

Cultural Identity and the Role of Forest among the Malhar Semi-Nomadic Tribe in and Around Kalapat Reserved Forest Area, Keonjhar

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Abstract

Since prehistoric period symbiotic relationship between human and forest determine the cultural identity of a human population. These forests holds a significant place for survival as well as practicing their cultural life through hunting, gathering, shifting cultivation, and many more. Forest plays a central role in the spiritual value, which guides the tribal belief systems. The present paper focuses on the Malhar tribe a semi-nomadic tribal group who resides in Kalapat Reserved Forest Area of Keonjhar district, Odisha of how they lose their cultural identity in recent decades due to threatened by various factors such as- deforestation, legal restrictions, ecology change, commercial exploitation of forest resources etc. The scarcity faced by this Malhar group in the forest causes the erosion of their indigenous knowledge further exacerbate the challenges to maintaining their forest- based livelihoods. The present paper explores the cultural significance of forests for Malhar tribe which examine the importance of preserving cultural practices to maintaining both the cultural identity and environmental sustainability in this region. Data was collected through extensive fieldwork among the Malhar tribe by using methods such as participant observation, group discussion and catchment analysis and also investigating various tools and technologies used by the Malhar tribe which provide a clear-cut understanding how the loss of forest resources is not just an economic issue but a cultural crisis.

Key words: Cultural Identity, Forest, Semi-nomadic, Catchment Analysis

From the time immemorial, human populations have forged deep relations with their surrounding natural environment, embodying a symbiotic relationship that spans generations. Forest shaping the human culture and ecology from the prehistoric times through the interrelationship created by forest and human. This act is not only a measure to survival of the species but also to design an evolved culture for a human society. The role of forest is not limited to only livelihood rather it creates a stewardship relationship which fostering various

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institutions and sustaining human life. Still, in the contemporary society the identity of both forest and human influencing and shaping each other. For many indigenous communities 'forests are a core component of spiritual beliefs, historical narratives and cultural identity. Many tribal societies considered forest as a sacred so; it has a deep sense of belonging for them. The ecosystem provided by the forest to the tribal people defined their form of identity through their different functions and shelter. The reciprocal relationship between the forest and human continuously shifted due to cultural, ecological and economical forces. Well-being of the forest is mostly dependent with the well-being of the human societies and vice versa.

Forest resources form the backbone of a tribal society often guiding their way of life and play a pivotal role to shape their cultural identity. Tribes in India had a unique identity with its culture, territorial organization, distinct social, economic, political, cultural traditions and practices (Subramanyam and Rao, 2022). Across epoch tribes have navigated the delicate balance between adaption and preservation in their relationship with the natural world. The economy and culture of these primitive societies are guided by the forest resources relying on both material and spiritual connection to the land for their survival, identity and resilience. Forest is the natural resources as economic asset (Panda & Chakrabarty 2022). This resource provides them income and sustenance (Saha & Sengupta, 2014). But now a days the tribal group facing challenges to reclaim ancestral ecology which affects their identity in terms of cultural and social. Tribe's identities are differentiated by named at different places according to their geographical positioning, their social stratification in the society and so on which distinct them from the other human groups (Chopra, 2016). The existence and nourishment of a tribal group are coordinated with the available resources procured by forest as these human societies are the close relatives among the society lived in town or cities. These tribal communities are also known as Indigenous people/ Primitive people/ Adivasi/ Janjati/ Scheduled Tribe/Aboriginal communities who residing in the forest area form the time immemorial (Shrinidhi,2018). Besides that, there are many terms are associated with the tribal group such as nomadic group and semi-nomadic groups. Unlike nomadic tribes a semi-nomadic life style is characterized by mobility but do not entirely depend on transient lives. These semi nomadic groups practiced a semi-permanent settlement pattern or home from which they exploited their environment for their livelihood. These groups may be involved with hunting, gathering or pastoralism and shared the products with the neighboring communities. Those sharing products are key for the survival of a semi nomadic tribe in a particular geographical region. However, due to the modern development encroaches in the traditional territories semi-

nomadic tribes often face challenge to procure the forest products. So, the forest also viewed as a provider for these simple societies who mostly inhabited, cultivated, harvested and exploited from the forest and meanwhile these economic activities shaped their cultural identity.

