjustment in any situation. According to the normative approach, adaptation is a process of continual social control over human behaviour, including social norms, values, and traditions (Romm, 2003). According to the interpretive approach, adaptation is a strategy of personal activity that allows the uninterrupted interpretation of self-identity and symbolic social context during the process of socialisation (Romm, 2003). Communities belonging to

different cultures come into direct, long-term contact, which leads to changes in the existing cultural patterns of one or both groups (Romm, 2003).

Socio-cultural adaptation of a community is determined by a continuous process of social control over human behaviour with a set of values and norms. It is a process that allows people to overcome challenges to cope with a changing environment (Romm, 2003). The socio-cultural adaptation has been discussed by Redfield et al. (1936) as a process of 'acculturation' in which groups belonging to different cultures come together and change the socio-cultural environment (Redfield et al., 1936). The communities undergo cultural changes because of a new socio-cultural environment and required behaviour adopted. Therefore, acculturation is a result of socio-cultural adaptation to accommodate socio-economic, political and cultural environment by a community at a new place of dominant culture.

Berry (1997, 2001) has incorporated the experiences of people in the process of socio-cultural adaptation at a new place. The acculturation process is a change in people's behaviour because of contact and involvement with people from other cultures. The process allows people to give the elements of their culture of origin and adopt new cultural elements (Tonder and Soontiens, 2014). Adjustment with the dominant culture and social practices is a necessity in a situation where people voluntarily or forcefully accept the dominant cultural components along with practicing their culture of origin. Therefore, acculturation is a consequence of social interaction through which people experience and adopt the dominant cultural components.

When people leave the place of origin of their culture and settle down in a different cultural setting for different purposes, the needs of acculturation emerge (Fu, 2015). It becomes paramount to explore the various acculturation strategies of people while adjusting themselves in a new socio-cultural and different environmental setting. It has been understood that the acculturation process is not a linear process. The acculturation process happens through the adjustment of people to a new setting, depending on their necessity, willingness, and pressure from the dominant community, and they gradually relinquish the culture of origin (Segall et al., 1990; Ryder et al., 2000). However, it depends on the duration of stay in the new place and the nature of the connection with people and the frequency of visits to the place of origin (Tonsing, 2010; Segall et al., 1990; Ryder et al., 2000).

Acculturation strategies are followed by an individual as well as in a group. It depends on the need for acculturation, the keenness of the people towards adoption and the socio-cultural environment. Berry et al. (1997) argued that the need for adaptation and its outcome can be positive and negative. However, the impacts of adaptation depend on individual characteristics and the capacity for adaptation at a new place. The socio-cultural adaptation is the change that people must accept while living with dominant communities in a new area (Berry, 1997). Berry (1997) has explained such adaptation as 'fit' in which people from all communities form a new environment to adjust to each other in a new area (Tonsing, 2010). Berry (1992) has conceptualised the whole process of adaptation as 'acculturation' that consists of integration, assimilation, separation and marginalisation. However, the process

of acculturation depends on the ability of people to manage the cultural setting of a new place; social and communication skills and other locally based socio-cultural and economic needs. The nature of participation of people in socio-cultural life also depends on understanding local language, making friends, and attending socio-cultural activities in a new place (Ward and Rana, 1999). However, it varies with length of stay, educational qualification, social network and nature of occupation (Ward and Kennedy, 1993).

The socio-cultural identity of tribal communities is a complex product of social and physical adaptation that reflects their distinct worldviews, beliefs, social values, norms, languages, and customs in a geo-environmental setting. Tribal villages experience heavy migration as well as multiple invasions, thereby bringing distinct communities and cultures into contact with one another. The government's administrative system has imposed on tribal communities a constitutional identity that often supersedes their natural and ethnic identity (Chaudhuri, 1992; Raha, 1999). However, tribal people represent their identity through their socio-political organisation, language, rituals, festivals, technology, dress, art, and crafts. All of these are deeply connected with the land, the forest, and the river. Every tribal community has a distinct socio-cultural set-up. Socio-cultural identity is the basic element by which a tribal community can be identified. This identity may be lost if the dominant culture is accepted unreservedly (Raha, 1999). The tribal people in the Sundarban have been adapting to a physical and dominant socio-cultural environment to ensure their livelihood. The changing political environment in the Sundarban islands also provided them space to engage in the political environment in the Sundarban (Raha, 1999). The lack of connection with the place of origin and the domination of the Bengali socio-cultural environment did not give many choices other than accepting the socio-cultural environment of the new place.

