



AGRICULTURE AND THE HILL KHARIA TRIBE OF MAYURBHANJ DISTRICT OF ODISHA – AN ANALYSIS

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Summary

The Hill Kharias of Mayurbhanj District of Odisha are very poor. They live on the lap of nature. Besides collecting the forest products, they also depend on agriculture. Both Rabi and Khariff crops are produced by them. Their method of cultivation of land is old and they have failed to update themselves with modern period due to their illiteracy and poverty. Their instruments of agriculture are old styled and they use those equipments for cultivation and reaping of crops like paddy, wheat, maize, etc.

Key words

Hill Kharia, share cropping, fertilizer, irrigation, *rabi* crops, *khariff* crops, agricultural practices.

The Hill Kharia tribe lives on the foot hills of Mayurbhanj district of Odisha. Largely they depend on the forest as they gather several forest products like lac, resin, honey, sal leaf and seed, etc. and sell those products in the market to earn their livelihood. Agriculture is also an occupation which they also adopt. As they are very poor and maximum of them have no land, they work as agricultural labourers in the field of others. Due to ban of *jhum* or shifting cultivation, they have now concentrated on agriculture. This paper attempts at a close study on the agriculture of the Hill Kharias.

The Hill Kharias cultivate paddy only because they require rice for their food and preparation of *handia* (intoxicants drink prepared from rice). Lands available in that area are mainly three types. The best variety of land is known as *Don* and the worst variety is called as *Taner*. *Don* is, in fact, suitable for the cultivation of paddy but such lands are not plentifully available to the Kharias. Whatever land they get, they put their labour in it and try to yield more from that land. Largely, they depend on the rain water for cultivation. Now-a-days due to the available of irrigation, they are using the land in a better manner for cultivation.

Composition of soil

The soil of the land carries importance for cultivation. Accordingly, it is divided into four types – *Lalka* soil, *Rugoi* soil, *Radish* soil and *Nagara* soil¹. All these lands vary from each other for their suitability of the production of crops. The Hill Kharias consider the *Lalka* soils as the best for the cultivation of paddy. That is why they prefer it and if the owner of that type of land, they become happy to cultivate the land on share basis.

Share cropping

Rarely the Kharias have land. If some of them have land they put their heart and soul together to do hard labour in the land. But largely they do not share cropping in the field of others. At first from the beginning of the Odia year (April), the Kharias contact the owner of the land. The *modus operandi* is decided from the beginning. Some times the owner agrees to bear a part of the cost to be paid to the Kharia spent in the cultivation. Now-a-days 50% of expenditure from the beginning till end of the cultivation is being borne by both the parties. After cultivation, the yield is kept in the house of the owner and when the paddy is finally obtained, it is shared by both the parties. The Hill Kharias who get the land for cultivation even on sharing basis consider themselves as lucky because for some months of the year they get food. Other Kharias who have some land of his own is the luckiest one because all the crops yielded from the land belong to him.

Fertilizer

The Hill Kharias do not use modern fertilizer. They use cow dung and dung of domesticated goat and sheep as fertilizer. Every Hill Kharia house had a pit big or small depending on the domestication of animals. Every day the cow dung collected from their house or from the road or from field are poured in that pit. The ashes of leaves, wood, steams burnt every day are also thrown into the pit. Karanja leaves and neem leaves are also thrown to the pit and they form a part of natural fertilizer. The wastes of banana tree and other herbs are also thrown into the pit. Coming under sunshine those waste products dry up. Then they are put in baskets. Balancing two baskets joined through *bahungi* kept on his shoulder, the Kharia man takes the manure to the field in the month of May and June and put it in different places of the cultivable land after ploughing. They take spade and distribute the manures properly inside the field which increase the fertility of the soil and made it fully prepared for plantation or showing of seeds. Even with the advancement of science and technology, the Hill Kharias are adopting the traditional method of manuring the field. Of course now the HKMDA (Hill Kharia and Mankardia Development Agency, Jashipur) is taking due care in educating the application of manure in the field at different point of time of the cultivation.² Due to lack of education, the Hill Kharias are learning it slowly but they have never left their traditional method of manuring the field of cultivation.

Irrigation

Earlier the Hill Kharias were depending upon the rain water for cultivation of land. Failure of monsoon at any point of time as per the requirement was harassing for the Kharias. Of course they were depending on *Dari* system during that period. *Dari* is like a pit which is dug by the Kharias upto a few feet. Water flows from different sides and fills up the pit. From that pit, the Hill Kharia can take water and irrigate the land single handedly. Even today the same system prevails. The Hill Kharias not only depend on *Dari*, but they also depend on wells, ponds, dams, springs, rivers and small canals for irrigating the cultivable land. Of course now, the Government is digging wells in Kharia villages in order to solve the irrigation purpose. But it is insufficient to meet the need of water in the cultivable fields. The Hill Kharias also depend on the ponds of the village for irrigation. Now-a-