Objectives

- To analyse the relationship between the forest and subsistence pattern among the Malhar.
- To examine how settlement patterns are influenced by forest in shaping the Malhar's cultural identity.
- To document the traditional knowledge of the Malhar related to the forest resources within a catchment area.

Methodology

The present research has gathered data from a wide range of sources using variety of methods. Household survey is very important which helps to understand the concentration of the Malhars in this area. This data collection helped a lot about the age, sex of the Malhar family, occupation of the member within a group, family types and marital status of the Malhar in Kalapat Reserved Forest area. Data were gathered through observation, interview group discussion, and schedule. Photography also provided the behavioral and customs of the Malhar society to uncover and to understand the past and the present. Catchment analysis methods help us to study the limit of influence in the surrounding physiographic. This catchment area is defined by drawing a circle round the site and in this regard the topographic map is very essential to locate the activities area in the catchment area. Using the cultural ecology approach to the study of subsistence pattern, environmental factors such as fauna, flora, avian are essential variable in this model. Most of the data on these aspects is obtained from district gazetteers of Keonjhar district and from Odisha Geo-Spatial Data Centre, Survey of India. Library study of Malhar ethnographic account has been carried out in order to establish the historical continuity in the study area and to determine the degree of influence of culture contact on traditional subsistence practices.

Study Area



(File: India Odisha Kendujhar district. Svg)

(Fig.1) Map of Keonjhar district of Odisha



(Fig.2) Topographic Map showing Kalapat Reserved Forest Area, Keonjhar, Odisha

The study area in and around Kalapat Reserve Forest in the district of Keonjhar district lies between $21^{\circ}7'30''$ N. Lat. to $21^{\circ}22'30''$ N. Lat. and $85^{\circ}22'30''$ E. Long.to $85^{\circ}45'$ E. Long. an area meaning (38.64 x 27.31) km: as East. Long.toE. Long. 38.64 km and North Lat. to North Lat. 27.31 km of the open Topographic Maps No. F45N12, F45N11 and F45N7, scale 1: 50000.

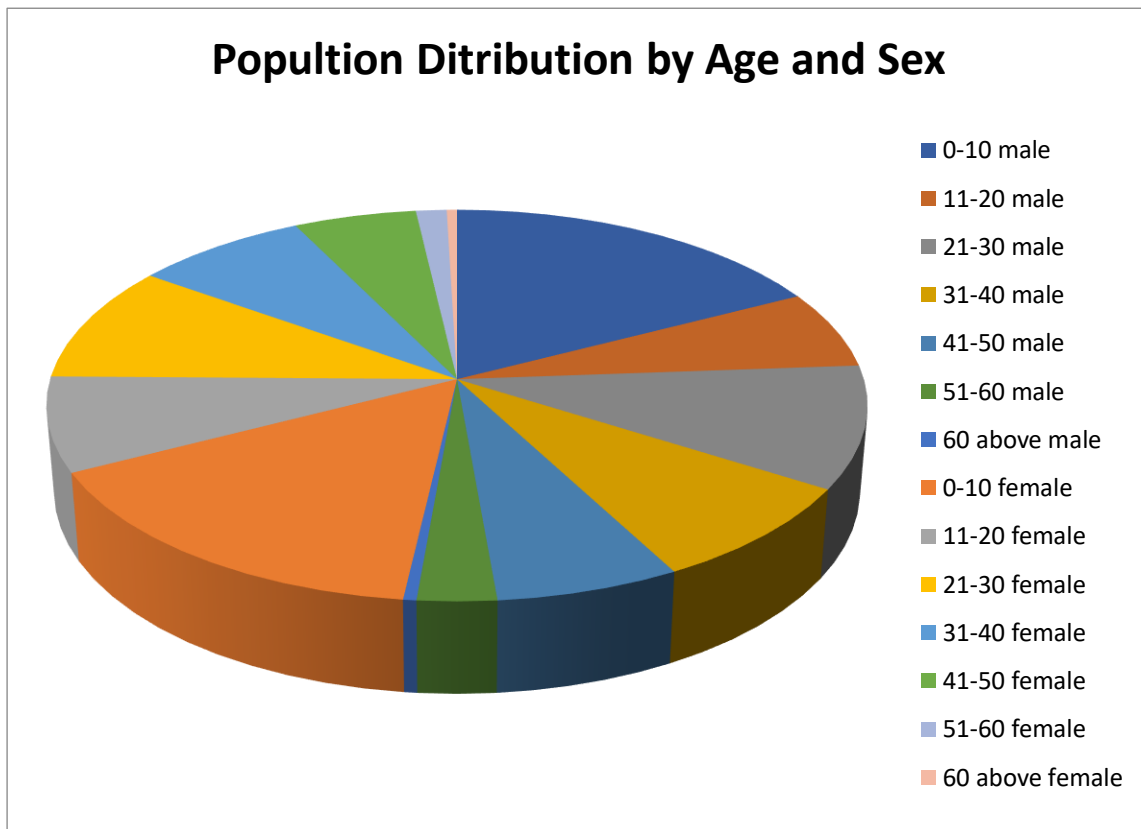
Geomorphologically the area is located on the North of the Dandadhar Reservoir which comes under the Dhenkanal district of Odisha. Topographic point of view the area includes the revenue village areas of Harichandanpur Block of Keonjhar district on its Eastern side and revenue villages of Telkoi block on its Western direction, Barabanka Reserved Forest on the North. Rebana Reserve Forest area is located on the eastern side of this area. The total area is consisting of rich alluvial soil; the highlands consist mainly of detritus and intersected here and thereby many hill streams. This area is well watered by streams which in the rains are raging torrents. Several seasonal stream such as Shrabantangar Nalla, Banan nalla, Nipania Nalla, Banakula nalla, Patrajhori nalla, Haguri nalla and Pechamundi nalla etc. flows southern side of this area while Sapua nalla, Tankapani nalla, Samakoi river and Samarsingha river which are the major stream or river in this area flows on the North side of this area. Khajuria nalla, Ghantla nalla, Churgunia nalla, Sankoi nalla water streams flows on the western side of the Kalapat Reserved Forest Area.