The factors of socio-cultural change are political, economic, educational, religious, industrial, or agricultural (Raman, 1993); the most important is religion. Chaudhuri (1992) rightly explains that the socio-cultural change of tribal people in India started when they encountered Hindu culture—the continual process of borrowing aspects of Hindu culture and incorporating them into tribal practices brought them closer to Hindu society. The acceptance of Hindu culture among tribal people was influenced by the concept of 'great and little traditions' and may be attributed to its comparatively developed material culture, educational advancement, political dominance, and impressive Brahminical rituals (Chaudhuri, 1992).

Elwin (1964) argues that tribal people maintain socio-cultural traditions that are unique and distinct from the dominant Indian cultural traditions. Singh (2002) and Peffer and Behera (2005) support Elwin and stress the uniqueness of tribal culture. Studies show that tribal identity is strategically important for claiming land rights (Schleiter and Maaker, 2010). Gupta and Ferguson (2001) emphasise the significance of multiculturalism and hybrid identities in the modern context. Worldwide, mass movements have weakened rigid cultural identities existing in territorial boundaries, led people of different ethnicities to live together and depend on one another, and

given birth to cultural plurality within the framework of a cohesive national identity. We must therefore take a closer look at the adjustments that have been made in the socio-cultural and economic lives of tribal people in the Sundarban islands.

Research Methodology and Data Collection

The community adaptation and maintenance of the original socio-cultural identity to neighbouring dominant groups is the combination of socio-economic, cultural, institutional setup, technological know-how, and religious beliefs of a community. Understanding integrated activities of a community to deal with every physical and social phenomenon is required because the physical-socio-cultural adaptation starts from each household, which connects every member into the community (Tran and Shaw, 2007). The present study has been conducted on the Munda people who adopted the mangrove environment as livelihood activities and part of the socio-economic and political life in the Sundarban region. To explore the changing socio-cultural lives of Munda people, the research followed an ethnographic approach. Ethnography refers to fieldwork conducted by a single investigator who ‘lives with and lives like’ those who are studied, usually for a year or more. It literally means ‘a portrait of a people’. Ethnography is a written description of a particular culture—the customs, beliefs, and behaviour—based on information collected through fieldwork (Fetterman, 1998). It relies heavily on up-close, personal experience and possible participation,

