

Pando Tribe in Contemporary Society

Jayant Kumar¹

ABSTRACT

The present study intends to explore the traditional culture of Pando Tribe in Jalkey village of Mahasamund district of Chhattisgarh State. The research is qualitative in nature and is based upon ethnographic design. The researcher has taken utmost effort to explore the cultural lifestyle of Pando tribe and their struggle, sustenance ranging from the pre-colonial state to today's context. The study also encapsulates Pando's tribe struggle with that of Gond's tribe and role of various protagonists in facilitating the preservation, dissemination of culture and ethnography. From the study it may be inferred that Pando tribe is attuned with traditional rituals and customs in the birth to death life-cycle. The Pando's were subject to forced exploitation for providing free labor under the British administration. The agricultural fields of Pando's were forcefully taken away by Gond tribe and they forced to displace from their own lands. CASA intervened in the upliftment of Pando tribe by undertaking various developmental projects like facilitation of irrigation system, alarming the Health department for providence of basic health services.

Keywords: Pando, Gond, CASA, PVTG, Jalkey

¹ Church's Auxiliary for Social Action(CASA)

Introduction

Jalkey comprises a compelling history, for which one need not look any further than the name itself. The existing literature that Gond Adivasis frequently project their past status, especially of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as that of ruling sovereigns or rajas. The same literature also points to how the Gonds, when genealogically expressed, comprise several clans (or *paris*), such as Koram, Uikey, Koretti, Markam, Atram, and so on. Against this background, the village elders, or *siyans*, at Jalkey, in the study expressed as to how the foundations of the village were laid by a Koram family, whose male head was of a kingly disposition. True to the warrior spirit, this Koram headman built a cadre of warriors over time and led several expeditions. Unfortunately, he met with an early end in one such expedition, dying a bloody death. When his body returned to the village, his wife seemed inconsolable. 'Her love and dedication for her husband was so strong that she lunged into her husband's funeral pyre, raising herself to the status of a devi, or *Sati dai*,' shared by one Gond *siyan*. This act of self-immolation, celebrated in typically patriarchal vein as a symptom of women's valor, gave the village its name. Jalkey, in vernacular, means 'got burnt,' rather, 'she got burnt.'

Over time other villages clustered around Jalkey. And today Jalkey refers not only to the singular village at hand, but an entire Gram Panchayat, comprising of 9 villages, one of which is Tendutikra. Jalkey village is home to 700 individuals, whereas the Jalkey Gram Panchayat comprises a population of about 2,000 strong Tendutikra, in comparison, consists only of 55 resident members, spread across 15 to 20 households. The residents of Tendutikra, however, are not Gonds. They are the Pandos. Their case and history go to establish the layers of marginalization that pervade Adivasi society, with the Pandos featuring far below the Gonds as part of the existing hierarchies. This working paper is devoted to their struggle and history, often times waged against the Gonds, and at other times the (post)colonial state. CASA's interventions are part of the same. A comparative backdrop of the Pandos, against the Gonds, thus becomes necessary for Researchers to study the same.

Review of Literature

The Pando tribe stands as one of the major tribes in the state of Chhattisgarh. They mainly reside in the areas of Balrampur, Surajpur and Surguja districts of Chhattisgarh. Considered

to be the ancestors of Pandavas from the Mahabharata era, they mainly reside in the hilly areas. The traditional Panchayat in the Pando tribe has its own system. The head at the village level is known as Mukhiya (Chhattisgarh). Surrounded by natural beauty, the Pando practice small scale farming for their living. Cultivation, daily labor, forest produce, cattle, birds etc. supplement their income. Karma is one of the main festivals of Pando's which stands as the celebration of liquor god (Pando in India, n.d.). As per Census 2001, the population of Pando tribe including Bharia - Bhumia and BhuiharBhumia is 88,981 which is 1.3 percent of total tribal population of Chhattisgarh(Census of India, Chhattisgarh, 2001). The Pando are divided into two main sub-divisions- Sargujiha and Uttariha, the status of Sargujiha is higher than Uttariha. Both are divided into various exogamous clans. They speak Pando dialect which comes under "Indo-Aryan" language family(Bais, 2014).

The Pando Samaj stands differentiated from the Gonds in the sense of having been of a nomadic/semi-nomadic disposition for the longest time. The Gonds, in contrast, boast of a longer agrarian history as settled, land-holding peasants, if not feuds (and warriors!). It is another thing that the colonial period demoted them in terms of status. But not half as bitterly as the Pandos.