These streams are mainly emerged out of the hilly tracts and flow onto the plain, charged with large volume of water during monsoon. In summer they almost dry. Their beds are usually rocky which render them unfit for navigation. The whole study area is fairly dense jungle mainly Sal (*Shorea robusta*). With the exception of isolated hills and undulating tracts this vast area is generally open and occupied by some villages and numerous hamlets. Some of the principal peaks of the Keonjhar district such as Meghananda (1054 m) and Ranga Parbata (897m) are situated south-west of this area. In this area there are some water bodies artificially made into a minor irrigation project, one is located near Somakoi Reserved Forest area on its western and another one is located southern of Barabanka Reserved Forest area named Sapua Dam on its northern side. Several revenue villages of this area have been studied such as- Kharaba, Ostiapasi, Baraguda, Galada, Pithagola, Similipal, Panga and Kuladera.

The Malhar

Odisha is a land of various Nomadic tribes such as- Mankiria, Birhor, Bajikar, Ghusuria, Sabhakia etc who live in different parts of the state adjoint to forest located nearby them (Subbarao,2017). Nestled in the natural environment, the Malhar are a semi-nomadic kolharian tribal group of Odisha. With a history stretching back ethnographer, Sir Risley (1891) described

them as sept. of Mundas and Ghasis of Chhotanagpur. This tribal group are distributed in Sambalpur, Dhenkanal and Keonjhar district of Odisha which is numerically a minor community. In Thane district of Maharashtra state they are enjoying the Scheduled tribe status. Malhar tribal group in Odisha called themselves as Malhar or Jara Sabar to glorify their Identity, but the neighbouring called them as Malhar and honey collector (mahuwalla). Though they collected honey form the surrounding ecology and practice trading with others but the collection is not limited to only honey they also collect Sal (Shorea Robusta) resin, lac etc. they speak their own mother tounge, a non-literacy dialect and schematically classified as Northern Munda family of languages. Malhar tribal people are mostly bi-lingual and they well versed with the local language Odia.