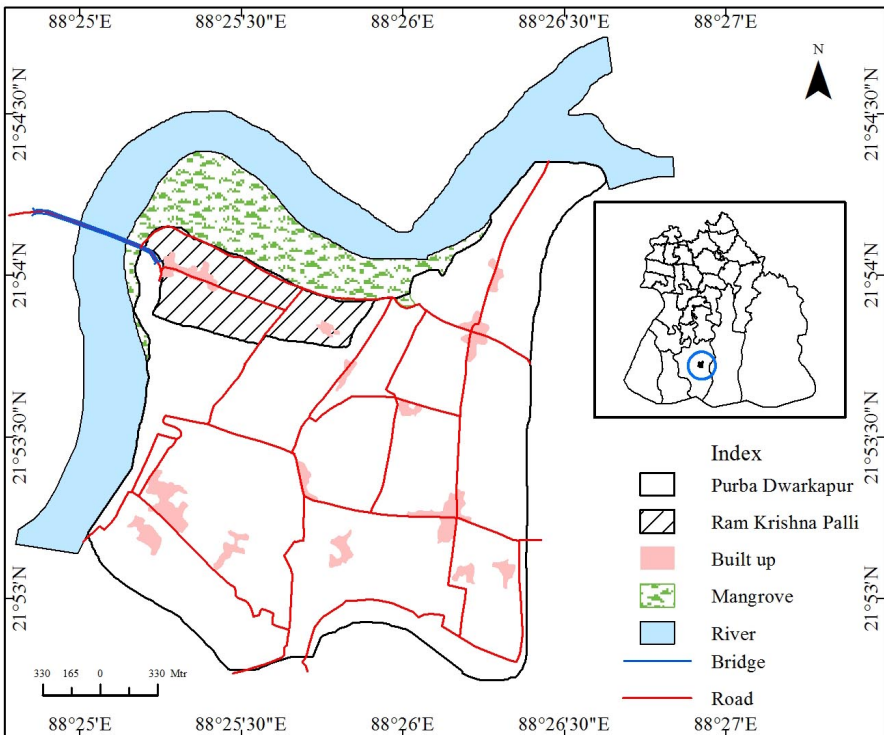


Fig. 1: Ramkrishna Palli of Purba Daragapur Village

not just observation, by the researchers (Genzuk, 2001). This study was conducted at Ramkrishna Palli of Purba Daragapur village (Figure 1), one of the oldest settlements of the Munda people in the Sundarban (Mukhopadhyay, 1976). The village is in the Pathar Pratima block of the South 24 Parganas district in West Bengal, far away from the Sundarban reserve forest region. The Munda people live with their Bengali neighbours and engage in cultivation as well as fishing, collecting honey, and catching mud crabs. The study was conducted during April–June 2017 and frequent visits to the village in last couple of years.

The fieldwork started with building rapport with the villagers, mainly elderly people. The researcher convinced a group of households to accommodate him with them and was allowed be part of different socio-cultural and political activities in the village. The long stays and frequent visits to the village in a particular interval allowed the researcher to understand their lives and challenges of the tribal people. The fieldwork has been categorised into three broad sections: changing socio-political mobilisation as an acculturation process; changing nature of economic activities as a process of acculturation; and socio-cultural activities and adaptation as a process of acculturation. The selection of the 13 respondents was based on the willingness of villagers. Very few tribal households in the village holds more than one hectare of agricultural land. Therefore, respondents have been categorized into medium landowners (landholding above one acre), small landowners (landholding of less than one acre), daily wage labourers, and landless respondents. The main motivation of the research is to understand the processes of acculturation focused on the middle aged group and elderly respondents. Elderly women and boys studding in the government high school were also included in the study because of their socio-cultural activities. Respondents focused on socio-economic and political transformation, adaptation, social integration, social inclusion and exclusion, deprivation and exclusion processes among the Munda people in the Sundarban islands. As the researcher was staying with villagers, all the participants were interacted with at multiple opportunities to understand the process of acculturation focusing on (a) influence of dominant culture on tribal culture; (b) strategies to adjust to the dominant culture; (c) influence of socio-political environment in cultural adaptation; (d) adjustment to new livelihoods; (e) influence of migration and education on socio-cultural adjustment; and (f) Impact of infrastructural development in the process of adaptation. The data has been analysed under the broad themes of integration, assimilation, separation and marginalisation.

Process of Acculturation and Challenges in the Sundarban Islands

The challenges of the socio-cultural identity of the Munda people have been experienced at the individual and community levels. The history of the reclamation of the salty marshy lands of the Sundarban began with the hard work of tribal people. They were known as leaders or *Sardar* who guided others to clean the mangrove forest. They also engage with other Bengali migrants in building earthen embankments to

stop saline water intrusion in the islands. Eventually, ‘Sardar’ has been replaced by the ‘Munda’ surname by non-tribal neighbours. For example, Moti Munda becomes Moti Sardar. The change of surname has increased challenges in daily life because of a similar Bengali surname, ‘Saradar’ (a socially marginalised Hindu community). There is a general confusion among outsiders of Sundarban to differentiate between ‘Sardar’ and ‘Saradar’. Sometimes, the Munda sub-caste is not mentioned in the government document such as a land registration certificate. It becomes difficult for them to prove themselves as a tribe. School going children find it even more difficult as they become ineligible to avail hostel facilities, scholarship and other government benefits for tribal students.