The report of the Bhiku Ram Idate Commission (2018), concerning the status of nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes, makes zero mention of the Pandos, even though it lists a plethora of other such tribes.² Some reprieve has been offered by the State Government though. Prior to 2014, the Central Government recognized Kamar, Abhujmaria, Baiga, Birhor, and Pahari Korwa, as 'Primarily Vulnerable Tribal Groups' (PVTGS). In 2014, however, the Chhattisgarh State Government added the Bhunjia and the Pando tribes to the list, making them eligible for a degree of protection and state welfarism. Despite which, the Pandos were in the news in 2021 for all the wrong reasons. Popular dailies such as *The Hindu* and *TheTimes of India*,³ both reported a series of deaths amongst the Pando folk on account of malnutrition and related chronic illnesses. The paper "Why are so many indigenous Pando people dying? Using observations from Chhattisgarh, India, to conduct structural assessment and identify solutions" indicates political, administrative, legal, economic, social, cultural, material, technical, biological, and environmental factors stands responsible for poor health conditions amongst the Pando tribe (Yogeshwar Kalkondea, 2023). One of the papers "Socio-cultural Aspects and Health Care in Pando Tribe of Madhya Pradesh" emphasizes upon

²Idate Com. report

³*The Hindu* and *ToI*

improving MCH and family planning acceptability in the tribe and to take suit-able measures in light of their Socio-cultural practices to improve infant mortality level and other health indices amongst the Pando tribe (G.D. Pandey, 2001).

The Pandos were also of a hunting-gathering variety, in traditional manner. Even today their household assets may include a spear, a pick axe, spade, catapult, and last but not the least, bows and arrows of impressive size. Though sparingly used nowadays, and restricted to celebratory display for the better part, such instruments speak of some expertise in craft and metallurgy. The metal heads of the pick axes and spears are solid and firmly attached to wooden poles or staffs of appropriate length and weight. The bow, for its part, is taut, and sometimes as tall as 4.5 feet. In earlier times, they were used to pursue quarry in the nature of birds, jungle fowl, hare, squirrels, and deer. They were also necessary in times of self-defense against wild beasts, such as leopards and tigers.

Apart from the above arsenal, the Pando households also remain equipped with portable bamboo baskets, customarily used for the collection of tubers, roots, mushrooms, herbs, tendu leaves, fruits, and mahua flowers. The last of the lot, or mahua flowers, remain significant for more than one reason. Alcohol is distilled from the same. This alcohol offers recreational value, as also a degree of nutritional supplant. This indigenous alcohol is thoroughly entwined with cultural norms, playing an important role in customs and rituals too.

The portable baskets of above mentioning are mostly self-made. This alone depicts another aspect of Pando existence - they have historically been proficient bamboo-based craftsmen. According to the existing lore, the hunting-gathering and itinerant lifestyle of the Pandos brought them into contact with the Basod community several centuries ago. An equally anonymous tribe in the state of Chhattisgarh, the Basod derive their name and identity from the word 'bans,' which means bamboo by itself. At times, the term Basod is also used in a generic fashion to refer to any tribe, or community engaged in bamboo-based crafts. The Pandos proved to be quick learners. When and where bamboo was in abundance, they began to collect it in sufficient measure from the forests, and fashion it into sieves, baskets of different sizes, grain boxes, and other small decorative items.

Though bamboo-based crafts are quickly receding from the repertoire of economic activities, bamboo is still collected in some measure from the surrounding forests and painstakingly

fashioned into the above products, only to be sold in the weekly village market, or *haat*. In other instances, such ware is carried by foot and sold in neighboring villages and townships, as part of an itinerant existence. Such villages, needless to mention, include the more prosperous segments of rural society stretched across the Adivasi-caste continuum. During earlier periods, the customers of such ware paid the Pandos in kind, in the form of grains, pulses, spices, vegetables and the like, which were cooked simplistically into a type of broth. Today payment is mostly made in terms of cash. Food and other commodities are purchased from the market.

An added supply of grains, however, came from *bewar*, or shifting cultivation, as part of which the propagation of coarse grains and millets, especially *kodo* and *kutki*, were preferred in the past. In most cases the forests were cleared and seeds were broadcast. For the lack of any expertise in keeping and maintaining drought animals, Pandos sometimes used a makeshift plough that was pulled with manpower. Much mechanization of agriculture, leave alone transformation in the concept of land rights, has taken place ever since.

Indeed, it is difficult to estimate how precarious/resilient the nutritional status of the Pandos might have been in antiquity. It is equally difficult to decipher, or say anything with certitude, about the respect and/or dignity that was imparted by larger society, including Gonds, towards the Pando model of sustenance - one which was peripatetic, driven by hunting-gathering, with a splash of bamboo-based crafts and *bewar*. Yet, the above aspects, relating to food and respect, suffered a serious deterioration in times closer to today's era.

Objectives of the Study

- To explore and analyse the cultural lifestyle of the Pando's in context to their struggle and sustenance against the Gonds, in the pre and post-colonial phase ranging to today's context.
- To study the existing prospect facilitating the preservation, promotion and dissemination of Pando's culture and ethnography.

Research Methodology

The Researcher in the study follows ethnographic design. The design involves qualitative research procedure for depicting, analysing and interpreting a cultural group cultural group's shared patterns of behaviour, beliefs, and language that develop over time (Creswell, 2002).

It's a micro ethnographic study wherein the ethnographic design is based on specific aspect of a cultural group or setting. The study is based upon realist ethnography wherein the Researcher reports on what is observed or heard from participants and produces participant views. The study is pursued in Jalkey Village of Mahasamund District of Chhattisgarh state. The Researcher carried a in-depth exploration of indigenous Pando Tribal through interaction with the tribal members. Conducting formal interviews often remains a challenge in the tribal system. So, the Researcher followed an "Go with the Flow" approach when interacting with the Pando tribal members. The researcher worked upon the following basic themes while interacting and exploring Pando tribal culture.