days, the Government is digging the ponds of the Kharia villages before rainy season so that each pond can contain more water to solve the problem of irrigation. Stock of water by building big dams is a dream for them. Of course, there is no such facility in the areas where the Kharias live. They also use the water of spring and river to irrigate the cultivable land. On the recommendations of the HKMDA, the Government is trying to solve the problem of irrigation in the Hill Kharia dominated area. In fact, lack of irrigation puts hardship on the cultivation of lands of the Hill Kharias. Now, with the development of irrigation facility in the Hill Kharia area, they are being attracted towards cultivation and are trying to make it their permanent occupation³. Another new step has been taken by the Government to help the Hill Kharias by providing them cows through HKMDA, Jashipur. This has inspired the Hill Kharias to resort to agriculture as the manure problem will be solved.

Tools of agriculture

The Hill Kharias use traditional tools for agriculture. They preserve the seeds for cultivation in a tight basket made of straw. They even keep the vegetable seeds what they get from their neighbour or get from their own kitchen garden or purchase from the market inside a bottle made of glass with tight lid. Government is now providing subsidy to the Hill Kharias for the purchase of agricultural instruments like plough, axe, sickle, spade, yoke etc. These implements are made of iron and are usually prepared by the *kamaras* (blacksmiths). The wooden part fixed on each instrument is prepared by the Hill Kharias.⁴ Even at the present time with the use of modern means of agriculture like tractor, power tiller etc., the Kharias are not moved at all. They cannot cope with the modern equipments because they are unaware about their use and also cannot afford for that. That is why the improvement of agriculture has not become possible on their part. Thus, the Hill Kharias have adopted the traditional equipment of agriculture even today.

Cultivation of crops

The Hill Kharias grow variety of crops in the field at different periods in a year. Paddy as 'Rabi Crop' is grown at the beginning of the rainy season which is a regular practice for them. The crops grown during the rainy season are known as 'Kharif Crops'. These Kharif crops include paddy, maize, *gundli*, *jatangi*, *maru* etc. In a similar vein, 'Rabi crops' are known as winter crops. They include mung, vegetables, etc. Practically, the Kharias have limited scope for such cultivation. As they have limited land or no land for cultivation Kharif crop is a dream for them although they do it as a share cultivator with others those who have lands. Of course, they cultivate various Rabi crops in their kitchen garden like spinach, brinjal, tomato, cabbage, chilly, reddish, cucumber etc. As they largely depend on the forest, cultivation is a secondary thing for them. They cultivate the following crops.

KHARIF CROPS

The Hill Kharias are born farmers. Either in their field or the field of others, they cultivate crops. They produce variety of *Kharif* crops. The following *Kharif* crops are cultivated by them.

Paddy

A low irrigated field is usually selected for the cultivation of paddy. During the summer season cow dung manure is put on the land. Thrice the land is ploughed and the manures are spread over the land. Then the land becomes fit for cultivation. Before the rainy season they sow seeds in the field. With rain, the seeds germinate and plants come up. If rain does not come early then plantation is made in other field. After rain, the paddy plants are brought from that field and planted in the prepared field. Many times (once or twice) the weeds are cleared from the field so that the paddy plants can grow instantly without hindrance. During winter, the paddy plants are reaped and brought to the house and finally paddy is obtained after they are separated from the plants and husks. A good variety out of these paddy plants are kept separately to be used as seeds for the coming year.⁵

Maize

A small plants of land exists adjacent to the house of a Hill Kharia which is known as *bari*.⁶ They harvest maize between June and August. They also grow this crop in a field which is nearer to their house so that they can keep an eye on that and prevent the animals to destroy the crop. They create furrows made by plough or with a digging stick and sow seeds. When the seeds germinate, they regularly water it and keep an eye on the field till the entire crops are yielded. It is a cash crop to them. After its yield, they keep some portion of it in their house and sell other portion in the market and earn money. They also produce *Jatangi* and *Maru*.⁷

Gondlis

It is a *Kharif* crop. This was cultivated by the Primitive Kharias. After furrows are made in the field by hoes, the seeds are sown in the month of May and after the crop grows, it is harvested in the month of August. Gondli was used as a staple food by the Kharias in the past.⁸ Due to the cultivation of paddy and other crops, now Gondli is not being cultivated by the Hill Kharias. However, at times the Kharias are cultivating this crop as they have not totally forgotten this what their forefathers used as staple food.

RABI CROPS

The need of the Hill Kharias are limited. Not too many crops are cultivated by them. They also grow some Rabi crops known as Chaiti crops like wheat, black gram, green gram, horse gram, peagram etc.⁹ which have been discussed below.