The Munda people in the Sundarban islands hardly speak Mundari or Sadri (the language which is an admixture of Mundari and Bengali) in public as well as at home. Since Bengali language is used in schools and government offices in the Sundarban islands, they adopted Bengali as their main language for communication. The pure Mundari language is only used during weddings and religious activities. The new generation of Munda people hardly know the Mundari language. They are also unable to sing the folk songs to continue their tradition. ‘How can I prove my identity as a tribe?’ (Respondent 2, 2017). ‘If I do not know my language, how can I preserve my culture and identity?’ (Respondent 9, 2017). Tribal youths are reluctant to use the Mundari or Sadri language in public because it is seen as a marker of social inferiority.

Traditionally the Munda people worship their ancestors and nature. In addition, the adverse ecology of the Sundarban islands has influenced them to worship Hindu deities such as *Banabibi*¹ and Manasa,² *Sitala*³ and also Lord Hanuman and the Tulasi plant. They use banana leaves as holy leaves instead of the *sal* leaf, which is not available in the Sundarban. They worship all Hindu gods and goddesses together by constructing mud statues of different colours. Goddess *Kali*⁴ is rapidly becoming the most important goddess among the Munda people; the importance of the goddess *Banabibi* is waning as their dependency on forest and river-based livelihoods decreases. They follow traditional beliefs and rituals in their worship of Hindu gods and goddesses. They are attracted by the stories of Hindu mythology and by Brahminical rituals. Recently, Christian missionaries have started distributing religious books and organising religious programmes in tribal villages. Although the Munda people follow Hindu practices and allow Christian missionaries in the village, they maintain a distance from Muslims. They have experienced different religious practices in different phases of development, but do not wish to give up their traditional beliefs and practices. One villager said: “I cannot give up my rituals, traditional practices, and culture, but I will not be able to protect our tribal culture in the future” (Respondent 6, 2017).

The Munda relatives and friends living in different parts of the Sundarban islands gather during weddings. Weddings are one of the most socio-cultural activities of the Munda people that has preserved the tribal identity while living away from Chotonagpur for over a century. The Mundari language is exclusively used during the marriage rituals, inter-personal conversations and wedding receptions. However, marriage

ceremonies are getting modified by the influence of Hindu Bengali neighbours in on following ways:

- (a) **Marriage timing:** Hindu Bengali marriage ceremonies are organised at night. Traditionally, Munda wedding ceremonies and rituals are held during the daytime, but slowly shifting to night. 'There is electric light, it looks good. The marriage rituals happen during the daytime, but the receptions happen at night. The young generation also demands some of the marriage ceremonies at night' (Respondent 3, 2017). 'The Munda people are spread across the islands. The marriage ceremonies during the daytime allow the families to walk a long distance to reach the groom's house. There was a concern of safety too. Now, the development of transport communication reduces the distance among the islands' (Respondent 9, 2017).
- (b) **Expenditure:** The expenditure for wedding ceremonies also increased due to the financial stability in Munda households. The higher expenditure shows the financial strength of the households (Majumdar, 1994). Most expenses are on the marriage reception.
- (c) **Dowry:** The Munda people traditionally follow the bride price for marriage. However, a substantial number of gifts, jewellery and other materials are also given to the bridegroom and they take pride in this display of status (Majumdar, 1994). Highly qualified grooms with government jobs have started demanding dowry like the Bengali neighbours. 'Neighbouring families demand dowry and therefore grooms from our community say, Why not we?' (Respondent 5, 2017).
- (d) **Inter-community marriage:** The Munda people strictly prohibit marriage within the clan (Roy, 1970). Most of the marriages are arranged marriages, but they accept registered marriages, love marriages, inter-community marriages (mainly with Hindu Bengali families). The inter-community marriages have influenced the tribal socio-cultural lives, rituals and beliefs. The tribal households with inter-community marriages are more attracted to the dominant cultures, rituals and customs. Most of the inter-community marriages are love marriage. Usually, Bengali families do not accept such a wedding, but Munda families accept the newly married couple with a small ritual of scarifying a white fowl before entering the house. A Hindu Bengali girl married to a tribal boy embraces the tribal culture even as she follows Hindu traditions and practices in the tribal home. This acceptance of non-tribal culture has brought significant changes in the tribal system. However, the tribal community has rejected the Hindu process of cremation. If an inter-community couple does not follow the tribal funeral customs, they are not allowed to participate in community activities. Slowly, non-tribal families accept the inter-community marriage relationship. It must also be noted that inter-community marriages have helped to bridge the gap between tribal and non-tribal communities.