- a. Traditional culture of Pando tribe
- b. Pando's Acculturation and Intervention

Findings and Discussion

Birth, Death and Marriage - The Cycle of Life

In light of the traditionality of Pando livelihoods, it is important to understand the faith-systems that accompanied for long. Any enquiry about the traditional gods of the Pandos, frequently lands the researcher in the midst of a bewildering plethora. There is the fire god, or *Agni deo*. There is ample reference to the worship of the bows, arrows, spears, and pick axes. Such assets, or arsenal, were indispensable for survival, and thus worthy of being treated as symbolic of a higher power. In addition, the Pandos also mention *Jhagra Kanai* and *Moti Baraiya*. The specific relevance and import of such gods, however, remains shrouded in darkness and awaits closer assessment. A brief discussion on the replacement of older Pando gods with newer ones is best delayed to a later section of this paper. The traditional faith systems of the Pandos are, perhaps, more easily visible in their birth and death rituals. The researcher in a long interaction with Keounlibai, the wife of Pando *siyan*, Buddhu Ram, learnt how a midwife belonging to a lower caste background, assists in the delivery. The midwife severs the umbilical cord and buries it at a discreet location at some distance from the village. Soon after the delivery, or shortly before, the expecting mother is shifted to a separate room, or chamber, that is properly cleaned and purified with incense. Entry to this room remains highly restricted in the coming time, as the mother tends to the child. No one is allowed to enter. Food, water and the like are delivered at the doorstep of the chamber by a designated relative. Guests, if any, are required to content themselves with meeting the father

of the child, and the mother's in-laws. Though this practice is interpreted as being woman unfriendly by some, it is but apparent that that it has been designed to prevent contamination, infection, and disease, during a crucial phase of post-natal care.

In the early stages of her recovery, the mother, as per Keounlibai's word, is administered a 'potion.' The preparation of this potion, requires the collection of an herb from the forest. Keounlibai was reluctant to reveal the identity of the herb and deflected the researcher with respect to the same with a shy smile that sent her face simultaneously into a hundred enigmatic wrinkles. Nonetheless, it was additionally learnt that this herb was carefully introduced in a bowl where a small quantity of both hot and cold water was being mixed by other women in equal proportions. Apart from this potion, *kulthi*, or horse gram, is also boiled. The water and the *kulthi* seeds are thereafter separated by a process of filtration, and given turn-by-turn to the mother. The researcher explored for the Pando maintain that the former (*kulthi* water) is emblematic of a cooling essence, while the latter (the boiled seeds) of a heaty essence. The designation of certain food substances as heaty, and others as cooling, is not restricted to the Pando samaj. Ayurveda follows a similar classification. What is relatively unique, however, is the importance associated revitalizing the mother's body while also bringing the hot and cold energies of her body into balance.⁴ This, indirectly gets transferred to the child, through breast feeding and care giving. The existing customs do not reveal any son preference. With progressive healing of the mother, prohibitions on entering the chamber are loosened, but not entirely suspended. The Pando's meticulously record the phase of the moon on the day of the birth, and wait for the completion of one cycle. The end of one moon cycle is met with a small function, where all prohibitions on entering the mother's chamber are suspended. This function is called the *Chhatti*. The head of the child, and sometimes the parents, is tonsured. In Hindi speaking belts this is largely called the *mundan* ceremony. This is followed with mild celebration in the form of a community lunch, which may or may not include the meat of freshly slaughtered goat or chickens. The indigenously distilled alcohol of mahua is also consumed.

As far as death is concerned, the process is relatively simpler. Pando society provides both options of cremation and burial. The third (*teejvi*) and tenth day (*dasvi*), from the death of the concerned individual, are marked for the concerned rituals. The third day involves the cutting of a goat, if not chicken. A delicious meal is prepared of the same. This is offered to the

⁴ Levi-Strauss, oppositional dynamics.

immediate family members of the deceased as a practical means of cheering their spirits. The tenth day ritual, or *dasvi*, often includes the immersion of ashes, in the case of cremation. In both the birth and death rituals of the Pandos, it is quite impossible to not notice the impacts of modernity. It is best not to evaluate the same in purely positive or negative terms, right off the bat. The availability of modern health facilities and allopathic medicines, for instance, finds the Pandos more willing to relinquish their faith in their system of quarantine. Likewise, in both birth and death rituals there seems to be an increasing hesitation to cut animals or offer indigenous alcohol. One can only infer this to be the influence of mainstream Hindu religiosity, with its clear preference for vegetarianism and non-alcoholic sobriety on all such occasions. Marriage, however, makes for the most compelling case of assimilation - cultural to technological. Mankuwarbai, another elder woman, the wife of the *siyan*, Pyarelal ji, explained that in earlier times the process was rather simple. Without consultation with the son, his parents would identify a bride from within the Pando society. The prospective bride and her family could hail from as far as Sarguja, a district no less than 150 kms. At other times, she could hail from the very same village of the boy's belonging. Whatever the distance, the boy's parents would trek to the home of the prospective bride with two items - a bottle of the mahua alcohol, and a wooden staff. This is easy to imagine given the nomadic/semi-nomadic predisposition of the Pandos, as mentioned earlier. The bottle would be graciously offered to the girl's parents, being placed near the hearth in keeping with existing custom, as part of the marriage proposal. On leaving the household, the boy's parents would leave the staff at the door as a symbolic gesture that they have approached the family for an alliance. This, as a consequence, communicated the ongoing negotiation to the rest of the Pandos, blocking new offers for the time being.