Wheat

Wheat was not cultivated by the Hill Kharias. However, coming in contact with the modern situation, some Hill Kharias are now cultivating wheat, of course on irregular basis. Between June and October, the land for wheat cultivation becomes ready. In October the wheat is germinated inside the field. The field is irrigated from time to time. The wheat plants grow and due care is taken to protect the plants from the attack of insects. The wheat is reaped in the month of March-April. When it was asked to many Hill Kharias about the wheat cultivation, they replied that they had resorted to cultivate this wheat in

the field. Since the yield was not satisfactory, they have left the cultivation of wheat.¹⁰

Grams

Varieties of grams are cultivated by the Hill Kharias. After the cultivation of paddy, the field is ploughed again and is made ready. The harvesting of grams is made between February and April. Among those grams, the black and green gram is sown and harvested during rainy season. Similarly, the green gram is harvested in winter season. The Kharias take interest in the cultivation of grams. It is only because the grams are used as food and their husk is used to feed the cattle throughout the year.¹¹ During research an interesting thing has come to the notice. Like paddy, the Kharias never sell grams in the market. They preserve it in their house to be used during calamities like cyclone, heavy rain and the like. Even some times, grams can be taken raw by them. That is why they always preserve grams in their house.

Agricultural process

The process followed by the Hill Kharias is traditional and simple. Many attempts have been made by the HKMDA to acquaint the Kharias with the present agricultural process. Still then no glaring improvement has been made in the process of agriculture followed by the Hill Kharias. Majority of them follow the traditional process which has been discussed below.

Preparation of the field

The first work which the Hill Karias do is the preparation of the field. They first put manure in the field and plough it. Then they break up the soil block by spade or hammer made of wood. After ploughing of the field by the male Kharia, the women and children do the rest of the work. After the first shower of rain, the Kharias again plough the field and give some gap around a week or more for the soil to dry. There after the manures are spread over the field and for the third time it is ploughed and seeds are sown. After cultivation, the women folk take care of the field.

Agricultural labourers

Among the Hill Kharias both men and women work in fields of others as agricultural labourers. People of the area know them. So as per requirement they ask for the labourers. At the end of the day, they are paid. On the other day, they go to work in the field of another man. Thus, ownership for them changes on day to day basis. This is a regular duty of the Hill Kharias. They are quite acquainted with this system. Some *gumastas* or middlemen are there who regularly send them to different fields and also get some commissions. Some times, they are also taken to work in other districts of Odisha and even outside Odisha, particularly in Bengal in the field of others. The Hill Kharias are well acquainted with this life because it is their primary source of income to sustain their family.¹²

Time bound labourers (*Baramasia*)

A peculiar system is prevalent in the society where the Hill Kharias are contracted for a year by their master. In many villages, it is a prevalent practice that the ironsmith, barber, washerman etc. are paid once in a year. Similarly, the Kharia man or women contract with their master for a year. The male annual labourer is known as '*Bagali*' and the female is known as '*Kamin*' among the Kharias. Even a boy having more than 12 years of age can be taken as a *Bagali*. The payment on annual basis is determined as per the capacity of the worker. As a practice, the annual labourers are appointed in the month of February. They work for a year continuously without break and it is an obligation which they discharge sincerely. Both *Bagali* and *Kamin* labourers leave their masters after completion of one year when their payment is cleared by their masters. They eat '*Pausa Pitha*' (cake in the month of January) in the house of their master and go to other master. They can continue with the same master if they so desire for another year.¹³ This is a healthy practice, the Hill Kharias follow. They show their loyalty to their master from the beginning till the completion of their term. This simplicity is present with all the Hill Kharias.

Both male and female labourers perform their duty assigned to them. The male looks after the cultivation of land, sowing of seeds, reaping of crops, taking paddy for milling, catching of fish, looking after the kitchen garden and other works assigned to him by his master.

Similarly, the female worker washes the clothes and utensils, cleans the room and cowshed, collect mahua flower, fetches water for the house, collects some forest products. She works as a nurse also. The *Bagali*, if married, performs his duties throughout the day at the house of his master. At night, after taking meal in the house of his master, he goes to his house and returns to his master's house in the next morning. This also happens with the *Kamins*. But usually it is seen that the *Kamins* stay in the house of their master throughout the year. Some times both husband and wife stay in the house of their master for a year as *Bagali* and *Kamin* and the master provides an out-house for their stay. There is another provision of such contract labourers. In that case the *Bagali* and *Kamin* work in the house of their master and receive payment at the end of the month. They are occasionally allowed to visit the house of their relatives by their master¹⁴ during the festive occasions. The master treat *Bagali* and *Kamin* as their family members and shows good behaviour to them. Thus as contract labour, they earn money for their family by working in the house of their masters.

These are the ways of cultivation and harvesting of crops followed by the Hill Kharias. Their plights are many but they compromise for earning livelihood by working in the field of their masters. Of course now-a-days the HKMDA, Jashipur is taking interest to provide land and loan to the Hill Kharias to attract them towards agriculture. Perhaps, that will be a great help to the Hill Kharias of Mayurbhanj District of Odisha.

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