The '*Gang Dhar*' (river side) location of the tribal hamlet becomes an integrated part of tribal lives. The location of hamlet allows the tribal people to access the river, but it also separates them from Bengali hamlets. They catch fish for consumption as well as for selling. Therefore, rice and fish become the main staple foods for Munda people. They eat pork, but do not consume beef. However, the consumption of pork has dropped due to limited availability, increasing price and avoiding social discrimination. They also stopped eating rats to avoid discrimination by the non-tribal neighbours.

Haria (a traditional alcoholic beverage made of fermented steamed rice and local herbs) is an integrated part of the socio-cultural lives of Munda people. Haria is consumed during festivals and social gatherings. They claim that Haria has medicinal values as it cools the body and often consume Haria during the farming season. "I used to work hard throughout the day. Drinking haria reduces physical pain at night. So, I could sleep at night and continue working in the morning" (Respondent 9, 2017). However, consumption of Haria has reduced due to educational development and the desire to avoid disputes after consumption. Interestingly, Hindu Bengali food and drinking habits have also changed through interactions with the Mundas. Pork and haria consumption has dropped among the Munda, but risen among their Hindu neighbours, and many rear pigs commercially at home. Pig-rearing, an activity for which the Munda people are often discriminated against, is a source of financial gain for Hindu Bengalis. They also request Munda households to prepare and sell haria. The adoption of tribal ways of life (Singh, 1985) has strengthened the relationship between the two communities.

Traditionally, the Munda households share food materials to organise any social event within a household in the village. The main purpose of sharing food materials is to reduce the financial burden of a household. The tradition of sharing food materials also allowed all the households to take part in the social event and eat together. The tradition has disappeared with the replacement of the trend of the selective invitation of neighbours to organise a social event. Neighbours are getting divided by political affiliation, like Bengali neighbours. The new trends adversely affected community bonding among tribal households. 'The dominant Bengali culture increasingly influences the Munda tribal culture, because social regulation is weak and the Munda people lack unity. Space in the tribal hamlet is limited, and the Mundas have spread to different parts of the village; the present generation builds houses wherever land is available' (Respondent 9, 2017). As tribal unity weakens, the desire to live symbiotically with the other community grows. The separation and distance from the tribal community increases the dependency on Bengali neighbours. Xaxa (1999) argues that tribal society has been changing from a simple to a heterogeneous society.

There is a trend of social discrimination towards tribal people in Sundarban by non-tribal people. The discrimination is centred on lower social status, location of the hamlets, food habits and physical appearance. The social behaviour of the non-tribal people has made the tribal people more conscious about discrimination and self-appearance. It is divided into 'Us' and 'Them'. As a result, they prefer to wear

good clothes in public place. The newer generations of tribal people are educated and mingle more freely with their non-tribal neighbours, thereby closely experience non-tribal customs and practices, but they are always aware of the possibility of social discrimination. As one respondent says: "Although I mingle with Bengalis, I am always conscious of myself as an Adivasi and know that I may be discriminated against" (Respondent 13, 2017).

Tribal people played an important role during the reclamation process in the Sundarban islands, but non-tribal people acquired most of the available agricultural land. Local landlords distributed small sections of this land among members of the tribal community, who acted as sharecroppers. After the government abolished the landlord system, communist party activists captured the land and distributed it among party cadres. This motivated the tribal people to engage actively in politics under the communist ideology. As a result, they benefited from the land distribution process undertaken later by the communist party. Politically conscious tribal people were directly involved in the election of a tribal representative to the local government in the late 1990s. The social relationship between the tribal and non-tribal people has now transformed into a political relationship, which has strengthened the ties between the two communities. However, no political leader has emerged from the tribal community. Political ideology divides the community (Xaxa, 2005), but cultural festivals such as the Tusu bring them together. Non-tribal neighbours never participate in the Tusu festival. Recently, political parties sought to mobilise resources and popularise the Tusu festival in the Sundarban islands, but failed to divide the tribal people. Similarly, the interest in football among Munda youths binds all tribal people together. The success of the football team from the tribal village attracts other non-tribal supporters, thereby encouraging greater social interaction between the two communities.