After the passage of some additional time the extended family of the boy, beyond his immediate parents, would revisit the family of the prospective bride, to confirm their approval or disapproval. A provisional 'yes' would subsequently find the boy residing in the girl's household for a period of about a week. If the boy were to pass this probationary period too, then his family would customarily arrive at the bride's household and preside over a simple ring ceremony. After this, the bride would be brought back to the newly wed groom's village. Mankuwarbai explains that for the lack of proper transportation this distance was, almost always, accomplished on foot. In today's context, however, things have changed dynamically. Modern transportation has eased things. More people participate in the negotiations and events, relying on hired vehicles. In contrast, the Pandos have also become

more sedentary. Mobile phones and WhatsApp have also entered the marriage market as ‘actants.’⁵ Flirtations and romantic conversation take the shape of text messages and voice recordings, long before parents learn of the matter. The researcher’s interactions with Pando women, particularly elders, did not reveal any moral apprehensions over the free interaction of the sexes. He encountered a high level of broadmindedness. Perhaps, some such interactions transpired in the past as well, and elders were used to it. Probably, the wilderness provided the scope of romantic couplings in the remote past, the way the virtuality of the internet does today.⁶ Pando marriages and other functions have also become home to ‘DJ parties,’ wherein the latest Bollywood hits are blasted on woofers and amplifiers to some bright and flashy light arrangements. Such parties also make it possible for younger generation Pandos of marriageable age, to meet, interact, and even exchange phone numbers and contact details with one another. The marriage ritual involves the role of a priest, hailing not so much from a Brahmin background as a fellow-Adivasi, Baiga, background. Baigas share many cultural and economic affinities with the Pandos. Their pasts also speak audibly of a nomadic/semi-nomadic heritage, simultaneously immersed in hunting-gathering lifestyles, and *bewar*. The defining quality of the Baiga, however, is mastery over the herbal wealth of the reigning forests, as also their ability to ward off spirits and fix diseases, ailments, and even cases of wrongful possession. The marriage ritual involves establishing a *mantap*, or tent. Most of the marriage transpires around the central pole of the tent, which is placated with a lamp, rice powder, turmeric and the like, though different stage. The bride is smeared with *haldi* and given a ritual bath. The end of the marriage entails a salutary and tearful *bidai*, or farewell, on the part of the bride’s parents. Needless to state, both the *haldi* ceremony and *bidai*, holds a special place in the cinematic and televisual representations of Indian marriages. But for the manner in which it is assimilated, they are no less Pando, particularly when one pays attention to the bamboo ware, bows, and other forest produce that are symbolically involved. The Pando people represent one of the longest preserved cultures amongst the indigenous people of India (Prachi, 2021).

The Raj and Pandos: Begar and Shikar

⁵My reference is to Bruno Latour’s concept of the same (explanation).

⁶Ramprasad also shared his karaoke version of a local song, hosted on Youtube (link). This cleanly banishes any myth that the Pandos are caught in some pre-historic “tribal” time warp that fascinates a variety of anthropologists.

Whereas the above cultural transitions and cultural adaptations cannot be mapped in a strict, year-wise chronology, the researcher gained a clearer sense of the same when and where to divert into the political and economic history of the Pandos in modern times. The colonial period, in particular, speaks of the initial industrialization of the landscape. The forest department was established in 1864, which proceeded to delineate territories for sylvicultural purposes and enhanced timber production. Simultaneously, large number of colonial officials began to enter the regime and map it for natural resources. Colonial foresters, geologists, naturalists, biologists, among several others, participated in the same. Railway lines followed the trail provided by the above officials, opening the forests to renewed exploitation.⁷ In such circumstance the Pando's were forced to provide *begar*, or free labor. Since the Pandos did not practice settled agriculture—the most evident form of rural enterprise - colonial officials misperceived them as being useless, lethargic, and indisciplined. In all probability *begar* was seen as a way of fixing the nomads. Dhanno Ram, a village resident reminisces how his grandfather used to share accounts of how Pandos were whipped and beaten for not obliging to ferry the trunks, tents and equipment of sahibs, for absolutely no payment. *Begar*, however, formed only one specific type of exploitation. Colonial officers were also fond of shikar. The rajas and maharajas of pre-colonial India were extremely fond of shikar, or the sport-hunting of wild animals, such as deer, gaur, tigers, leopards and wild boars. The Gond rajas were no exception. But for factors beyond this paper, the Gond rajas were not able to hold their own during the colonial period. Rajas hailing from upper caste Hindu backgrounds, however, fared better. In Chhattisgarh, one may include the maharajas of Jashpur, Korea and Sarguja, who were able to negotiate with the colonial powers, even become their intermediaries, in order to retain a degree of autonomy and princely status. In order to placate the British administrators of rank such maharajas offered them the specific delights of shikar. British administrators, in turn, used such blood sports, which often entailed elaborate arrangements, to communicate their own power, masculinity, and authority, to forest dwellers, not excluding the Gonds.⁸ Although the Gond tribes lived in a continuous stretch of land, they lacked the uniform cultural identity and socio-economic status (Gond Tribe of India: History, Culture, Administration, Judiciary and Religion!, 2023).