(Fig.3) Pie chart showing the age and sex distribution among the Malhar

The Malhar people in this Kalapat Reserved Forest area lived in Telkoi and Harichandanpur block of Keonjhar district. Within this geographical area a total no. of 218 Malhar population found. There are 113 no of males and 105 no of females found in the area. The highest no of males is in the age group of 0-10 that 17.43% whereas the highest no. of females is in the age group of 0-10 that is 15.59%. The lowest numbers of females are found in the age group of 60

above that is 0.45% and the lowest no of males are found in the age group of 60 above that is 0.45%.

Importance of Forest in Malhar Cultural Identity

From the very beginning early, prehistoric populations were viewed as an essential component of their natural environments, deeply intertwined with and dependent on the surroundings in which they lived. (Smyntyna, 2004). Malhar people living within the territory of Kalapat Reserved Forest area are mostly semi- nomadic in nature. This reserved forest plays a vital role to know the identity of the Malhar group which influence their way of life, belief system and survival strategies. Mostly the Subsistence pattern and settlement pattern among the Malhars highlights the interaction with the forest.

Subsistence Pattern

Traditionally it has been found that the Malhars are practicing gathering activities though they sometimes go for hunting but it is limited due to forest rules and regulations implemented by government. The dietary habit of these Malhar people is wholly rice based. Their group hunting is limited for some specific animals only such as- wild boar; porcupine, monitor lizard and forest rat because other animal meat is strictly prohibited in their culture. The use of plant food by the Malhars was highly valued for them as it provides significant contribution to the diet in terms of essential nutrients, vitamins and minerals. Through their indigenous knowledge they collect a wide variety of young shoots and leaves available in different season from the forest. Among them *Melothria heterophylla* (Bana kunduri), *Antidesma diandrum* (marmuri), *Basella alba* (Ban poi), *alternanthera amonea* (madaranga), *leucas cephalotes* (pitta), *Amaranthus viridis* (Marshi sag) are collected from the nearby forest. Root and tuber collecting is much more extensive practice among the Malahar in this region. different types of *Dioscorea* species like *D. Oppositifolia* (Pani Alu), *D. Bulbifera* (Pita Alu) and many more collected from the forest and every yam has its own process for preparing. This *Dioscorea* species with nutritive and antioxidant content not only enrich the diet but also make them ethno medicinally important. The techniques used by the Malhar group providing valuable new evidence of early root and tuber cultivation in the nearby area which is similar to the Dounia's "Paracultivation" practice (Dounia, 2001).By using their indigenous knowledge, they collect several types of mushrooms during the rainy season like *Russula cyanoxantha* (Gachha bedha),

Volvariella glandformis (bali Chhatu), Lycoperdon sp. (Anthua), tuber sp (Desi Rutka) Russula emetic (patra Chhatu), Termitomyces sp. (Bihuduni) Russula virescens (Angarua) etc.



(Fig.4) In this picture, an old woman is digging in the earth with the help of an iron crowbar in the vicinity of her house. This old woman regularly practices digging in the nearby area of her house for digging wild yam (Dioscorea)

Though the Malhars are collecting several forest products they are known as honey collector as it is their main occupation. By using indigenous method this process starts with gathering information, followed by the preparation for the activity then collecting from the honey comb and then purifying the honey. This honey collection provides an income generation opportunity which is the primary way for a sustainable livelihood since long. Though they are collecting honey but they considered honey as a prohibited food for themselves due to their beliefs followed by generation after generation. They sell those collected honey into the nearby local markets and most of the time they are using barter system to exchange the commodities for rice, oil etc. Resins are the most important non-wood product and one of the oldest tree products used by humans for various purposes. Like honey the Malhar people in present day give more importance to collect Sal (*Shorea robusta*) resin as it is plenty much available in this Kalapat reserved forest area. These resins are sticky, liquid and organic substances that usually harden upon exposure to air into brittle, amorphous solids. Due to the close proximity with the Hindu communities as

they used these for religious activity the Malhar people collect resin from the forest. Both male and female members of the Malhar tribe are engaged in the collection of the resin.