The Munda people engage in every source of livelihood that includes fishing in the river, catching mud crabs, collecting honey and collecting wood. As there are restrictions to protect the mangrove forest, wood collection has been stopped. The collection of honey depends on the availability of a boat, an entry pass from the forest office and the distance from the forest. Honey collection is seasonal, which provides good economic support to the household, but there is a high risk of animal attack. Tribal households also used to collect fresh water tortoises during the harvest season, but there are restrictions by the forest department to catch these tortoises. There was a time when every Munda household had a boat for fishing. As they hold a small agricultural land, fishing in the estuaries of the Sundarban islands became a source of livelihood. The number of boats has decreased over the years due to the unavailability of an adequate amount of fish and crabs, fear of crocodiles and government restrictions. There is a change of natural resource-based livelihood activities to secondary and tertiary sectors based livelihood activities among the Munda people in Sundarban. They started working with Bengali neighbours while migrating in search of jobs in cities. The changing pattern of livelihood activities influences the tribal people to assimilate to the non-tribal socio-cultural and economic environment. Higher education made the

tribal youths integrate and assimilate more with non-tribal neighbours. The changing economic dependency made them economically more diversified and stable (Table 1).

Table 1: Livelihood diversification

Economic activities in the past	Economic activities at present
1. Farming (sharecropping)	1. Farming (cultivating own land or practising seasonal cropping based on a lease)
2. Migration (family and long-term)	2. Migration (individual and seasonal)
3. Catching fish, crabs, and rats	3. Catching fish and crabs
4. Rearing pigs, cows, goats, and chickens	4. Collective aquaculture
5. Ferry services	5. Rearing cows, goats, and chickens
6. Wage labour (agricultural labour)	6. Wage labour (agricultural labour and work under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA))
7. Selling <i>haria</i>	7. Government jobs
	8. Jobs in private farms
	9. Small-scale trading
	10. Selling <i>haria</i> (on demand)

Educational disparities led to economic exploitation and social discrimination against the tribal community in the Sundarban islands. “Our landlord used to cheat us by changing the language of the contract papers of the land. Now my son has become a university graduate and looks after all the land documents. Now nobody can cheat us” (Respondent 6, 2017). Education has changed the socio-economic condition of the tribal community. Tribal youths spend more time with their non-tribal friends, and this allows them to learn about and engage in non-tribal cultural activities. Education has also helped to reduce alcoholism among younger members of the tribe. As one respondent says: “My daughter gets angry if I consume *haria*, wear dirty clothes and engage in unsocial activities. She is ashamed because her non-tribal friends speak frequently about how disputes among tribal people occur due to alcoholism” (Respondent 6, 2017). Many elderly tribal people are uneducated as a result of poverty. They used to stay at home and catch fish, crabs, and rats for consumption. When they started going out of the village, they realised the need to wear good clothes in public. They became aware of the notions of ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’, and learned that the latter could lead to discrimination. Educated tribal youths are also questioning the reasons behind land disputes and economic exploitation. They work for the government or migrate to cities in search of jobs. However, there is a tendency among them to adopt the dominant culture rather than revive the tribal culture.

Discussion

Tribal people have changed their physical appearance and lifestyle. The first generation of Munda people in Sundarban were very poor and too busy earning their livelihood

to clean their bodies or wash their clothes. They were discriminated against for their inferior social status, their physical appearance, and their poverty-stricken homes (where pigs were often reared). Untouchability was a common experience among the first generation of tribal people. Although access to education and a changing socio-economic and political environment have ameliorated this situation, social discrimination against the Munda people remains a challenge. Football has played an important role in encouraging interaction and bonding between the tribal and non-tribal communities. Non-tribal neighbours also drink Haria in tribal homes and work together in labour groups. While tribal people have accepted inter-caste marriages, their non-tribal neighbours do not accept them positively. Couples in inter-community marriages are persuaded to practise the rituals of the dominant community. However, educational achievements and engagement in government jobs have brought about a change in attitude towards the tribal people in the village. It is not uncommon for educated members of the tribe to engage in the social activities of the dominant Hindus.