⁷This is an exceedingly brief summary development during the nineteenth century. Lengthier analysis can be availed in Sumit Sarkar's, *Modern times*.

⁸This receives precise explanation in William Storey's solitary article on the subject. Storey's draws parallels between the fate of indigenous communities in colonial Kenya, with those in colonial India.

However, as mentioned earlier, the British administrators moved with a negative bias against nomadic societies, and forcefully demanded communities such as the Pandos to provide the requisite labor where shikar was concerned. It was in the convenience of British administrators and maharajas to habitually position themselves on a safe machan, if not elephant back. Pandos, on the other hand, had to do all dangerous, if not menial tasks. They were required to manage the camps, skin dead animals, cook the food, but most of all, play the role beaters and trackers. Beaters were required to sound large drums in a semi-circle around a notified tiger, leopard, or herd of deer, thus pushing them in the direction of the elite shikari. The trackers, on the other hand, would trail a mortally wounded animal, that had removed itself to a hiding ground after being shot. Pain would often make such animals, particular tigers, excessively ferocious. Such practices persisted into independent India, when Indian administrators started using the Pandos for similar reasons.⁹ Sitaram Pando, the headman at Tendutikra, shared as to how on a given occasion a Pando got mauled in the process of tracking one such tiger, tentatively, in the 1960s. This was not the first time, but now the Pandos had had enough. Meanwhile, the tiger remained at large becoming more aggressive towards human life and livestock. In the midst of the growing angst, and feline terror, the Indian administration finally requested another expert shikari, a missionary, to eliminate the tiger. This, very interestingly, brought the Pandos in connection with the person of Newton Babu, associated for all other reasons with an American protestant church at Kotmi, a township closer to Pasan, which the researcher crossed while arriving at Jalkey. Newton babu proficiently cleared up the tiger, relieved the Pandos, but insisted that they no longer settle for simplistic compensation and medical treatment where human-animal conflicts were concerned. In what was a completely new idea, if not radical, Newton babu asked the Pandos to demand nothing less than land rights.

Land Rights and Struggle

An initial struggle aligned with the support of Newton babu of Kotmi, resulted in the delineation of close to 120 to 130 acres of forest land as the Tendutikra village. But this was only the beginning of a longer, and more protracted struggle with the Indian state, or *sarkar*, which proved to be no less predatory than the preceding colonial establishment in colonial experience.¹⁰ This, however, brought another ‘godfather,’ or ‘messiah,’ in the form of Shastriji, to Tendutikra. Though Shastri ji would definitively object to descriptive, this is

⁹Mahesh Rangarajan confirms the same.

¹⁰Peter Evans, predatory state.

precisely how the Pandos remember his services. Currently in his late 60s, Shastri ji resided at Ratanpur, an hour and a half from Tendutikra. In a separate interaction Shastri ji, who has mostly taken a back seat from active community mobilization nowadays, opened the window into the status of the Pandos in the early decades of independence. Most of the discussion in the following paragraphs, owes to Shastriji's deep understanding of the troubled relations between the Indian state and nomadic/semi-nomadic Adivasis, from the 1960s to the 1990s.

Incidentally, the land rights that Newton babu helped the Pandos secure were not pucca. It was more in the nature of a lease arrangement, that required the payment of sizable rent to the revenue department, even while the Pandos had limited knowledge or understanding of how to turn the allotted land into proper agricultural fields. The rent in such circumstance was usurious, but the arrangement was important for the forest administration in so far as the Pandos did not recede back into the forests or highlands, all of which were coming under increased pressure. While such pressures were not new, the upcoming dams, mines, roads, railway lines, forest plantations and the like were being affected for the purpose of 'nation-building' in the present instance. Despite the same, the Pandos broke loose from Tendutikra every now and drifted back into the forests and highlands, with the bid to revert to their traditional, peripatetic livelihoods, but only to be driven back to plains and their freshly leased plots. If this was not torture enough, every time the Pandos tried to mimic the efforts of the other landed peasants—particularly in terms of preparing lands for cultivation or grazing - the Gonds and other influential groups would practically colonize the same. Obviously, the Gonds were making use of the colonial prejudice against the Pandos, one which was animating the Indian state now, to assert might in their turn.