(Fig.5) This picture shows a man vertically clinging and collecting Sal (Shorea robusta) resin with the help of an Axe and a bamboo basket. There is a traditional method of Malhar tribe for climbing into a tree called tapping. This tribe uses this specific tapping method to climb into any tree

The resource collected by the Malhar community is deeply intertwined with their forest. This forest as we see is just a physical space but for them it is the source of tradition, sustenance. The Kalapat Reserved Forest provides various products to the Malhars, so that they shape their way of life and sustain the nomadic life style. These collected forest products not only used for survival but also hold a symbolic significance which represents the interrelationship between the forest and the Malhars. The way they procured their resources mostly imbued with cultural meaning. Certain foods like yams, mushrooms and leaves are associated with social bonding. The traditional knowledge of collecting these products is mostly known as para-cultivation a way of maintaining sustainability. The knowledge of finding the products and when to collect is passed down from one generation to another, which ensuring their survival of their traditional ecological knowledge. The practices of climbing tall trees, hills for honey and Sal resin are honed over time and it reflects a deep respect towards the environment. Most of the resources they have collected exchanged for tools, textiles and other essentials. The exchanges create a foster relationship with the neighbor community and integrate the Malhars into the border economic and cultural systems, without hampering their cultural identity. By living

harmony with the forest these Malhars shape their traditions, social structures and the way of life that celebrates their connection to the forest.

Settlement Patterns

Various types of semi-nomadic settlements are built by the Malar people in this Kalapat Reserved Forest area that reflects their dependency and relationship with forest. As the Malhars typically move from one place to another the design of these houses are different from one to another as they adapting their way of life to the availability of the forest resources what they have collected. The settlement pattern purely depends upon these forest resources which are essence for their survival.