Language plays a significant role in shaping the culture and collective identity of a community. However, the Munda people often avoid speaking in the tribal language in public to conceal their identity and prevent discrimination. In Sundarban, the language used by the tribal people is a combination of the Mundari and Bengali dialects. In such a bilingual situation, the mother language is often dominated by the second language, thereby provoking a loss or diffusion of identity, although Trudgill (1974) finds that a person or group may give up their language without losing their original identity.

Tribal culture cannot be isolated from the influence of the Bengali culture. Both Hinduism and Christianity exert a significant influence on the Munda village, but people have not changed their religion and traditional practices. The worship of Hindu gods and goddesses is not a choice, but a strategy to survive in a harsh geographical location. By adapting to the dominant culture and working with Hindus, the Mundas have expanded their means of livelihood. Cultural adjustment is also a strategy adopted by the Munda people to enhance their social status in the village. Srinivas (1966) describes this strategy as a process of Sanskritisation. In this process, the dominant ideology and culture are internalised through the acceptance and practice of its traditions and customs (Gaventa, 1980). Regarding upward mobility among tribal people, the findings differ from those of Gaventa (1980) and Fernandes (2005). The interviews of tribal people in the Sundarban islands show that they worship the dominant community's gods and goddesses to avoid social discrimination and livelihood risks, as a strategy of survival, and as a way of living with the dominant community in a foreign land—this is not merely a process of Sanskritisation, Hinduisation, or social transformation. Only a small number of tribal households follow Hindu rituals and practices; besides, worshipping Hindu gods and goddesses and practising Hindu customs do not transform tribal people into Hindus (Xaxa, 2005). There is no space for them in the Hindu caste hierarchy, as they cannot simultaneously maintain their tribal and Hindu identity, and they have never been fully accepted by the dominant Hindu community. It has traditionally followed the practice of spatial segregation in the Sundarban islands, as may be seen in its claim, and in its awareness, that tribal hamlets' geographical

location—near the riverbank, far from Bengali settlements—helps them to access river- and forest-based livelihoods.

It has been observed that the Munda people in the Sundarban are in a process of acculturation to integrate and assimilate with the larger community in the Sundarban to ensure livelihood. They accept the influence of the dominant community, but do not change their religious belief. The rejection of the Hindu cremation system by the Munda people symbolises the nature of acceptance and rejection in the process of acculturation. The process of acculturation depends on the willingness and necessity of adjustment of people (Berry, 1997). Tribal people are also in a process of Hinduisation (Xaxa, 2005), but to become Hindu. Young Munda women dressed up like Bengali women to avoid social discrimination at work and in public places. “I have to live in a society and need to follow local traditions” (A woman Respondent, 2017). The research agrees with Xaxa (2005) that educated Munda youths become highly conscious about their tribal identity. The changing nature of economic activities allowed the Munda people to integrate and assimilate with non-tribal people (XaXa, 1999).

The studies have claimed that the acculturation process and maintaining socio-cultural identities depend on the duration of stay at a new place (Tonsing, 2010; Segall et al., 1990; Ryder et al., 2000) and the connection with the people of the place of origin (Ward and Kennedy, 1993; Ryder et al., 2000; Wenjing, 2005; Jayaram, 2009). Munda people have been living in small hamlets across the Sundarban islands. They do not communicate much with the people of the Chotanagpur region. Therefore, it is not just the duration of stay, but the sense of tribal identity (Xaxa, 1999) and close bonding among the tribal people, which encourages them to integrate, assimilate, maintain and revitalise the Munda socio-cultural identity.