Pandos share how they would witness their pastures and freshly prepared fields being taken over by the Gonds - colonized, in short - right before their eyes. The Gonds were not only closer to the post-colonial state administration by virtue of being settled agriculturalists, they were also a majority. They could react brutally if their will was frustrated. Protesting against sahibs, white or brown, was relatively easier. But not the Gonds. Pandos would simply move away from their freshly prepared landed assets, and start afresh somewhere else. But the moment they would do this, the Gonds would land up again and displace them. Caught in this 'no man's land' between the forest department and landed peasants, seen as encroachers and pariahs alike, they lost all dignity and salience as fellow citizens, if not fellow Adivasis. The Researcher in interview with Shastri ji, learnt that with independence, higher positions in

the administration, be it revenue or forestry, came to be filled with upper-caste Brahmins. With this caste replaced race as a principal parameter of discrimination. This subsequently came to reflect in the relationship between both the local government and Pando society, as also between the Gonds and the Pandos. The Pandos came to be typecast as untouchables, menials, and pollutants. Their bamboo-based crafts continued to wield a market, but with diminished respect or dignity for the hands which fashioned such ware, prices became abysmally low. Lesser grains were bartered for the same. And early signs of long-lasting malnutrition set into Pardhi society. Increased poverty, hunger, and destitution followed, and further fed the lowly opinions and prevailing stigma about the Pandos.

Important to state that the Pandos were not alone in the same. Much of the same transpired with the better part of the PVTGs of today. In the midst of such developments, criminal cases began to pile up on them. Shastri ji expressed that sometimes the mere possession of a catapult, rope, pick axe, bow and arrow, became sufficient ground for the arrest of a tribesman. The authorities failed to note the connection between increased malnutrition and dependence upon wild meat. This fold in time reveals how the state administration in independent India was following a colonial script. Colonial foresters in the early part of the twentieth century, such as E.P. Stebbing, had made a forceful case of proceeding against nomadic/semi-nomadic tribes on the mere grounds of possessing hunting appliances.¹¹ More than half a century later, irrespective of the significance of 1947, the Indian state was doing practically the same thing. Oblivious of this continuity, Shastri ji shared that by the early 1980s, the undivided state of Madhya Pradesh, had registered 65,000 cases for the illegal possessions of hunting-gathering appliances, or what are called *shikarauzars*; and India, on the whole, had amassed 1,56,000 cases on similar grounds. This widespread criminalization of nomadic/semi-nomadic tribes, particularly those of a hunting-gathering nature, legitimated all sorts of harassments in the region at hand. The breaking down of Pando settlements, the confiscation of their bamboo ware, and most disturbingly, the subjection of women to rape and misogynistic violence.

Kabir and Social Action: A unique Confluence

Shastri ji admitted that he was slightly slow to catch on with the gendered dimensions of the prevailing apathy. Yet, he offered a poignant explanation for this predicament, one in which

¹¹ E.P. Stebbing, reference.

the benefits of big development failed to ‘trickle down’¹² to the likes of the Pandos, but stigma surely did in a way as to push them lower down in the social ladder. Shastri ji attributed the same to a fundamental difference in the imagination of development, between the Indian state and Adivasi groups of the type exemplified by the Pandos. ‘For the Indian state development meant big dams, roads, aero planes, and electrification. All things that would help the state to fill its treasury and accumulate wealth,’ Shastri ji shared. ‘But for the Pandos and their fellow tribes, they are accustomed to living in harmony with nature, they do not mistrust life’s bounty and hoard things, everything so collected is shared and distributed, and though there is no defined sense of property, there is much dance and merry,’ Shastri ji concluded. While much of the above post-independence trajectory of the Pandos is stated in hindsight, Shastri ji arrived in the region only in the 1980s. The backstory of Shastriji’s evolution into a social activist of sorts, is equally interesting. At a young age he was taken in by the teachings of the fifteenth century Indian saint, Kabir. Both the satire, and radical potential of Kabir’s rhyming verses, inspired Shastri ji, who read them compulsively, to the point of memorizing them. Later in his early youth, Shastri ji left home and travelled to Banaras, interacting with other religionists, only to realize that Kabir was an embodiment of Vedic illumination. At one moment in interaction with the Researcher, Shastri stopped to share the significance of Kabir:

What should I say of Kabir. One can think of Kabir’s verses as a form of lifestyle practice. One can think of Kabir as the irrefutable road to peace, both personal and global. One can find in Kabir revolutionary thought for the establishment of an egalitarian and just society. One can treat him like a guiding ideology, one that will safely guide any party, institution or organization to fashion a better and more humane world. Or one can simply think of Kabir as a crystalline and placid stream, one which washes over the self, refreshing it eternally. Ah, Kabir!

When Shastri ji returned from Banaras to present-day Chhattisgarh in the mid-1980s, he attached himself with upcoming farmers’ unions. However, on noting that such unions did little for the landless he toured the villages around Jalkey, Ratanpur, Pasan and Masturi, stopping at three important locations every now and then—the village square, the market place and the existing water bodies. At all three places he made close note of what people were saying and developed an inventory of those possible individuals who could serve as

¹²Dandekar and Rath.

viable change agents, and those who stood opposed to positive change. It was through some such efforts that Shastri ji unraveled the plight of the Pandos, and other PVTGs, thereafter creating an initial institution in their favor. This was how the idea of '*vanchitonkasansad*' - the parliament of the dispossessed - was grounded in the region in 2002. Several young leaders were already identified to lead the *sansad*, in the manner described earlier. Shastri ji, in his turn, used his deft command over the corpus of Kabir's teachings, to accomplish a threefold purpose: sensitize the state administration, to orient young leaders, and give hope to tribes such as the Pandos.