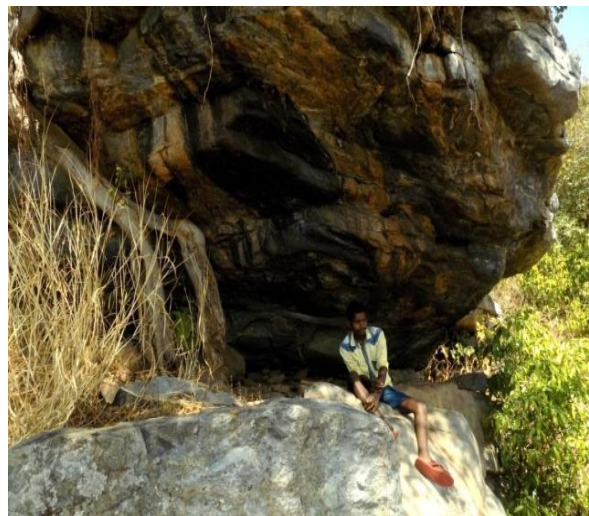
(Fig.6) Wattle Daub House



(Fig.7) Reed Thatch House



(Fig.8) Seasonal Camp of Malhar



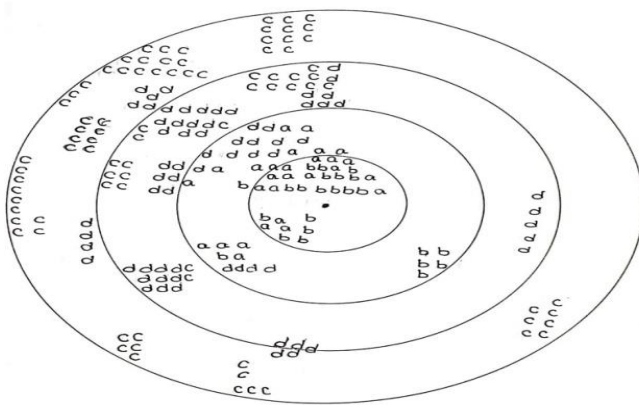
(Fig.9) Foraging camp of Malhar

The Malhar peoples are semi-nomadic in nature which reflects in their settlement pattern. Ecology of the Kalapat Reserve Forest area is very much helpful to these tribal people to make several types of settlement. These habitation structures varied in size and manner of construction depending on location, time of year and length of occupation as well as the number of people using them. On the basis of activities there are mostly two types of settlement such as- Permanent settlement and Temporary settlement. Permanent settlements foster a dynamic interaction with culture, allowing traditions to evolve in a more structured way. These settlements are providing platform for an adaptive and resilient form of cultural identity for the Malhars. The Malhar people in Kalapat Reserved Forest area mostly practices two types of permanent settlements such as- rectangular wattle daub house and reed thatch house. These settlements provide them a stability which allowing traditions and practices different economical activities like gathering, preserving etc to be more deeply embedded within the Malhar group. Most of these houses are built due to cultural shifts like to desire for modernity. In contrast temporary settlements these are divided into two types such as-Seasonal hamlets and Foraging camps. These seasonal hamlets are mostly used during a specified season in a particular geographical area where they can easily get the resources for their settlement. This type of hamlets usually located near the foothills of the forest. Malhar people in this region mostly live in this settlement for a reason for their subsistence activity and for trading purposes. Most of these hamlets are occupied by them for Honey collection, wild tubers and daily wage labourer in nearest villages which are the daily activities in these settlements. Foraging camps are mostly located inside the forest where they can rest for some time. During the survey around Kalapat Reserve Forest Area the author noticed one type of foraging camp that is a shelter which is naturally made in dense forest and is situated at high altitude. They storage the gathered material inside the shelter, because of the gathered materials need protection from wind and rain water.

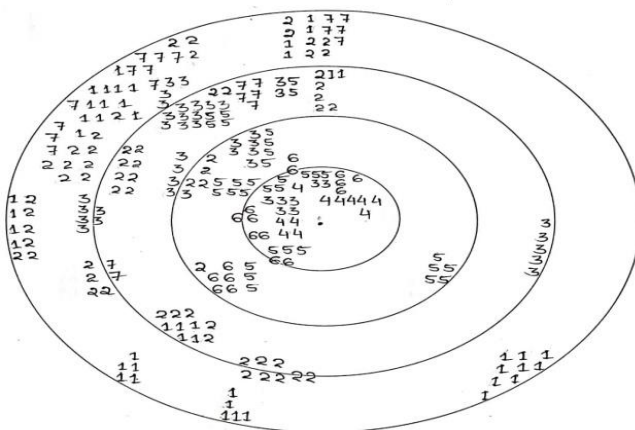
Catchment Analysis

Catchment analysis involves studying various aspects such as- physical, ecological and socio-economical to understand the significance and functions. In this context forest resources collected from different region from the forest influencing their culture. Forest supports the Malhar people to maintain their indigenous knowledge in this catchment area and create a sense of social bonding between them. Malhar people are characterized by the seasonal movements and temporary movements in search of forest products. The mobility

carried out by this group is shaping their cultural identity. The movements for the collection of resources from forest influence their social structure and cultural expression. Their cultural ethos guides them to live with a minimal impact in the forest which becomes the defining aspects of their cultural identity. The practices are crucial for preserving their cultural identity as these subsistence and settlement practices is central to their identity. The study of the catchment at Pithagola village has brought to light reconstruction of the exploitation pattern and strategies, long distance trade and interaction with the nature and other social group.



a = Male (Individual), b = Female (Individual), c = Male in group, d = Female in group
(Fig.10) Catchment analysis showing Male and Female activities among Malhars



- | | |
|--------------------------------|----------------|
| 1 = Honey | 5 = Mushroom |
| 2 = Sal (Shorea robusta) Resin | 6 = Firewood |
| 3 = Yam | 7 = Small game |
| 4 = Green leaves | |

(Fig.11) Catchment analysis showing collection of forest resources by Malhars

The Malhar people practiced mostly gathering from the nearby forest and occasionally they go for small game and hunting animal like Monitor Lizards, Porcupine, big Rat and wild boars but they do not practice agriculture. Within the Range of 10 km the male and Female practicing various types of activities in individual and also in group. This range is quite different for both male and female. Towards 2.5 km North-west of this site both male and female in individual practicing their gathering activity. They mostly collect Mushrooms, green vegetables and firewood from the forest. The quarry site is located within this 2.5 km south of this site. They collect different types of colour soil like white, red etc. for their house decorating. Some Male person in individual sometimes goes up to 5km for collection of Poles for constructing their settlements. Within this range both male and female in group carry their gathering activity for their subsistence. In this area female groups are more actively participating than the male groups for collection of different forest product like Yam, different fruits and flowers.

Towards west from this site up to 7.5 km female groups occasionally go for gathering activity while the male group actively participating and collect forest product such as Sal Resin and sometimes, they go for small game hunting. These Malhar people mostly depend upon the forest product like honey, Sal (*Shorea robusta*) Resin and Yams and sell those commodities in the nearby local market to get money in the return. For this purpose, sometimes they go beyond up to 10 km range and both male and female in group stay in the forest for 2-3 days. Both male and female group actively participating in this type of collection.