Table 2: Socio-economic and Cultural Adjustment with Bengali Neighbour

	Adjustments	Reason for adjustment
Language	Speaking local language and dialects	Low level of practice of the Mundari language at home No academic activities in the tribal language No use of the tribal language in government offices More engagement with non-tribal communities Tendency to hide tribal identity
Worship	Worship of Manasa, Tulasi, Banabibi, Shiva, and Hanuman	Fear of wild animals and snakes Attempt to secure livelihood Desire to live with Hindu neighbours Inter-caste marriages
Clothing	Wearing a saree, bindi, red and white conch bangles, and vermilion	Need to adjust to society Need to go to schools and offices and mingle with non-tribal neighbours Avoid discrimination Avoid the social stigma of ‘unclean’ Desire to look good

Food	Avoid pork and rat meat	Need to adjust to non-tribal neighbours Avoid quarrels among the neighbours Avoid discrimination
Drinking Haria	Reduced alcoholism Consumption during the festival	Children do not like the practice Children are ashamed within their friend circles Influence of education Economic consciousness
Livelihood activities	Reduced dependency on catching crab and fish	Government restrictions Unavailability of species Migration in search of jobs Engagement in farming Collective pisciculture
House	Building a good house	Avoid the social stigma of a poor and 'unclean' house Government housing scheme Improvement of economic condition

The socio-cultural adaptation of the Munda people also happened through a series of economic changes. Engagement in diversified economic activities has transformed their social status and ways of life. Economically stable tribal households now spend money on building concrete houses with the help of the Indira Awas Yojana (a central government housing scheme for the poor). The economic improvement of the tribal community has enabled them to live with greater respect in the village. The strategies of avoiding rearing pigs and consumption of Haria, avoid quarrels within tribal households and with non-tribal individuals; getting higher education; ambition to work in a government office; engagement in farming; maintaining economic stability; wearing good clothes (and 'be clean'); engagement in active political activities; making more friends and networking with non-tribal people and speaking the language of the dominant community symbolise the strength, strategies and challenges of acculturation of the tribal people (Table 2). These strategies allowed them to avoid social discrimination, marginalisation and stop economic exploitation and supported the process of acculturation.

Young tribal people show great interest in gaining an education and migrate for employment opportunities. Some lease land from big land-holding families for seasonal farming. This increased participation in agriculture has brought them closer to the non-tribal peasants in the village, but the diversification of economic activities has increased wealth-based social stratification, and economic development has influenced community structure and social interaction patterns. There are landless labourers, marginal farmers, and government employees; and differences in ideology, religious belief, political orientation, class, and way of life in tribal society, as in Indian society (Xaxa, 1999). Government developmental programmes have influenced the social, economic, political, and cultural life of the tribal people in the Sundarban region, changed the nature of income-generating activities, and reduced the social distance between communities, but traditional authority plays a less significant in the

tribal village today. People are psychologically united through emotional ties and the celebration of cultural ceremonies. Mallick (2011) points out that tribal people now engage more in agricultural activities even as they pursue their traditional means of livelihood. Social discrimination, economic exploitation, and educational disparities create fewer barriers in the reciprocal and symbiotic relationships between tribal and non-tribal communities.

Conclusion

One's socio-cultural identity is linked to the socio-cultural adaptation of a community. As the Munda people in the Sundarban islands are immigrants, they had to cope with adverse conditions before they could engage in primary economic activities. Their increasing involvement in agriculture has allowed them to socialise more freely with their non-tribal neighbours. By gaining financial stability and building good houses, they have succeeded in minimising social discrimination. In addition, they are now acutely conscious of the difference between the 'clean' and the 'unclean' and 'us' and 'them'. Greater access to higher education has changed their lives and daily activities. They follow non-tribal practices in public but exercise their tribal identity within private spaces. Tribal representation in social, economic, and political institutions helps them to voice tribal issues and concerns before a wider audience. The changing economic and political identity of the Munda people has influenced the attitudes of the dominant community towards them. The tribal community is now integrating into the larger social life of the Sundarban islands without losing its cultural identity. Moreover the growing politicisation of the village system is affecting tribal traditions. As the tribal people are few in number, they cannot bypass the changing socio-economic developments in the Sundarban islands. The question remains the same, how far can they adapt themselves to these changes without sacrificing their tribal socio-cultural identity?

Endnotes

1. Banabibi is the Goddess of tigers.
2. Manasa is the Goddess of snakes.
3. Sitala is the Goddess of small pox.
4. Kali is the Destroyer of evil forces.

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