This was not achieved overnight, but assumed the formation of a series of local village-level institutions or *jansangathans*, alternatively referred to as 'people's organizations.' Such institutions gradually spread across the marginalized villages of three blocks, Kota, PoundiUproda, and Pali. These villages were home to several PVTGs, including the Pandos. This grass root infrastructure gradually gave way to a federating structure, comprising of cluster level and block level governing bodies. Rules and regulations were carefully laid for ensuring that the PVTGs are not sidelined in the functioning of the cluster and block-level federating bodies. Referred, in sum total, as the *vanchitonkasansad*, its core objective was clearly spelt out as one that was committed to the creation of society free of three evils: hunger, poverty and social oppression. Since the late 1990s, and through, the early 2000s, the above *sansad*, moved heaven and hell, using the instrument of requisitions, petitions, dialogue, and dissent against the state administration, to bring health, dignity, revenue generation programs, and most of all, proprietary rights over land, to doorsteps of the PVTGs. Shastri ji shared that his efforts could have never fructified had it not been for the parallel efforts and contributions of other organizations in the form of Ekta Parishad and CASA. The predominantly rights-based approach of the first, and the relief-oriented support provided by the second, served to translate the afore *sansad's* mandate into reality. Kabir's teachings found a renewed vehicle through the rights-based and developmental perspectives offered by non-government organizations. Elsewhere, similar struggles threw up charismatic leaders in the form of Shankar Guha-Niyogi and Ratneshwar Nath, with strong socialist commitments. Such collective efforts began to reflect in policy, and in 2000 the state of Chhattisgarh was carved out of a handful of tribal-dominated eastern districts of Madhya Pradesh. It is important not to lose sight of the Pandos in the midst of the same. In 2004, the state was rocked by the death of BirjuBaiga by state repressive forces. Birju was an ordinary Adivasi who was tortured to death for flouting a forest boundary, when, in fact, the so-called forest

had been the homeland of his tribe for eons. This triggered a series of protests and media reports. It was in the midst of this charged atmosphere, that the Pandos decided to convert their mud houses into proper houses. This also was on Shastriji's insistence. When foresters objected the Pandos from collecting timber for house construction, the Pandos gave them a lesson on how the forests, especially in terms of diversity, had suffered more at the hands of the forest bureaucracy, than their subsistence needs. The houses were finally constructed.

It can be safely said that such awareness, amongst the Pandos and far beyond, was the guiding energy behind the passage of the Forest Rights Act of 2006. Shastri ji and CASA collectively capitalized on the opportunities presented by the above Act. Land rights were further reinforced, turning land into immutable Pando assets of today. An intensive youth leadership program was subsequently conducted. Young leaders, such as Bhuvanesh, who had been previously identified by Shastri ji, participated in this leadership program. This greatly broadened their perspectives. In 2007, a number of non-government organizations brought together a great number of Adivasi social groups, hailing from different parts of central India, at Gwalior. When this mass decided to march from Gwalior to Ramlila Grounds in Delhi, in added assertion of their rights, the likes of Bhuvanesh would be one of them. This, however, would not be the last of such events. Young Adivasi leaders, willing to represent the cause of tribal groups such as the Pandos, kept presenting themselves at sites of democratic protest in the national capital in the coming future. Such developments served to reverse a wrongdoing of 2008. Gond landholders, through some backdoor processes, had managed to transfer a significant chunk of 30 to 40 acres of Pando lands into their name. This had entailed some collusion with the local revenue officials. Signatures of the Pandos had been obtained on stamp paper, under a different pretext. When the fraud came to the awareness of the Pandos, they led a highly coordinated struggle under the fresh leadership, and reclaimed their lands. In an interesting turn of events, they gifted back a few acres to the landless Gond households. Sitaram explains this gesture as being the fruit of Shastriji's training, and lasting vision of a society free of hunger, fear and oppression. This fundamentally altered the Gond-Pando relationship. Since 2014, Shiv Prasad, a Gond, has joined the ranks of young leaders eager to serve the cause of the Pandos. At the time of Researcher's visit, Pando women were actively participating in a ritual incantation organized by Gond *siyans* in a nearby sacred grove, intended to placate the moody rain gods. Two Gond youth came on another day to obtain herbs, and still another to get a protective talisman, or *taveez*, made by Sitaram, who doubles up as a healer nowadays.

Role of CASA

In 2012, CASA undertook a number of Food for Work (FFW) programs in the village. The main village water body at Tendutikra, with its emphatic bund and water spread, was a result of the same. It is stretched across a little more than half an acre, and is actively used for clothes washing, bathing, livestock purposes, and last but not the least, irrigation.