Analysis

From the lens of subsistence pattern, settlement pattern and analysis of catchment the Malhar tribes deeply connected to the surrounding forest as they rely for subsistence and settlement on forest. Relation with the forest shapes their mobility and also their social structure to ensure sustainable use of resources. The catchment analysis clear shows forest influenced their resource management. Their indigenous knowledge often ensuring them how to preserve their biodiversity within this catchment area for maintaining balance between survival and conservation. This indigenous knowledge contributes to the biodiversity conservation (Abas et. al, 2022) The forest represents a holistic cultural space for the Malhar group where they interact with both natural and social environments. For subsistence system the resources collected by them are mainly depend upon the preservation of the forest. Forest products such as– timber, honey, resin, lac, yam, mushrooms etc, only be available if the forest secure its biodiversity and the Malhars are well known about it. Among the Malhar these products are

vital for the nutrition and income. While considering honey and other forest products these are not just practical tools for survival but form the fabric of the Malhar identity.

The permanent and temporary settlements play a significant role in shaping and preserving the Malhar cultural identity. These settlements give an insight about how the Malhar people strikes a balance between flexibility and permanence. The patterns of dwelling reflect their social, ecological and economic dynamics which play a central role in shaping Malhar cultural identity. As these groups are semi-nomadic in nature, they do establish specific homes in specific location. An intimate practice need for the construction of the permanent houses often involving multiple generation who gathered knowledge from previous generation who pass down the traditional knowledge of local materials and architectural techniques. Again, as the forest near this region is full with reeds, grasses or similar plants the reed thatch houses are prevalent. Despite the permanency, these dwellings do not reflect complete sedentary life instead it implies a dynamic equilibrium between mobility and settlement. Temporary settlements are the central to the nomadic way of life. Seasonal settlements are built with the purpose of gathering forest product in different season. These dwellings are transient in nature, often built with the material available near them. These camps serve as the crucial points of cultural continuity. These houses allow the Malhar people to remain mobile and take advantage of particular seasonal resources such as honey, sal (*Shorea robusta*) resin, yams, leaves etc. the acts of setting up these seasonal camps helps the Malhar people to know their forest and its resources formulating their cultural identity. While the foraging settlements represents the most transient form of settlement. As these are located in wild forest, it highlights the deep connection with the forest ecology.

The mobility of the Malhar group shaped by the need of the forest products such as, honey, resin, lac, yam etc. Their cultural identity is closely tied with the connection to forest from where they collect the materials for survival. The catchment area used by them is not just physical spaces but carry deep cultural practices. Forest plays a significant role as their protector and provider which nourish the Malhar community and their traditional knowledge. As the Malhar people practice low impact resource exploitation it leads harmonious relations with the forest. But in recent times their activities area under forest faces several challenges like deforestation land encroachment and ecology change which disrupt the traditional practices of this group. Their overall culture is depending upon the protection of the forest that the Malhar peoples have worshipped as own home. The identity embedded in the relationship

with surrounding forest to their traditional knowledge, tradition, social systems etc where they traverse.

Conclusion

The Malhar people deeply connected with the forest ecosystem which creates the foundation of their subsistence pattern and settlement patterns. The forest not only act as a provider but also nurture their cultural values, preserved their indigenous knowledge system which act as protector for the Malhar people in this Kalpat reserved forest region. The gathering techniques during seasonal movements and settlements showcasing a symbiotic relationship which emphasises their adaptability and forest understanding. However recent challenges such as deforestation, globalization and commercial logging led to disrupt this equilibrium. And also, the desire for sedentary lifestyles without forest, land encroachments and climate change diminish their traditional practices. Despite the challenges now the Malhar people face difficulties to maintain their traditional subsistence strategies, leading to increased dependence on the external markets and modernization. This shift poses a risk in their settlement patterns as the Malhar group are compelled to establish more permanent dwelling in urban areas, leading to a gradual disconnection from their traditional ecological knowledge. So, in this context we say that the Malhar's cultural identity is inseparable from the forest and their identity balances ecological sustainability and cultural preservation.

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