The construction of this village water body greatly forced the administration to perceive the Pandos in fresh light. It brought the administration to recognize the Pandos as industrious in their own right. Village wells were subsequently built with state support in other parts of Tendutikra, and lately the agriculture department has provided the resident Pandos with diesel and electric pumps and irrigation pipes. One of the civil society organization (CSO) have separately facilitated the cultivation of close to 55 acres of spare land with drought resistant millets such as kodo and kutki. Vegetable cultivation has also been encouraged over the years. The health department, on the other hand, has stepped in to increase awareness over nutritional aspects, apart from providing basic health services. Bhuvanesh and Shiv Prasad, mentored by Shastri ji, serve as part of a state-level initiative of CSO,¹³ which has grown organically out of 27 jansanghatans like the vanchittonkasansad, spread across Chhattisgarh. On the day of Researcher's return such leaders along with Pando representatives, were found actively discussing the progress of a newly instated nursery and seed bank. Both of which have been put in place to promote the local seed, crop, and plant diversity. In latest interesting note, "Members of Pando tribe say they are deprived of even basic amenities in Pipradeeh village of Balrampur district of Chhattisgarh. There is no school or Anganwadi center in this village of 200 people, for which children have to travel 5 km through rugged paths says a Villager" (Chhattisgarh: Members of Pando Tribe Say They're Deprived of Even Basic Amenities in, 2023).

Conclusion

Tendutikra is a quickly transforming village. But does this mean that the battle has been won? Not too many years ago, Gonds once again attempted to occupy Manglu Ram Pando's land in a village not too far from Jalkey, falling in Lengi Gram Panchayat. The experience proved strongly reminiscent of older days, though comparatively rare and less intense. Despite the elaborate coordinating and federating structures created by non-government organizations,

¹³ Note on FCRA restrictions

the state's electoral processes, continues to bring people into power that do not always have the necessary sensitivities towards PVTGs. Indeed, non-governmental intervention has not produced uniform results. Some pockets lag behind. Certain *jansangathans* have not been able to discover the fine balance between development and activism, an art which the Pandos at Tendutikra appear to have grasped. This has proved counter-productive. For the failure to build collaborative ties, state benefits have not percolated in such villages. This has often become the cause of discontent, and intra-*sangathan* discord. Bhuvanesh and Shiv Prasad have to deal with such angst every now and then.

The Pandos also appear to be at the receiving end of certain cultural pressures. They have recently started to plead the case that they are the direct descendants of the Pandavas, from the Hindu epic of the Mahabharata. Perhaps, this is because of the phonetic resonance between Pando and Pandav. They further claim they are direct descendants of Arjun, and their *isht*, or personal god, is none other than lord Krishna. But it takes little to note that the Pandos had no knowledge of the Hindu epics and gods till about half a century ago.¹⁴ The places of worship have also come to include Hanuman, Shiva, and Kali. As also, Gond gods in the form of Mahadeo, Thakur deo, and last but not the least, Sati dai. This can be seen as process of cultural assimilation, which speaks of both loss and gain in bewildering permutations and combinations. Sometimes activists inadvertently exert their own pressures. Conformance to vegetarianism, abstinence from mahua-based alcohol, and greater control over the sexual freedoms of women, can take on the form of a moral discourse on their part. Then again, even as the Pandos are getting more and more entrenched in settled agriculture, human-animal conflicts have started increasing. From the evidence at hand, the fading away of shikar traditions does not necessarily mean a better future for wild life. Since 2009, the Pandos have had to contend with increasing number of bears, leopard, and last but not the least, elephant attacks. 'Bears have practically taken over Lengi,' shared Jairam Pando. 'I saw a leopard mauling an uncle of mine in broad daylight,' shared Shiv Prasad. Several dilapidated houses stand in bold evidence to the destructions of the elephants, whose corridors are increasingly blocked by the Korba coal mines at one end, and agricultural fields on the other. Even as the Pando lifeworld draws itself closer to the mainstream, it is left to reconsider Shastriji's early contemplation - the one on the fundamental difference in the understanding of development between the Sarkar and its nomadic/semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers. This closing gap does not merit the Researcher's judgement. Instead, it begs a

¹⁴ Hobsbawm and Ranger, 'Invented traditions.'

reflection that remains sensitive to the past struggles and aspirations of the Pandos, as also the sanctity of nature.

References

- Bais, S. (2014). Reproductive Health Behaviour among Pando Tribal Women: Sarjuga (Chhattisgarh). *Bhartiya Bhasha, Shiksha, Sahitya evam Shodh*, 5(5).
- (2001). *Census of India, Chhattisgarh*.
- Chhattisgarh, G. o. (n.d.). *PANDO*. Retrieved from Tribal Research and Training Institute: http://cgtrti.gov.in/Pando_jati#:~:text=The%20houses%20are%20coated%20with,and%20women%20wore%20a%20lugra.
- Chhattisgarh: Members of Pando Tribe Say They're Deprived of Even Basic Amenities in ...* (2023, July). Retrieved from @ANI.
- Creswell, J. W. (2002). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Merrill Prentice Hall.
- G.D. Pandey, J. R. (2001). Socio-cultural Aspects and Health Care in Pando Tribe of Madhya Pradesh. *Journal of Human Ecology*.
- Gond Tribe of India: History, Culture, Administration, Judiciary and Religion!* (2023, July). Retrieved from <https://testbook.com/ias-preparation/gond-tribe>
- Pando in India*. (n.d.). Retrieved from Joshua Project: https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/16353/IN
- Prachi. (2021, September 12). *THE TRIBES OF CHATTISGARH*. Retrieved from Medium.
- Yogeshwar Kalkondea, C. M. (2023, February 14). Why are so many indigenous Pando people dying? Using observations from Chhattisgarh, India, to conduct structural assessment and identify solutions. *Global Public Health*.